

# Comment

## *The Easter Touch*

In the painting traditions of the eastern and western churches there are different ways of showing the Resurrection. The west has never been particularly shy about showing that the Resurrection actually happened. The fact that there is no description in scripture of the process of the Resurrection far from putting western artists off has actually given their imaginations free rein. Everybody can remember seeing spectacular pictures of the risen Christ emerging from the tomb in various states of undress, radiating power and majesty brandishing the standard of the Resurrection, a red cross on a white ground. I remember that I was once looking at a picture like this in an Edinburgh art gallery. Two ladies came up and looked at it rather curiously. One turned to the other and said, "What is Jesus carrying the English flag for?" The other one thought for a moment and then said "He is just about to descend into hell and I suppose a lot of folk would recognise it down there!"

The Eastern Christian tradition, on the other hand, is much more shy about showing the Resurrection in its icons. In fact the purest tradition avoids it altogether. Instead the painters show the results of the Resurrection: the descent into hell, liberation. The finest icons show a majestic Christ, springing down amongst the ranks of the faithful dead and drawing them up in a kind of glorious chain dance of joy. They are so surprised and delighted to see Jesus bursting into their loneliness that they quite spontaneously hold on to each other, they grab each other's hands. In one I saw recently there were astonished looking prophets and disconcerted kings and patriarchs all linked to the whirlwind figure of Christ through their hold on each other. Christ lays hold of them and, in the Spirit, draws them into the communion he enjoys with the Father; a communion that death cannot break.

One of the characteristics of Jesus' mission was its physicality, its bodiliness. He was not afraid to touch people. In a society in which there were all kinds of rules about who could be touched and who could not, about what could be touched and what could not, he was not afraid. Nothing and nobody was untouchable for him. He reached out and touched people. Quite often those who had been cut off from the communion of society, those who had been rejected and excluded, those who had become untouchable, were brought back through being touched by him. All of those who followed him had, in some way, been touched by him. He had laid his hand on them, drawn them away from their nets,

from their tax offices, from their hearths and homes. His touch had released them from the chains of madness, it had healed the wounds of sickness, it had taken away the bitterness of anger and the pain of grief. His touch had caused them to leave everything and follow him. Their despairing feeling when faced with the shock of his death was that they would never again feel his touch. Clearly what they fear is being cast adrift. The withdrawal of Jesus from their lives might involve their losing touch with each other; the dissolution of the bonds of communion that their pilgrimage with him had forged. In a fundamental sense his touch had put them in touch with each other. It is this, I think, that explains the lonely journey of the women to the tomb very early on the day after the sabbath.

Many of the Fathers of the Church, when they comment on this passage, explain that the women were coming to the tomb with spices and ointments. These were to embalm the body. They did not want it to wither away. They wanted to preserve it, to hold on to it, to stay in touch with it. Their worst fears and anxieties are confirmed when they reach the tomb; it is empty; the precious body of the Lord is not there.

Later on they actually meet the risen Christ. They meet him at a significant moment. In Matthew's story it is when they have turned away from the tomb, when they have left it behind them, that they meet the risen Christ. He makes the first move. He takes the initiative in the meeting. He shows himself to them by greeting them or by calling them by name. This greeting awakes in them the spontaneous desire to hold on to him; to prevent him from escaping them; they need that reassuring touch. In St Matthew's gospel the women fall at his feet and cling to him. It is almost as if they want to make sure he stays there firmly planted in their midst. They think that he will only stay there if they hang on to him. It is the same with Mary Magdalen in St John's gospel. When she turns away from the tomb Jesus calls her by name and she recognises him. Immediately she tries to cling to him. She lays hold of Christ, trying desperately to stay in touch. But the message of the Resurrection, and therefore the meaning of the Eucharist, is that Christ still lays hold of us. He is still in touch with us. But the only way we can stay in touch with him is by allowing ourselves to be touched by him and by bringing his touch to others.

The only person who refuses to touch Jesus after the Resurrection is Thomas. Thomas was the one who clung to the literal reality of the death of Jesus. Others might have preferred to forget about Jesus' death, to pretend that it did not happen and to hang on to the memories, but Thomas could not; for him the wounds were real. Jesus is dead and life must go on. When faced by the risen Christ he turns down the invitation

to put his hands in the marks of his sufferings. There is no need. Thomas confesses that Jesus has laid hold on him. He has been touched by the risen Christ.

The lesson that the earliest generations of Christians learned is necessary for us too. We need to allow ourselves to be touched by Christ, to be drawn into friendship with him. We all have to hear the phrase spoken by the disciple Jesus loved when he recognised him preparing the eucharistic banquet on the seashore, "It is the Lord". That message comes to us in a number of ways: in the breaking of the word and the breaking of bread; in the voice of the Church; in the silence of prayer; in the encounter with those who are close to him. We can never touch him unless we first allow him to touch us.

AJW

## Questioning the Virgin Birth

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On a wet and windy evening last February over five hundred people gathered in a fine eighteenth century church in central Edinburgh to discuss the doctrine of the Virgin Birth. Given that the population of the city is about 500,000, one need not exaggerate the significance of the event. The interior of the church, modelled on St Andrew's in the Via Quirinale in Rome, and thus neither cruciform nor circular but elliptical, provides a good arena for discussion. It is the church to which the dissenting ministers and elders went in procession when they withdrew from the General Assembly in 1843, to constitute the Free Church of Scotland.

The present controversy about the factual basis and importance of accepting the doctrine of the Virgin Birth is unlikely to split the Kirk, although the main Scottish newspapers were inundated with letters during the weeks after the Moderator of the Church of Scotland (the