

Catholic Faith and Easter Stories: Reflections on Hubert Richards

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Is it possible for a Catholic to believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ while at the same time classifying the resurrection narratives in the New Testament as examples of a special kind of fiction? Is faith in the resurrection compatible with treating the gospel accounts of an empty tomb and appearances of the risen Christ to his disciples as 'stories'?

With the recent publication of *The First Easter*¹ Hubert Richards has presented Catholics with problems about the literary status of the resurrection narratives which cannot be ducked by theologians and preachers because for one thing the ready availability of the book means that many Catholics who have not been able to keep abreast of current biblical exegesis have suddenly been shocked into reconsidering how they should regard the gospel stories. It is depressing, but not surprising, to hear that some enquirers are being headed off with the information that Hubert Richards has resigned from the priesthood. His faith in God and in the resurrection shines through so manifestly in his writing that we need not linger over this futile manoeuvre.

A second ploy, this time with some aura of intellectual respectability about it, is to say that Richards allows himself to be too impressed by Willi Marxsen's work on the resurrection narratives. This would mean that what a German Lutheran in the existentialist tradition of Bultmann may believe is one thing but for a Catholic to follow that line must lead to the heresy of liberalism and modernism. Marxsen published a pamphlet in 1964 which triggered off what has proved to be perhaps the most intensive study of the resurrection in the history of Christian theology. His book, *The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth*, has been available in English since 1970. That his exegesis of the Easter narratives shows traces of a strong Lutheran bias against reason and history in favour of faith alone and sheer proclamation seems to be demonstrated in an important review by Gerald O'Collins (*The Heythrop Journal*, April 1971). On the other hand, the question of the literary status of the Easter narratives does not seem to be inextricably interwoven with interconfessional differences. On the contrary, because Xavier Léon-Dufour levels similar

¹The First Easter: What Really Happened?, by Hubert J. Richards. Collins, Fontana Books, 1976. 126 pages. 65p.

objections against Marxsen's theologically biased exegesis but goes on to raise questions about the literary status of the Easter narratives in his splendid book, *Résurrection de Jésus et message pascal*, available in a somewhat less than perfect English translation since 1974, and by far the best Catholic treatment of the whole subject. And in the equally fine book by Reginald H. Fuller, *The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives*, published in 1972, we can see how an Anglican scholar deals with the same questions. But the effects on Catholic theology of introducing an exegetical approach which owes so much to Protestant scholarship must raise much wider questions than have so far been generally acknowledged. It is by no means silly to wonder what the long-term implications for Catholic doctrine and sensibility are to be of this introduction of a hermeneutical method that was forged by adherents of the *fides sola* principle in response to the positivism of the Enlightenment.

Some no doubt will wonder whether a popular paperback series is the proper context for raising questions about the resurrection narratives. Hubert Richards is certainly very conscious of the difficulties. He wants, as he says (page 13), to act only as the reporter and populariser of the most serious research in this field today. 'The questions which are being asked of the resurrection today may shatter some of our most treasured assumptions'; he anticipates that his interpretation will seem strange and shocking, and that some will doubt whether he believes in the resurrection of Jesus at all. It is, however, precisely his deep faith in the resurrection that impels him to try to lead his readers 'from superficialities to the heart of the matter', 'from childish *naïveté* into adult understanding'. No doubt it would be better for everybody if we could all read Fuller and Léon-Dufour; but are those who, for various reasons, cannot cope with such nuanced and footnoted studies to be deprived of all chance of hearing what faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ might mean today? To ask the question is to answer it. If the resurrection of Christ means anything at all, it cannot be kept in the safety of learned journals and doctoral monographs. With all the risks that go with popularisation, then, what we are to believe about Jesus must be offered to everybody, which means, in our society, that the results of critical study of the resurrection narratives must be made available in paperback, in a form that makes them accessible to the ordinary reader.

The average Catholic remains far from well equipped to read the New Testament. For example, how many of us have any real idea of the immense *variety* of writing that the New Testament includes? How many of those who have heard of the concept of literary genre are able to make much practical use of it? How many of us realise in any detail how different the four accounts of the Passion are from one another and how illuminating for our faith the contrast is? For the most part we still operate with a version of what happened which is only a harmonisation of the four accounts—a version, then, that irons out the distinctive theological perspectives that were so important for

the evangelists, and leaves an essentially factualistic, biographical report that would have astonished them. Don't most of us, believers and non-believers, take it for granted that we know what the resurrection of Jesus is about? Don't we take it for granted, that is to say, that we know what the Easter narratives mean? Don't most of us, believers and non-believers, assume that faith in the resurrection of Jesus involves, and even depends on, treating the Easter narratives as essentially historical accounts of meetings that the disciples had with a dead man who had been 'raised' (in effect resuscitated and reanimated) 'from the dead', and was able to appear and disappear at will, pass through closed doors, display scars for them to finger, barbecue fish, and so on, all of which is assumed to demonstrate the power of almighty God and summon us to repent and be baptised?

As Hubert Richards points out, however, the stories in the concluding pages of the gospels do not provide such a clear and coherent account as we generally imagine (page 17): 'as literal descriptions of what took place, the stories are quite incoherent and totally irreconcilable', 'the stories were never intended as literal descriptions of a sequence of events and should not be treated as such'. When the Easter stories are compared with one another it proves impossible to resolve the contradictions and discrepancies. Mark manages to refer to the resurrection without narrating any appearance story; Paul seems never to have heard of the empty tomb that occupies a place in all four gospels; Matthew writes of a final appearance of the risen Christ and places it in Galilee whereas Luke seems to shift it to Jerusalem; and so on. In short, the resurrection of Jesus, whatever it consisted of, can be indicated by different New Testament writers in terms of appearances or without such appearances, in terms of Jerusalem or Galilee, as involving an empty tomb or apparently unaware of that, with appearances extending over forty days or apparently concluded in one (page 18:) 'There is no *one* coherent or consistent or exclusive account of the resurrection of Jesus'.

Following Marxsen, but together with other scholars such as Fuller and Léon-Dufour, Hubert Richards proceeds to show how the Easter narratives developed, and how other ways besides the language of 'resurrection' existed from the outset to put the Easter experience into words. Here again what he says will not surprise anybody familiar with current exegesis, but many other readers are bound to be disconcerted. Very few of us have any real sense of the development within the New Testament, say from the earliest letters of Paul (circa 50 A.D.) to the Johannine literature (perhaps 90 A.D.) and such turn-of-the-century documents as Jude and 2 Peter. However absurd it may be to present the books of the Bible in the order in which they were written—scholars have been falling over themselves recently to ridicule just such an attempt—the plain fact, as any preacher knows, is that nothing illuminates a congregation or a study-group more than having to reconstruct for themselves the internal chronology of the New Testament writings. Most of us assume unthinkingly that the

gospels are earlier than the letters of St Paul simply because they come first in the book. It is certainly a widespread assumption that the gospel accounts of the resurrection are much closer to the original event than anything in St Paul. Anybody with the slightest acquaintance with the chronology of the New Testament writings knows that precisely the opposite is the case; but even then doesn't the idea linger on, against what scholarship has proved beyond argument, that the apparently simple and naive testimonies of these people who walked and talked and ate with Jesus after he had risen from the dead are much nearer in time to what happened than the various accounts of what happened to Paul on the road to Damascus?

It is very striking, however, when one puts the Easter narratives into the chronological order in which they were composed, to discover that the earliest of them are by far the most reticent and uninformative. The later an account is in the history of the formation of Easter narratives the more likely it is to be detailed and circumstantial. The further a writer gets from the event the more he seems able to say about it. In the early 50s, Paul says simply that the risen Christ appeared to him, and Mark, in the earliest of the gospels, is as I have said, able to communicate his faith in the resurrection without mentioning any appearances at all. In the late 70s, however, Matthew writes of the risen Christ appearing to the Eleven on a mountain in Galilee and delivering a discourse of stupendous significance. Ten years later, Luke tells the story of a Christ who joins two of his disciples on the road and, remaining anonymous, expounds the scriptures to them before sitting down to share a meal with them. Finally, perhaps in the closing decade of the century, the Christ of John's gospel invites doubting Thomas to finger his scars, and in a kind of epilogue to the gospel he makes a fire and cooks breakfast for the disciples. As Hubert Richards says (page 47), 'stories which grow like this in the telling need to be taken *as* stories, not as history'.

The shift from Paul's reserved declaration (e.g. I Corinthians 15 :8) to the expansive, picturesque and detailed narratives in Luke and John is very striking. Whatever the core of remembered historical fact in these late stories, the interesting question is not so much the accretions to, and internal evolution of, a traditional story which eventually terminated in Luke and John as we have inherited them (the question of redaction-history), but when, and even more *why*, the bare proclamation that Jesus had been raised from the dead and had revealed himself to his disciples turned into, or spun off, *narratives*. This is a question about the nature of narrative, of what it is to tell a story, and it is a question that goes beyond the bounds of biblical studies.

Of course there are stories and stories, and the problem is finally the poverty of the available theory of narrative, the lack of much developed reflection on the nature of story telling. What would it be like, for example, to read the Emmaus story (Luke 24 :13-32) on the assumption that it is not, and does not even contain any "core" of,

historical report of how two of the disciples, on Easter Sunday, were on their way to a village called Emmaus, and as they talked and discussed all that had happened in Jerusalem in the previous few days, 'Jesus himself came up and walked along with them', and so on? As long ago as 1921, in the first edition of Bultmann's *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, the Emmaus story is classified as a 'legend', and C. H. Dodd speaks of it as a 'tale'. On the other hand, in the Pelican Gospel Commentary published in 1963, George Caird appears to take the Emmaus story as a literal account of an experience that two of the disciples had, as a matter of fact, on the road to Emmaus that very day (page 257): 'From the experience of this couple we can learn much about the resurrection appearance of Jesus. As they walked along the road, Jesus suddenly appeared at their side, and they assumed that he was a fellow traveller who had overtaken them'; and so on. In John Drury's contribution to The J. B. Phillips's Commentaries (*Luke*, 1973), one of the finest 'popular' commentaries ever published, for other reasons as well as his use of the sort of literary criticism which helps one to understand any kind of creative writing, we are invited (page 217) to treat the Emmaus story as 'one of Luke's best and most characteristic achievements, a short story whose spell-binding power comes about by a controlled line, a sober realism and a muted sense of wonder . . . his last great set piece . . . nothing strains or spoils the tale . . . it is very likely that this tale is his own work'; and so on.

Consider how the first half of the story goes (Luke 24 :13-27), in the King James version, vastly superior to modern translations for rhetorical effectiveness in such passages as this :

'And behold, two of them went that same day to a village called Emmaus, which was from Jerusalem about three score furlongs. And they talked together of all these things which had happened. And it came to pass that, while they communed together and reasoned, Jesus himself drew near, and went with them. But their eyes were holden that they should not know him. And he said unto them, What manner of communications are these that ye have one to another, as ye walk, and are sad? And the one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answering said unto him, Art thou only a stranger in Jerusalem, and hast not known the things which are come to pass there in these days? And he said unto them, What things? And they said unto him, Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, which was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people: And how the chief priests and our rulers delivered him to be condemned to death, and have crucified him. But we trusted that it had been he which should have redeemed Israel. . . . Then he said unto them, O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory? And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself'.

The 'and behold', there, might be taken as a signal to the listeners or the readers to whom Luke addresses himself to use their imagination—to visualise the two disciples making their way from Jerusalem back into the country. The village of Emmaus has never been successfully identified and, no doubt like the name of Cleopas, may be regarded as circumstantial detail for verisimilitude. The Lukan motif of Jerusalem as the centre of action is so strong that it reappears in this story which (one might have thought) requires no particular localisation. It is as they 'talked together of all these things that had happened', and while they 'communed together and reasoned', that 'Jesus himself drew near'. The emphasis on their being in the midst of discussion—*en tō homilein autous kai syzêtein*—when Jesus himself is said to join them is so clear that we have surely to think of 'homily' and 'searching' as the scenario (the *Sitz im Leben*) of this particular intervention of Christ. Timing it as occurring 'that same day', i.e. on the first Easter Sunday, places the story within that privileged period when Christ was revealed to his disciples—revealed, as this story goes on to tell, as they related the things concerning Jesus of Nazareth to Moses and all the prophets.

The eyes of the disciples (so the story goes on) are held by some supernatural force—*ekratounto*—from the recognition scene that the appearance narratives usually contain. Instead, the moment of recognition is delayed by a strange dialogue between the masked Jesus and one of the disciples. For Luke's original listeners or readers this dialogue is rich with irony and even humour. The unrecognised Jesus is made to ask the disciples what manner of communications they are having with one another, and, in turn, they ask him if he is the only pilgrim to Jerusalem for the passover celebrations who remains ignorant of what has happened. He continues to pretend ignorance and they finally tell him 'the things concerning Jesus of Nazareth'. That this must be a literary device or a dramatic presentation intended to grip the imagination of some circle of early Christian readers is surely obvious. The irony of having the unidentified Jesus asking for information about what had happened to himself prepares us for the mere recital of the bare facts which the disciple finally vouchsafes: 'Jesus was a prophet, the chief priests had him crucified, our hopes that he might have redeemed Israel were thus disappointed'. At this point in the text we must bracket out the verses on the empty tomb, a secondary and somewhat awkward attempt to incorporate a different story—so awkward that the response of the unidentified stranger ignores it altogether. He chides them for their reluctance to believe and tells them they should have realised that the Messiah would have to suffer before entering into his glory (an alternative expression for the resurrection). Then, beginning with the Pentateuch and continuing with the Prophets, the still unidentified Jesus expounded—*diêrmêneusen*, from *hermêneuein*, to interpret, from which comes the word hermeneutic—the passages which referred to himself in every part of the scriptures. The stranger who began as the questioner now turns into

the exegete, the interpreter, who relates the bare facts of what happened during the passover in Jerusalem that year to a variety of passages in the scriptures. Where two or three gather and discuss the facts about what happened to Jesus a recital of the facts in the context of an interpretation of the scriptures gives rise to Christian faith. Instead of being a naive report of one of the earliest appearances of the risen Christ to a couple of his disciples on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus, then, this narrative is surely rather a very sophisticated parable accounting for the rise of the Christian interpretation of the scriptures and inviting the reader to seek the risen Lord by relating for himself in his turn the facts about Jesus to certain passages in the scriptures. Far from telling us anything about the resurrection appearance of Jesus if by that we mean that he could be mistaken for a fellow traveller and so on, and thus bringing us close to the original events of the first Easter Sunday, the Emmaus story would be something more like a theological meditation on the relation between history and scripture—but cast in what is for us the rather strange form of a parable. An essential claim about the origin and nature of Christian faith, which we should be more likely to make in a scholarly monograph or in a theological treatise, is issued here in the form of a story. An important truth about the rise of Christianity would thus be expressed in a kind of fiction. Far from reducing the text, then, treating it as a kind of fiction seems only greatly to increase its significance and to extend its truth.

Whether all of the Easter stories may be treated in this way is a large question which it would take a book to answer. Each story would have to be taken by itself. The interpretation of half of the Emmaus story which has just been outlined would not be likely to meet with the approval of many exegetes (it owes nearly everything to an essay by Hans Dieter Betz, in *Interpretation*, January 1969). On the other hand, while all differing in detail over the interpretation and the history of the composition of the text, Fuller and Léon-Dufour, as well as Drury and Betz, would certainly treat the Emmaus story in the form in which we have inherited it as 'a gem of literary art' (Fuller's phrase, page 104). There is no doubt about what Hubert Richards thinks (page 50): 'It needs some reflection to realise that (the Easter stories) do not describe some event—a raising from the dead, an empty tomb, appearances—upon which faith was subsequently built. It was the other way round. What came first was the faith-experience, and the stories are a subsequent pictorial elaboration of that experience'. He suggests, as of course many exegetes would, that apologetic and polemic elements have influenced the composition of the Easter stories. Incipient docetic tendencies in the early Church, which considered the humanity and sufferings of Jesus as apparent rather than real, may well have led Luke and John to picture the risen Christ eating with his disciples, offering his scars for them to touch, and so on. But the principal factor in the making of the Easter narratives, so Richards argues (page 47), is 'the element of dramatisation, the need to express in a

concrete and pictorial form a mystery which would otherwise remain almost inexpressible'. Very summarily, the overwhelming experience which a man like Paul had, a sudden conversion with some physical effects, and a dramatic reorientation of his whole life, convinced him that Jesus had been raised from the dead and exalted to the right hand of God and was now commissioning him to proclaim the Gospel (1 Corinthians 1 :23-24): 'yes, Christ nailed to the cross; and though this is a stumbling-block to Jews and folly to Greeks, yet to those who have heard his call, Jews and Greeks alike, he is the power of God and the wisdom of God'—but convinced him of all this without his ever having to visit the tomb or have breakfast with Christ after his death. It would have been a later generation—people who did not belong to the founding generation—who began to picture what the original disciples experienced and to dramatise it in the stories which, lovingly remembered over generations, finally took shape in the gospels of Luke and John. The original event would have been like what happened in the case of Paul (the only personal account which we have, after all); while all the Easter narratives in the gospels, whether relating to the empty tomb or to appearances, would be graphic dramatisations of, and extended metaphors for, an essentially unrepresentable and absolutely unique event.

There can be no doubt whatever, as we noted at the start, that Hubert Richards believes in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He has no objection, as he says (page 9), to being told that his understanding of the resurrection is different from someone else's. He has no desire to impose his interpretation on everybody else as the only possible one (page 114). Indeed, his point throughout his book is that there is, and always has been, a variety of ways of interpreting what happened to Jesus when he went to God. The question is not of imposing a new orthodoxy but of what liberty a Catholic has to treat the Easter narratives as a special kind of fiction.

The answer cannot but be brief. As we noted already, the problem goes far beyond the bounds of biblical interpretation. It is the problem of the poverty of the available reflection on the nature of fiction. Despite a whole shelf of books from Auerbach's *Mimesis* to Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, and from Wayne Booth's *Rhetoric of Fiction* to Barbara Hardy's *Tellers and Listeners*, there is a remarkable absence of the kind of theory of story which would help to illuminate biblical and theological questions. Some pages by Brian Wicker, in *The Story-Shaped World*, surely put one on the right road. Under the pressures of a culture such as ours has been for centuries, in which narratives have been separated out into either the empirical or the fictional, it may have been inevitable that the gospels should be read in a uniformly literal mode. As he says (page 105), 'perhaps it is only now, as a result of our long experience of reading *novels*, that is, narratives that once again combine the empirical and the fictional in a mode of narration more complex than either of these can be by itself, are we able to recover the true nature of narratives that were written

before that split occurred'. The perspectives opened up there are surely very encouraging for those who would read the Easter stories *as stories*, and who find it is precisely that approach which deepens and sustains their faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In any case, as has often been observed, Catholics should feel no discomfort at this modern understanding of the gospel stories as largely the product of the loving reflection and devout imagination of the Church, for their high doctrine of the Church guided by the Holy Spirit should help them to accept some such view.

Contempt for the Past

Ann Dummett

'L'immensité de ces espaces infinies m'effraie', said Pascal, and we are all familiar with the ways in which European attitudes to the place of man in the universe have changed since astronomy rendered him small, lonely and vulnerable. But the idea of the expanding universe in infinite space, while it robbed man of a central place as lord of creation below the heavens, did not take away the idea of brotherhood between men. That deprivation has to do with another kind of frightening immensity: the unthinkable length of the human past.

It is less than two hundred years since educated Europeans believed that Adam was very close to them in time. Lemprière's Classical Dictionary, first published in 1788, the work from which Keats took his knowledge of classical mythology, begins with a chronology following the guidance of Dr Blair and Archbishop Ussher: the creation of the world is given in 4004 B.C. and the birth of Moses in 1571. Thus the gap between Adam and Moses was of the same length as the gap between Moses and Basil the First at Constantinople in 862 A.D. Chronologies varied, but none placed the first man so far away in time that imagination could not encompass the distance. Moreover, this nearness was a matter not only of time but of human nature. Adam was no less human than they, no less intelligent, no less feeling: there was a real sense in which he was not only an ancestor but a brother. Made in the image of God, he was of noble appearance; fallen through sin, he was a fellow-sufferer of human misfortune; formed out of dust, he was lowly; speaking with God in Paradise he was touched with glory. The first man was a *full* human being. And, as father of all men, he conferred on all men this fullness, this potentiality for both great-