

What happened at the first Easter?

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

In the years before the Second Vatican Council, Jesus' resurrection was used primarily for apologetical purposes in the church. Jesus claimed to be the Son of God. He proved his claim by his miracles, and especially by the greatest miracle of all, his own resurrection from the dead.

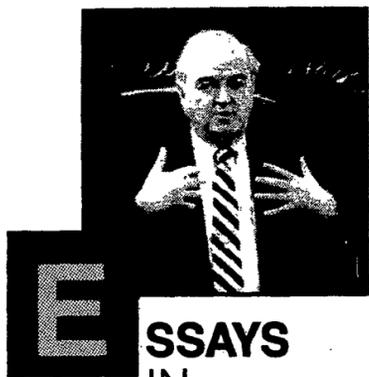
Around the council's time, a reaction set in against this approach. Advances in theology and biblical studies reminded us that the resurrection is not simply a proof of Christ's divinity; it is our redemption's very centerpiece.

"If Christ has not been raised," Paul wrote, "your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" (1 Corinthians 15:17).

Thereafter, most writings on the resurrection veered deliberately away from the apologetical aspect. We were to be no longer interested in what happened on Easter morning, but rather in its meaning and significance for us today.

That remains a valid approach, but it is not the only one. Whether the resurrection really happened was clearly important to Paul and to the early church. The question should still be important for us as well.

The stakes are high, after all, because if Christ was not truly risen, then those who have died in Christ "have perished" (1 Corinthians 15:18).



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

"If for this life only we have hoped in Christ," Paul argued, "we are of all people most to be pitied" (v. 19).

"But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died" (v. 20).

Jesus' resurrection is portrayed in the New Testament as unique: While Lazarus, Jairus' daughter and the son of the widow of Nain returned to their ordinary lives after Jesus raised them from the dead, Jesus did not.

He conquered death once and for all, and returned in a glorified state of existence. As such, his resurrection is without precedent. It is God's supreme intervention in human history.

Accordingly, it immediately became the principal apologetical argument

for the truth of Christian faith, as well as the main target of Christianity's critics.

In the 19th century, for example, rationalist critics charged that the apostles stole the body and invented the story; that Jesus didn't really die, but was only in a coma; that the tombs were confused; or that the post-resurrection appearances were hallucinations.

Traditional works of apologetics in the early part of the 20th century refuted such charges, but some of these attacks were already current in the first century and were answered within the New Testament itself.

To those who said that the apostles were lying when they alone claimed to see the risen Lord, Peter pointed out that God allowed Jesus to appear "not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead" (Acts 10:41).

The charge that the apostles stole the body is blamed on the priests and Pharisees, who bribed the soldiers to say, "His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep" (Matthew 28:13). But Matthew reminds his readers that guards had been placed at the tomb to prevent just that sort of thing from happening (27:64-66).

The charge that the apostles were gullible elicited a reminder that, from the first moment, the apostles resisted the idea that Jesus was truly risen

(Matthew 28:17; Luke 24:11,37; Mark 16:11,14; John 20:25).

That the early Christians believed in a bodily resurrection is clear from the New Testament's emphasis on the fact that the risen Jesus ate food (Luke 24:41-43; Acts 10:41) and that his wounds were verified by the apostles (Luke 24:39; John 20:24-28).

And yet one occasionally hears someone say that faith in the resurrection would not be disturbed if Jesus' body were discovered somewhere in the Holy Land. That is not the case.

Although the early Christians did not use the empty tomb as an argument for the resurrection, they certainly were not indifferent to it.

As far as they were concerned, the tomb was empty and his body was nowhere else to be found. They believed him to have risen. Although he appeared in another form (Mark 16:12) and somewhat unrecognizable (Luke 24:16; John 20:14; 21:4), many people claimed to have seen him.

Amid our Eastertide celebrations, it remains of the highest importance for us to grasp the meaning and significance of the resurrection for our faith today and for our hope in eternal life beyond tomorrow.

But if Christ did not, in fact, rise from the dead, then our faith is "futile" and so is our hope in eternal life.

What happened on that first Easter morning is the basis of everything else.

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