

RONALD ROLHEISER - SEEING THE RESURRECTION

God never overpowers, never twists arms, never pushes your face into something so as to take away your freedom. God respects our freedom and is never a coercive force.

And nowhere is this more true than in what is revealed in the resurrection of Jesus. The Gospels assure us that, like his birth, the resurrection was physical, real, not just some alteration inside the consciousness of believers. After the resurrection, we are assured, Jesus' tomb was empty, people could touch him, he ate food with them, he was not a ghost.

But his rising from the dead was not a brute slap in the face to his critics, a non-negotiable fact that left sceptics with nothing to say. The resurrection didn't make a big splash. It was not some spectacular event that exploded into the world as the highlight on the evening news. It had the same dynamics as the incarnation itself: After he rose from the dead, Jesus was seen by some, but not by others; understood by some, but not by others. Some got his meaning and it changed their lives, others were indifferent to him, and still others understood what had happened, hardened their hearts against it, and tried to destroy its truth.

Notice how this parallels, almost perfectly, what happened at the birth of Jesus: The baby was real, not a ghost, but he was seen by some, but not by others and the event was understood by some but not by others. Some got its meaning and it changed their lives, others were indifferent and their lives went on as before, while still others (like Herod) sensed its meaning but hardened their hearts against it and tried to destroy the child.

Why the difference? What makes some see the resurrection while others do not? What lets some understand the mystery and embrace it, while others are left in indifference or hatred?

Hugo of St. Victor used to say: Love is the eye! When we look at anything through the eyes of love, we see correctly, understand, and properly appropriate its mystery. The reverse is also true. When we look at anything through eyes that are jaded, cynical, jealous, or bitter, we will not see correctly, will not understand, and will not properly appropriate its mystery.

We see this in how the Gospel of John describes the events of Easter Sunday. Jesus has risen, but, first of all, only the person who is driven by love, Mary Magdala, goes out in search of him. The others remain as they are, locked inside their own worlds. But love seeks out its beloved and Mary Magdala goes out, spices in hand, wanting at least to embalm his dead body. She finds his grave empty and runs back to Peter and the beloved disciple and tells them the tomb is empty. The two race off together, towards the tomb, but the disciple whom Jesus loved out-runs Peter and gets to the tomb first, but he doesn't enter, he waits for Peter (authority) to go in first.

Peter enters the empty tomb, sees the linens that had covered the body of Jesus, but does not understand. Then the beloved disciple, love, enters. He sees and he does understand. Love grasps the mystery. Love is the eye. It is what lets us see and understand the resurrection.

That is why, after the resurrection, some saw Jesus but others did not. Some understood the resurrection while others did not. Those with the eyes of love saw and understood. Those without the eyes of love either didn't see anything or were perplexed or upset by what they did see.

There are lots of ways to be blind. I remember an Easter Sunday some years ago when I was a young graduate student in San Francisco. Easter Sunday was late that year and it was a spectacularly beautiful spring day. But on that particular day I was mostly blind to what was around me. I was young, homesick, alone on Easter Sunday, and nursing a huge heartache. That colored everything I was seeing and feeling. It was Easter Sunday, in spring, in high sunshine, but, for what I was seeing, it might as well have been midnight, on Good Friday, in the dead of winter.

Lonely and nursing a heartache, I took a walk to calm my restlessness. At the entrance of a park, I saw a blind beggar holding a sign that read: It's spring and I'm blind! The irony wasn't lost on me. I was blind that day, more blind than that beggar, seeing neither spring nor the resurrection. What I was seeing were only those things that reflected what was going on inside my own heart.

Christ is risen, though we might not see him! We don't always notice spring. The miraculous doesn't force itself on us. It's there, there to be seen, but whether we see or not, and what precisely we do see, depends mainly upon what's going on inside our own hearts.