

# Comment

Dear Editor,

In your *Comment* for December 1979 you imply that it is an error to assume that the resurrection of Jesus Christ was 'the revivification of his corpse'.

I would be grateful if you could explain why this is erroneous, because although I would not for choice express my faith with that phrase, I suspect that you might reduce my faith to it. And if you did, I would not accept without some very precise explanation that you had achieved a *reductio ad absurdum* of my faith. The *reductio ad absurdum* is a valid form of argument, within strict limits; but it has been replaced in much contemporary theological debate by the *reductio ad verbum Boo*, which is not a valid form of argument; and I have a lurking suspicion that 'revivification of a corpse' is such a 'boo-word'.

In which part of this phrase do you consider the error to lie? In the word 'corpse'? Well now, Jesus died on the cross. His corpse therefore was taken down from it and laid in the tomb. And according to the narratives it was not there any longer on Easter morning, and later on Jesus appeared to his disciples in distinctly bodily form – not as a ghost or anything like that. So at least Luke seems to have thought. So *something* appears to have happened to his corpse. What I would say happened to it, in terms of my belief in the resurrection of Christ from the dead, is that it ceased to be a corpse. And when corpses cease to be corpses, I suppose you can say that they are revived or resuscitated. But if you cannot say this, because it is erroneous – as you seem to maintain – what can you say in order to be orthodox (not erroneous)?

If you are objecting that to regard the resurrection of Jesus (or the resurrection of the dead in general, with which it is necessarily and intimately linked – see 1 Cor 15) as the revivification of his corpse is to make no distinction between it and the revival, say of Lazarus, or any medically effected resuscitations, then I would agree with you that the phrase is unsatisfactory. But I can only see the fault in that tiny prefix 're-'.

For my faith, and I am fairly sure the faith of sincere if unlettered Christians, is not that Jesus came back to life, this common, mortal life we live now, and he lived before his death; but that he rose to new and immortal and eternal life, to die no more. But that this resurrection, this unimaginable transfiguration or transformation involved his body, the body that was for a time a corpse, but is a corpse no more – that I think, I am sure, is an absolutely necessary affirmation of Christian faith – once more see 1 Cor 15, not to mention Phil 3:20-21, and the gospels.

Yours sincerely,  
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The problem surely is not so much that tiny prefix 're-' as the whole phrase 'revivification of a corpse'. As Edmund Hill says, when a corpse ceases to be a corpse we would normally say that it has been revived or resuscitated, or, to put it slightly differently, when a corpse revives that usually means that it has come back to life, (leaving aside for the moment, the pretty odd use of normally and usually here – I have never, nor have I met anyone who has, seen or heard of a corpse reviving, even through medical resuscitation). But that is not at all what we mean when we confess that Jesus is risen from the dead. Indeed the uniqueness of Jesus' resurrection is such that we cannot speak 'normally' about it. We may not know very well what we *do* mean by the resurrection of Jesus, but we know what we *don't* mean, and that includes Jesus coming back to life. If that were all that happened to Jesus, it may have been startling to his friends and worrying to his enemies, but is of no more radical human and theological significance than the view that his resurrection means simply that his message lives on.

One of the more subtle aspects of the New Testament is that it points to the astonishing novelty of the resurrection by sustaining the tension between on the one hand the continuity of the crucified and risen Jesus, (it is really Jesus who is risen – see my hands and my feet that it is myself) – and on the other hand the discontinuity, the radical, unimaginable difference, (there is nothing of the old Jesus left, not even a corpse, thus the Empty Tomb stories). It is this utter newness of the resurrection (that in Jesus God was 'doing a new thing' – Isaiah 43), this new way of being bodily – that makes the death and resurrection of Jesus the heart of the Christian gospel and the focus of the Church's liturgical year. At least we *say* the death and resurrection of Jesus is at the heart of the Church's year. How sad it is then that so many complain that the Easter liturgy is so easily forgettable rather than magnificently memorable. Normally this is the result of small-minded liturgical performance. The Easter fire, symbol of God's creative love soaring into the deadness and darkness of night, sags to the limp flame of a few wooden chips set alight (often while it is still half daylight) in a kind of disused frying-pan. The Easter candle, symbol of the utter newness of the risen Christ, not only will be lit from that melancholy flame but may well turn out to be last year's candle or even the year's before with a new transfer stuck on. The baptismal font, womb of the new life in the Spirit, makes its appearance as some tawdry glass bowl holding perhaps a pint of water.

It isn't necessarily the case that exciting, whole-hearted liturgy encourages and nourishes excited resurrection faith, any more than pusillanimous, drab liturgy produces half-hearted resurrection faith, but it really does help.

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