

COLUMNISTS

Themes explore surprise of Resurrection

The best Easter sermon I have heard in years, perhaps ever, I heard this year in Canterbury, England. The preacher was Archbishop of Canterbury George L. Carey. I should acknowledge here that I know the archbishop not only as the spiritual leader of the worldwide Anglican Communion but also as a cherished friend.

It was after he had already completed the text of his Easter sermon that a copy of my Easter column arrived at his London address, Lambeth Palace. He was struck by our common theme: the surprising nature of the Resurrection.

In his Easter sermon, Archbishop Carey pointed out that modern Western society takes a skeptical stance toward truth-claims. "How can you be sure?" becomes our constant and instinctive reaction. And nowhere more acutely than on the matter of Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

Against this background, the archbishop asked if there are any reasons, apart from emotional conviction, for believing the Resurrection story. He cited three, all connected by the element of surprise.

First, the Resurrection was totally unexpected. It's not that the disciples were so "besotted with the idea" that they concluded that, of course, it happened. On the contrary, when Mary Magdalene and the other women came to the tomb early Sunday morning to anoint the body of Jesus, they were to-



By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

essays in theology

tally surprised not to find it there.

The women did not immediately conclude that he had risen from the dead. Indeed, it runs through the whole of the New Testament that no one expected the Resurrection. Jesus himself had been "elusive" on the subject.

Second, the Resurrection story shows the male disciples "in a poor light." It is clear that none of them had expected the Crucifixion, let alone the Resurrection. Their hopes were dashed, and, out of fear of reprisals from some of the Jews, they ran away.

"Shame runs through the Gospel record," the archbishop reminded us. "Boasting, cowardice and betrayal scar the apostolic witness." The Resurrection story, therefore, has "the ring of truth."

"A made-up story would have sanitized these shameful features of male humiliation. The women have too high

a profile in a story in which men are supposed to have the central place. This underlines the credibility of the narrative as a whole.

"Third, these dejected and humiliated disciples are suddenly and surprisingly transformed. Although they were devout Jews for whom the Sabbath was utterly sacred and central, they took the extraordinary step of changing their holy day from Saturday to Sunday and calling it the Lord's Day.

"Only something quite overwhelming could have led them to do so," the archbishop said. "We know what it was, for it has been spelled out in our creeds from early Christian times: 'On the third day, he rose again from the dead.'

"And ever since," he continued, "the reality of that divine surprise has been the heart of the Christian faith. Almost every book of the New Testament throbs with resurrection joy. It overturns our understanding of Christian beginnings.

"The beginning is not where you think it is. It is not the birth of Jesus. It is not the ministry of Jesus. It is not the cross of Jesus. It is the resurrection of Jesus."

Of course, the biblical accounts of the Resurrection leave us with many unanswered questions. How did he rise? What was the nature of his appearances? Why did his own disciples and friends not recognize him at first?

"Yes," the archbishop continued,

"there are things we do not know and cannot explain, but two things stand out: His body was buried and God raised it."

What does all this mean for us today? First, "If Christ is risen, then life and love ultimately triumph." There is "life for all who come to God. Come, all are welcome here."

Second, "the Resurrection challenges the church to get its priorities sorted out." What is central is not "the superstructure of theology, liturgy and doctrine built up by the church," but "the encounter with the living Christ."

"The Resurrection proclaims to a tormented world that God absorbs all human sin and defeats it with love. It challenges the church to be an Easter people and to trust God for the future.

"... The world shames and humiliates, God comes with forgiveness and hope. The world speaks a word of cheer to the strong and successful, God comes with a message to the weak. The world often condemns, God rushes to us with love and embraces us with the greeting, 'Peace be with you.'"

"Easter says that nothing can kill God's love. Easter is God's statement that He makes all things new."

"If we open our hearts to the Resurrection message," the archbishop concluded, "we too shall find ourselves surprised by joy."

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.



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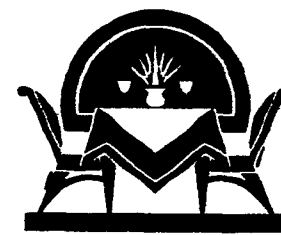
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