

## Can the Story of Easter Continue in Us?

Ladies and gentleman,

We meet here before the gates of Easter. I would like to share with you some ideas that I develop in greater depth in my book *Patience with God*.

Several years ago extensive research was carried out into the value orientation of contemporary Europeans. One of its theological commentators wrote: “God is no longer a self-evident God and has become an alien, unknown God.” I asked myself the question whether this does not represent a great and so far unused opportunity for Christianity.

I recalled the well-known scene from the Acts of the Apostles of Paul’s sermon at the Areopagus in Athens. Paul first praises the Athenians for their devoutness in erecting altars to so many gods, so that they even remember “an Unknown God”, whose altar had particularly intrigued him.

Paul proceeds to interpret this “Unknown God”: “What therefore you unknowingly worship, I proclaim to you.” *Paul says: “He is not far from any of us. For in him we live and move and have our being...”*

There is something we should note: an “Unknown God” is not a distant God. On the contrary he is incredibly close to us: “in him we live, and move.” *He is unknown not because he is too far away but because he is too close.* After all, we know least of all about what is closest to us, what is most proper to us, what we take for granted. None of us has seen our own face – we only see its image in a mirror. And we can only see God in a mirror; elsewhere Paul states in so many words that during our lives we see God only partly: “indistinctly, as in a mirror”, but after death we will see him “face to face”.

Paul wants to show the Athenians the “face” of the unknown God, who is too close, *as mirrored in the story of Jesus of Nazareth*, above all his paradoxical climax: the cross and resurrection. But he does not get that far. When Paul says the words “resurrection from the dead” some of the Athenians start to sneer, while others walk off, having lost interest: they have understood the resurrection as *something they were naturally familiar with*, whether as an absurd fable, or as a frequent image in the mythology of the surrounding nations, where gods frequently died and rose from the dead; the Greek gods, however, enjoy one – and often only one – privilege not accorded humans, and which sets them apart: their immortality.

How might Paul's sermon about the face of God in the mirror of the Easter story have continued? I am sure that what happened on the Areopagus is paradigmatic in its way. "*The Altar to an Unknown God*" is precisely the most appropriate "*topos*" for proclaiming the Christian message. For Paul, as a Jew and a Christian, the only true God is the God that can't be portrayed, one hidden in mystery. A known god is no god at all. It is not surprising that the ancient world – a "world full of gods" – for centuries regarded the Jews and Christians as atheists.

I am convinced that if anyone wants to preach the Good News of the paradoxical God of the Bible, he has to find the "altar to an Unknown God". To speak about Christ at the altar to familiar gods would be blasphemy or risk even greater misunderstanding than on that occasion at the Athenian Areopagus.

The thought occurs to me whether we Christians have not in the course of history constantly fallen prey to the temptation to exchange the paradoxical God of Christ's Easter story for a "familiar god" conforming to the human notions and expectations of specific epochs. Wasn't the identification of the Biblical God with the god of the ancient philosophers as described by Plato and Aristotle – so fateful for the history of Christian theology – precisely one of those substitutions?

And if this has happened, and our Christian thinking is burdened with this legacy, then is not much of what we call secularisation, criticism and undermining of religion, atheism, etc., no more than taking leave of the *familiar, known gods* and thus a great opportunity to clean and open up a space in which we may hear anew Paul's message? Is not the situation in which, for a large proportion of Europeans, God is an unknown and alien god, a summons to a "new Areopagus"?

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I would not be able to say anything other at that "altar to an unknown god" than what Paul proclaimed. That unknown god is unknown to us because we don't look for him in the right places. We seek him among the gods of this world, among philosophical constructs, projections of our own desires and fears, among "supernatural beings" and fruits of our imagination. We seek him among the ancient gods "behind the scenes" of the world in some heavenly managerial office of our destinies. We seek him like the deists of early modern times in some engineering shop for the manufacture or repair of the cosmos. But he is not anywhere there. We can't see him because he is too close. He is not a being far above us; he is the depths of our life, he is in our being, "we live, breathe, move and are in him." Things that

are very close to us are easy to overlook. But he is not “close” to us, he is the closeness itself. We can still see close objects but we can’t see closeness itself. We see objects in light – we do not see the light itself. If we don’t even see our own faces, but only see their reverse reflection in a mirror, as was noted earlier, how could we possibly see the face of God?

And then – like Paul at the Areopagus – I would try to show that “God’s face” is only accessible to us in mirrors and riddles. It is visible in the *mirror of Easter*, in the story of Jesus of Nazareth, in that great riddle that was set for us all.

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Paul wants to know nothing except *Jesus crucified*.<sup>1</sup> The landscape of Paul’s thinking is dominated by the cross. Paul is passionately concerned that “the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its meaning” (1 Corinthians 1.17). We should also be concerned that that message should not be emptied of meaning and diluted by anything – even a superficial understanding of the resurrection. J. B. Metz wrote: if the cry of the Crucified One is not heard in our preaching about the resurrection, then our message is the mythology of victory, not the core of Christian theology.

The resurrection message requires from us *much more than our intellectual assent* – because when it is forced to gaze into the abyss of that mystery our intellect naturally suffers vertigo. It demands from us a still deeper involvement, something much more fundamental: *our existential acceptance of that event*, with this great truth of faith. *To believe in Christ’s resurrection* means something else, something much more than simply accepting a particular theory, or espousing the opinion that *it once happened*. Our belief in the resurrection is confirmed by our involvement in that event, by our joint resurrection. According to Paul, we have already been raised with Christ (Col 3.1) – and since Christ rose from the dead we too must now live in newness of life!<sup>2</sup>

When, on Good Friday, I read the Passion according to John that ends with the sealing of the tomb, or when I am walking the Stations of the Cross that culminates with that same event, the placing of Jesus in the tomb, what I am conscious-of always is that the tomb is ourselves. *The Resurrection is to take place within ourselves*.

The fact that the central symbol of Christianity is the cross and not a representation of the resurrection is not, of course, because the resurrection and the resurrected Jesus would be

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. 1 Corinthians 2.2

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trickier to portray artistically. The crosses on the walls of our churches and our homes challenge us to go and narrate the story's continuation *by how we live!* The last station of the cross is the depiction of the entombment, but the contemplative journey must be continued along our own life's path. We are told: Now you have been chosen as a "witness of the Resurrection" – it is now for you to bear witness to the way Jesus is present in this world and how he is alive in these days!

I insist that belief in the resurrection and Christians' readiness to bear witness to Christ's presence and vitality draws strength from *the event* of the Resurrection and not simply from the inspirational power of some mythological image. I believe that the presence of the Resurrected One in our world is fundamentally *more real* than the presence of the *ever-living ideas* of one or other of the gallery of "the great departed." I would even go so far as to say that the reality of the Resurrection forces me to revise my previously over-narrow understanding of reality and breaks through the horizon of the world of my experience into the depths of bottomless mystery. And not just my *understanding of reality*, but the very reality of my life, and my life itself thereby acquires a new depth and a new meaning – and that meaning is already present in my life – even though it has not yet in fact transformed it – at least as a call, as *an invitation into the depths*, which I can either accept or reject.

I believe with Paul that if Christ did not rise from the dead our faith is in vain (1 Corinthians 15.17) – but equally vain, pointless and empty would our belief in resurrection be if it simply remained nothing more than an opinion or conviction and had no influence on our lives, if we too were not resurrected to a new life. If, according to Paul, our belief in Jesus's resurrection is the condition of our salvation, then that belief must clearly be something *much more* than our conviction that *it once happened*; after all, our opinions and suppositions, the theories we agree with, and the knowledge we carry in our heads, are not what is going to save us. The *cause* of our redemption was Christ's sacrifice on the cross – and we accept (embrace) that unmerited gift of grace through faith. That faith, however, means allowing that event to enter our lives as a whole as a transforming power, it is not enough to simply to include it among our knowledge about famous events of the distant past.

Belief in the resurrection means accepting that "strength that showed itself in weakness", the strength of Christ's sacrifice – his sacrificial *love* as a living reality. Not to believe in Christ's resurrection is to live as if the cross was the final end, as if Christ's life and His sacrifice were a hopeless fiasco, a pointless, absurd defeat, something that can never inspire any more. To live that way would amount to "emptying Christ's cross of meaning", not accepting the proffered grace, "not to believe in the resurrection" and close oneself off

from salvation. It would amount to “remaining in the tomb” – and now, in this present life, not entering into the newness and fullness of life that Christ opened up with his victory over death – and to probably lose the hope that nothing can exclude me from that new (“eternal”) life apart from my sin, apart from my free refusal. Its darkest consequence would be to lose hope that not even the death of my body can destroy that “newness.”

Even those who “for no fault of their own did not receive Christ” – either because they lived before Him or because the Gospel tidings never reached their ears, *or because the message came in such a form that they could not accept it in all good conscience or in the light of their understanding* – can, as the Catholic church now teaches, nevertheless be saved, if they have lived according to their conscience and understanding. These people participate in the Incarnation event – the “Christmas mystery” – by virtue of their very humanity, so long as they accept it as a “gift and task” and strive to fulfill that assignment conscientiously and faithfully. And they plainly share in the Easter mystery insofar as they cherish within their lives the same sacrificing love that led right to the cross, insofar as they try to overcome their own selfishness, and insofar as they do not accept as final the setbacks which that love encounters in the course of their lives. Christ’s victory over death is truly an event of a special kind and not “just another event.” What distinguishes it from the other historical facts is that it is “visible” solely with the *eyes of faith* – and because in the here and now/ even faith sees all the things of God *only partially and as in a mirror*, it must be supported in the darkness of our lives by *patience*, and the perseverance of hope.

Christ’s resurrection must remain a provocation, *foolishness* in the eyes of “the wisdom of the world.” It must remain a “scandal” for those who don’t share the faith, or also for the “unbeliever within us” – as Paul writes.<sup>3</sup> If we sought to “prove” that central mystery of our faith (such as by means of rational theology), and make it something that could be painlessly and easily acceptable for all, even the “wise and cautious” of the world, we would *empty* it.

No human experience, reason or senses could roll away by themselves the stone that conceals the mystery of the Resurrection – faith alone, supported by hope and love, can hear the message of the Resurrection. That event is hidden and unwitnessed. In the hymn Exultet, we sing that only the night knew when it happened – but in the midst of history it should be present through the testimony of those who make known that Christ is not a finished chapter.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. 1 Corinthians 1.18-25

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The mystery of Christ's resurrection does not confront us like a detective problem that we could solve by verifying one of several hypotheses. Nor is it a fact of nature or history that we might discover, describe and explain using scientific methods (and I am unable to trust those theologies that pretend to do so – whether by pinning its hopes on traditional dogmatic concepts or on “demythologization” of some kind.) It confronts us more as a sort of *koan*, a riddle defying the powers of reason and yielding its meaning only in the flash of a spark that leaps – unmanipulable and unforeseeable – between God and us – from God's side the spark is called grace and from ours it is called faith.

Resurrection – from God's viewpoint – is a perfect and completed action, whereby the Father freed the Son from the snares of death. Seen (imperfectly, how else?) from the viewpoint of the history of the church and world, however, that event is still an “unfinished revolution” – it is like a subterranean river, boring its way through the hard soil of our lack of faith, sinfulness and closed-mindedness, and only here and there visibly gushing out amidst the incidents of our lives. When Mary Magdalene heard her name from the lips of the one she took to be the gardener, when Paul on the road to Damascus heard the question “Saul, Saul why are you persecuting me?”, and when St Augustine in the garden heard the song “Tolle, lege!”, these were not simply post-Resurrection events, the power and the reality of the Resurrection was *within* those events. The Resurrection *happened* there too, so that those people were able to experience it as an unfinished, living event. We also *shall be united with him in the resurrection* ( as Paul said).

Many distinguished theologians support the theory of “*creatio continua*” – continuing creation; could we not similarly speak of a “*ressurrectio continua*”, a continuing Resurrection?

Augustine wrote somewhere that praying means to close one's eyes and realize that God is creating the world *now*. I would add: to believe means to open one's heart and realize that *now, at this very moment* the sealed stone has been rolled aside and the rays of the Easter morning have triumphed over the cold, dark tomb.