

ON SECOND THOUGHT

No doubt you have heard about the tragic death of Matthew Morelli, the Norwalk Police Office found shot to death a little over a week ago. He was described by fellow officers as well respected, and had served in the Marines before becoming a policeman in 1996.

Officer Morelli's funeral service was attended by over 1200 people, including some 700 fellow officers. On the cover of this Friday's *Westport News* there was a very moving picture of Morelli's casket at the cemetery. On top of it were many flowers, and, at one end, one of his colleagues was adding a white glove to a growing pile of white gloves placed by other officers, a final tribute to a fallen friend.

Every culture, every sub-culture, has its rituals, its ceremonies, its own unique ways of saying goodbye when someone dies. For Jews, even to this day, some of that ritual involves preparing the body for burial. Known today as *tahara*, the act of cleansing, purifying and wrapping the body in a shroud is considered a great honor. As the conclusion of the ritual, a blessing is pronounced on the deceased: "Go in peace, rest in peace, and arise in your turn at the end of days." (Bob Abernathy and William Bole, *The Life of Meaning*, 287)

Joseph of Arimathea, Mary Magdalene and the other Marys, had all been involved in the burial rites for Jesus. But one part of the ritual remained unfinished. His body had not been anointed with spices. And, as we recalled last week, it was that ritual that brought Mary to the tomb on Easter morning, when she discovered Jesus had been raised from the dead.

The apostles too soon had their encounter with the Risen Jesus, as he appeared to them in the room where they were hiding from the authorities. And the word was beginning to spread. Jesus was somehow, somehow, alive once more!

But Thomas hadn't been a part of it. He'd not been at the cross. He'd not been involved in the burial rites. He'd not visited the tomb on Easter morning, and he was missing on Easter night. And so he had his doubts. It all sounded well and good, but it just didn't fit into his understanding of reality. "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark . . . and in his side, I will not believe." (John 20:25b)

Thomas had his doubts—and frankly, so do we. Yes, we live in a day and age when folks are seemingly miraculously brought back to life by CPR and electric shock, but they then go on to die. If not that day, then another day.

In truth, it has become fairly commonplace in our day and age. For a few moments, sometimes even longer, the body, the brain, has ceased to function. But then with a whoosh of air, with a jolt of electricity, or a bit of pressure, the lungs expand, the heart beats, and life goes on. But that's not resurrection. That's resuscitation

So what *is* resurrection? Certainly, the stories in the Gospels seem to feel a bit like resuscitation. The empty tomb. The warm breath on the disciples. The invitation issued to Thomas to touch hands and side. These are all matters of the body. So how is resurrection different from resuscitation?

Marcus Borg offers a helpful answer: "The meaning of resuscitation is obvious," he writes, "a person dead or believed to be dead comes back to life again. Such a person returns to the life she or he had before, needs to eat and drink and sleep. . . [But] resurrection does not mean resumption of previous existence, [rather it means] entry into a new kind of existence." (*The Meaning of Jesus*, 131)

Resurrection is an entry into a new kind of existence.

Whatever the disciples experienced, I would suggest they did not experience Jesus in the flesh—at least not as they or we usually understand it. This was not some animated corpse they were witnessing. This was a new kind of existence. Even the stories themselves point to something different from our usual understandings of how we are impacted by time and space. Jesus seems able to come and go at will. First he's in Jerusalem, then he's in Galilee. One moment he stands in the room, the next he's gone. And ultimately, he is gone altogether. Ascended, as Luke describes it, ascended into heaven.

So was it a ghost? Was it all a vision, a hallucination, a day dream? For the writers of the gospels that is definitely not the case. I think that's why they go to such lengths to describe things that are beyond the realm of visions and ghosts. That's why they discuss his eating fish, offering his hands to Thomas, and so on.

It would, of course, be easiest to simply dismiss the whole matter as a really good story, made up by some first century Jews caught up in their grief. But that ignores the reality that they were transformed by the whole thing. After Jesus' death they were in hiding. They were petrified. They couldn't do a thing. But within a matter of weeks, they were out preaching, teaching, healing the sick and creating an institution that has lasted for almost two thousand years! Jesus had entered into a new kind of existence, one we cannot fully comprehend, one deeply rooted in mystery. But so too had they. No longer a quivering mass of cowards, they were now an empowered group of men and women, willing to risk life itself to spread the word that God really does love humankind—even to the point of death, and beyond.

You see, ultimately, resurrection is really more about the living than it is about the dead. It is about how we can be transformed by the story of Jesus. It is about how we can be transformed by love. It is about how we can enter a new kind of existence—one rooted not in fear and anxiety, but rather one rooted in the wondrous truth of God’s great love.

But it also means things won’t stay the same. It means we can’t just simply resume life the way it was before we encountered the love of God. It means things will change. It means *we* will change.

Like the officer from Norwalk, Maine State Trooper and former Marine Drew Braestrap died at an early age. He was killed in a car accident while he was on his way to work. He had been planning on going to seminary, to become a minister, but that was never to be.

His wife Kate wanted to take part in preparing his body for burial. For a Christian, at least in our culture, it was an unusual request, but the wise undertaker consented to her wishes.

In her book *Here If You Need Me* she describes her experience. Several folks tried to dissuade her, but she was determined to honor her husband by performing these last rituals of bathing and dressing before his cremation.

As she entered the room she saw him laid out on a steel examining table. He was dressed in a t-shirt and a pair of Halloween boxers one of their children had given him and wanted him to wear. Slowly she washed and dressed him. “I washed Drew’s face with a soft, damp cloth,” she writes, “*Semper fidelis*, I told him, washing him tenderly around the mouth and jaw and closed eyes, then smoothing his hair with my hand. Leaving the cool room where Drew’s body lay was harder than it was to enter it.” (42-43)

Braestrap’s book is full of bodily memories and stories. Like the gospel writers, she has a hard time letting go of the physical. Yet, like those disciples in the ancient stories, she too experiences resurrection. And, indeed, enters a new existence. She decides to take up Drew’s dream, much as the disciples took up Jesus’ dream, and she becomes a seminarian herself, eventually being ordained, and serving now as a chaplain.

Near the end of her book she writes: “Death alters the reality of our lives; the death of an intimate changes it completely. No part of my life, from my most ethereal notions of God to the most mundane detail of tooth brushing was the same after Drew died. Life consisted of one rending novelty after another” She then goes on to describe the many changes in her life after his death: going to school, getting ordained, working as a chaplain, and mothering her children as a single parent. “On one hand,” she concludes, “there is my darling Drew, whom I will never cease to love and never cease to long for, on the other hand, there is a wonderful life [full of new things] that I enjoy and am grateful for. I can’t make those two

realities—what I've lost and what I've found—fit together in some tidy pattern of divine casualty, I just have to hold them on the one hand and on the other, just like that." (310-311)

On second thought maybe that is all we can say about resurrection itself. Maybe we just have to acknowledge that the various pieces of the gospel story don't fit neatly together. There is no tidy pattern of logic. The stories are filled with seeming contradictions and anomalies. They are sometimes sublime, and sometimes quite pedestrian. They just don't fit into our understanding of reality. But they are the stories we have to work with. And at the last trumpet, as St. Paul might put it, at the last trumpet whatever they mean, however we understand them, , they speak of a love which transcends even death itself. A love which can and will move us into a whole new existence.

Maybe, in the end, Thomas had it right. Maybe all we can do in the face of such mystery is fall to our knees and proclaim, "My Lord and my God!"

Amen

John H. Danner