**Resurrection and the Second Half of Life** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake  
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You may recall the media attention a number of years ago that focused on the discovery in a first-century tomb in Jerusalem of a clay *bone box—an ossuary—*to use the technical term. It was inscribed: *“James the brother of Jesus.”*

For most Christians, the discovery of the *James Ossuary* was interesting, but not surprising. If authentic (and its authenticity is strongly contested), it would have been the earliest attestation outside the New Testament to Jesus as a figure of history and to his having a brother named James.

For these Christians, this simply confirmed what they already believed, that archeology verifies that there really was a Jesus. And for skeptics, it was strong evidence that Jesus really existed, too—that he isn’t a made-up figure, as some from time to time have argued.

But the exciting and titillating reason this story got so much media attention was the possibility, suggested by those involved in the discovery, that perhaps the bones of Jesus had also been interred in an ossuary in the same cave. If that were true, what would that mean? If Jesus’s bones were discovered, would that mean that the resurrection never happened? And should that mean the end of Christianity?

Now, I don’t imagine that his bones will be discovered—but it’s an interesting and important question and directly relevant to what we think Easter is about. Is Easter intrinsically about an *empty tomb—*about something extraordinary happening to the corpse of Jesus? Would Christianity be invalidated if we found his bones?[[1]](#footnote-1)

Now that I have your attention, I want to share with you another story about Resurrection and Easter that Christians in the West (like us)—Western Europe and the Americas—may find surprising.

You see, the Western church and the Eastern church have developed *two different ways* of depicting the resurrection.

For example, in Cappadocia (in western Turkey—where some of the oldest church buildings still stand), there is a magnificent miniature Byzantine cathedral that was carved out of the volcanic rock around 1050, it’s called *The Dark Church,* because it exists essentially within a man-made cave.

It contains 15 frescos on the life of Christ, from *Annunciation to Ascension*, including one on *Resurrection*. But instead of using the English word *resurrection,* the commentary (describing the fresco) used the Greek word *anastasis. Ana/stasis* literally means *“up/rising.”*

But an uprising by whom and with whom I wonder.

A description of the fresco may give us a clue (and by the way, similar frescos can be found in churches throughout the Eastern Orthodox world—Eastern Europe, Russia, Greece, the Middle East, and parts of Africa):

The central and tallest figure in the *Dark Church’s Anastasis painting is* **Christ** .  His right hand firmly grasps the right wrist of a white-haired, white-bearded man identified as **Adam.** Behind Adam is **Eve.** Both Adam and Eve are being wrenched from their sepulchers—tombs carved out of stone.

But it’s what appears beneath Christ that is the most striking element of the fresco. Christ is emerging from a dark semicircular area below the ground, and he is standing atop or trampling down a prostate figure whose feet and hands are chained. He lacks both halo and name. This is a **Hades figure,** the personification of *death.* To his right are scattered locks, bolts, and bars, originally part of a pair of bi-fold doors, which are flattened on the ground, arranged in a cruciform pattern.

In terms of *location* this image is *not* of **hell** but of Hades. In terms of *personification,* the image is *not* of **Satan,** the opponent of God, but of Hades, *the custodian of the dead.*

And here’s the punch-line: the resurrection as Anastasis (up/rising) depicts the crucified Christ breaking forcibly into Hades, tossing aside its bolts and locks, forming its gates into a cross, chaining the Hades persona, *and liberating all of humanity—*as personified in Adam and Eve—from the prison of death.

You see, the West (our world) celebrates the *individual resurrection.* Christ rises triumphantly and magnificently—but utterly alone. The guards of the tomb may be shown asleep or awake, but nobody else rises *in, by,* or *with* Christ.

The East, on the other hand, celebrates the *universal resurrection.* Here Christ also rises triumphantly—*but he takes all of humanity with him.*

So, Anastasis (up/rising)-as-resurrection is the liberation of past, present, and future humanity from death *in, by,* and *simultaneously with* Christ.

Which version is closer to the New Testament vision of Easter? This question is difficult to answer. In the Bible, *there is no direct account of the resurrection.* There are stories about the empty tomb and about Jesus appearing to his disciples, but *there is no attempt to describe the actual moment of resurrection.* As a result, Christians have had to imagine that moment. But what is striking is how two such profoundly different visions of resurrection could have evolved.[[2]](#footnote-2)

One theologian (addressing the nature of the resurrection stories) put it this way: *“… extended dogmatic discussions of this question almost always miss the forest for the trees. They do not come to terms with the larger implication of the fact that seemingly contradictory portraits of the risen Lord in his appearances were allowed to stand side by side in the New Testament. Why should the early communities have been comfortable with this? The answer, I suspect, is that they were considerably less concerned about the physical or non-physical nature of the resurrection “event” than are many of our contemporaries. For the early Christian communities, this was not where the main significance of the statement, ‘He is risen!’ lay. The primary importance of that confession was the reality of Jesus Christ as the risen Lord of their* ***continuing experience.”****[[3]](#footnote-3)*

Which brings us back to the James Ossuary—the bone box—and the implication that there might also be bones in a similar box that belonged to Jesus. Would it make any difference?

*I think not* because there is no question that had there *not* been some *transforming experience* that happened to the disciples after the death of Jesus that convinced them that he had conquered the boundary of human death there would be no Christianity.

There is a powerful *Easter experience* that starts the whole Christian faith, transforms the disciples, changes them from cowards who had forsaken him and fled and brought them back into being heroic followers of Jesus and that changed the way they understood God.

So whatever that Easter experience was they could never again think of God without seeing Jesus as a part of that definition. They could never again *see* Jesus without feeling that God was part of the divine definition. Something incredibly powerful happened.[[4]](#footnote-4)

And this transformative, surprising *Easter experience* continues to happen in our world today.

Barbara Brown Taylor calls it *becoming fully human.* She said:

*Like every believer I know, my search for real life has led me through at least three distinct seasons of faith, not once or twice but over and over again. Jesus called them* ***finding life, losing life, and finding life again****, with the paradoxical promise that finders will be losers while those who lose their lives for his sake will wind up finding them again. [Matthew 16:25] … You do not have to die in order to discover the truth of this teaching ... You only need to lose track of who you are, or who you thought you were supposed to be, so that you end up lying flat on the dirt floor basement of your heart. Do this, Jesus says, and you will live.*

She continued: *My losses have been chiefly in the area of faith, and specifically in the area of being certain who God is, what God wants of me, and what it means to be Christian in a world where religion often seems to do more harm than good . . .*

*[But] committing myself to the task of* ***becoming fully human*** *is saving my life now. This is different from the job of* ***being human****, which came with my birth certificate.* ***To become fully human*** *is something extra, a conscious choice that not everyone makes. Based on my limited wisdom and experience, there is more than one way to do this. If I were a Buddhist, I might do it by taking the bodhisattva vow, and if I were a Jew, I might do it by following Torah. Because I am a Christian, I do it by imitating Christ . . .[[5]](#footnote-5)*

In a similar way, Richard Rohr describes the Easter experience as entering *the second half of life.* He said:

*We are created in the image and likeness of God from the moment of our conception. The Creator gives us our core identity as sons and daughters of God, “from the beginning” (Ephesians 1:4-5) …*

*[And] life gives us opportunities to discover our image and develop our likeness, often in the form of necessary stumbling and falling. Throughout it all we are always held inside of Love. Challenges and disruptions invite us to move from what I call* ***the first half of life to the second half,*** *from forming and serving the ego to the ego, in fact, serving the soul. With the guidance of the Spirit and the help of wise mentors and elders, all of life, including our “false” or small and separate self, can lead us to our True Self or “who we are hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:3).*

He continued: *Most of us tend to think about the second half of life in terms of getting old, dealing with health issues, and letting go of our physical life. But the transition can happen at any age. Moving to the second half of life is an experience of falling upward and onward, into a broader and deeper world, where the soul has found its fullness, and we are consciously connected to the whole.*

*It is not a loss but somehow a gain. I have met enough radiant people to know that this paradox is possible! Many have come to their* ***human fullness****, often against all odds, and usually through suffering. They offer models and goals for humanity, much more than the celebrities and politicians who get so much of our attention today.[[6]](#footnote-6)*

And so, the Easter experience, Anastasis, the up/rising, becoming fully human, or entering the second half of life—whatever we call it--is a *mystery* and the best way to understand the Easter stories as *parables—parables about Jesus.* That is, *metaphorically.* Parable and metaphor are about *meaning.*

The story of the empty tomb means (in this way) that death could not hold Jesus, could not stop what he had begun. The powers killed him, sealed him in a tomb. But that was not the end—he continued to be known and known as Lord.

The stories of his appearances make the same metaphorical point: when Jesus appears to two of his followers on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24, he is experienced as a stranger who travels with them, and then is recognized as Jesus in *“the breaking of the bread.”* In John 20, he appears to Thomas, who needed, yearned, hungered *for his own experience of the risen Jesus,* and also blesses those who have *not* had such an experience and yet believe.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Friends, the *good news of Easter* is **not** found in the unknowable details of what may or may not have happened to the corpse of Jesus. Rather, it’s found in the fact that Jesus’s followers *continued to experience him as a living reality,* and *in a new way,* namely as having the qualities of God. Now he could be known anywhere, and not just in a particular place, now he was the presence which abided with them, *“Immanuel”* (which means “God with us”). [[8]](#footnote-8)

This Jesus, indeed, continues to be the *way,* the *truth,* and the *life—now—for more than 2 billion people across the globe.* And *that* is the good news of Easter!

1. Marcus J. Borg, *Speaking Christian,* Harper One, NY, NY, 2011, pp. 109, 110 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John Dominic Crossan and Sarah Sexton Crossan, *Rising Up with Christ,* The Christian Century, January 31, 2018, pp. 22, 23, & 24 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Douglas F. Ottati, *Jesus Christ and Christian Vision,* Westminster/John Knox, Louisville, KY, 1996, p. 94 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. David M. Felten & Jeff Proctor-Murphy, *Living the Questions,* Harper One, NY, NY, 2012, p. 119, (quoting John Shelby Spong) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith* (Harper One: 2012), xiii, xiv, 219, 229-230. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Adapted from Richard Rohr, [*Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*](http://email.cac.org/t/d-l-oikiijk-kjllojhh-r/)(Jossey-Bass: 2011), 153-154. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Marcus J. Borg, *Speaking Christian,* Harper One, New York, 2011, pp, 112, 113 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision,* Harper, San Francisco, 1987, p. 185 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)