

Easter

Robert Mueller has shown that after two years of detailed research and writing it is still possible to produce a respected report that no two people interpret the same way. We like to think that facts are facts, but, in fact, they're not.

We should not be surprised that the biblical evidence about the resurrection varies a bit from one gospel to another. Each year on Easter Sunday the Catholic Church has us hear the account from Saint John, which includes some details that others don't have. Yet even within this single account, there are some facts that people interpret in different ways.

For example, it features Mary Magdalene as the first person to discover that the tomb is empty. She then draws a conclusion based on logic rather than faith. She runs to Simon Peter and the disciple Jesus loved, and wakes them up with bad news: "They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they put him." It isn't clear who she means by "they", nor is it clear who she means by "we" because in this account she went to the tomb alone. "We" could then include the two disciples in front of her. They ran to the tomb. When they saw that the body was missing and the burial cloths were left behind, the beloved disciple "believed." But the next verse says that "they did not yet understand the Scripture that [Jesus] had to rise from the dead." So, what did he believe? Some commentators, including Saint Augustine, thought that he believed what Mary Magdalene had told them; namely, someone had stolen the body. However, others say, no, the beloved disciple clearly believed in the resurrection based on the evidence he saw with his own eyes. He just had not yet understood all the scripture passages that could have prepared him for this day. He believed because of what he saw, not because of what he had read or heard.

Our belief in the resurrection is based on these platforms: the empty tomb, the testimony of the Scriptures, and the witnesses who saw Jesus when he appeared to them after the resurrection. Some people also have an experience similar to that of the beloved disciple: even without encountering the bible, they see the faith in their parents, friends, and the community of believers. The empty tomb was a fact, but people interpreted it in different ways; they still do. Some prefer unbelief, the first reaction of Mary Magdalene - that the tomb was empty but someone stole the body. Others believe as the disciples did: something more has happened here.

That belief brings us here today. Belief in the resurrection of Jesus also affects the way we live. It influences our decisions when we no longer pursue our personal appetites but rather the common good. It encourages us to keep Sunday holy, the day on which Jesus rose from the dead. It changes how we deal with the death of one we love and prepares us to accept our own death on the day that God will call us home.

The gospel for Easter Sunday stares unbelief in the face. It allows the view of the unbeliever to be stated, but it feels compelled to tell you the facts. Some people will still dispute them, but others use them to state with ever greater confidence the two words that shape their lives: "I believe."

Sunday, April 21, 2019