

The Resurrection: fact or fiction?

By Bishop Victor Galeone

Last month, we examined some verses in the Synoptic gospels supporting Jesus' claim to be equal with the one true God. Someone might object, "*Granted - he made the claim! But how could he prove it?*" By rising from the dead! After all, would God have brought an imposter back to life? So this month we want to examine whether the resurrection of Jesus was a hoax or an actual historical fact.

Like all facts of history, the resurrection is supported by reliable witnesses. In the words of St. Peter to the household of Cornelius: "We are witnesses to everything that Jesus did...they killed him by nailing him to a cross, but God raised him to life on the third day and allowed him to appear to certain chosen witnesses. We are those witnesses who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead..." (Acts 10:39-41)

Is it possible that the disciples fabricated the story of the resurrection to deceive us? Suppose for a moment that such were the case. If they had invented such a colossal lie, why didn't they embellish it with more convincing details?

1. The morning of the resurrection, the men are hiding behind locked doors for fear of the Jewish authorities. Why "make up" such an embarrassing account?
2. The women are the first to discover the empty tomb, and Mary Magdalene is the first to see the risen Lord. But since women of that day were not considered valid witnesses in a Jewish court of law, the official list of appearances in 1 Corinthians 15 does not even mention them. Then why do all four gospels do so? Because that, in fact, is what happened.
3. On learning of the empty tomb, the first thought of Mary Magdalene and the disciples was not of a resurrection. They concluded that someone had stolen the body. Why put on their own lips the very charge the High Priests were to make against them, "...the disciples came during the night and stole the body..."? If they were fabricating the resurrection, why not say that they were expecting it, just as Jesus had predicted on three separate occasions?
4. Far from expecting the resurrection, the disciples had to be persuaded that it was really Jesus. At first, they thought they were seeing a ghost. "Touch me and see that a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have." (Luke 24:39) Again, why include such an embarrassing detail?
5. Thomas - absent the first night that Jesus appeared to the disciples - withheld belief for an entire week until he himself could palpate the wounds in Jesus' hands and side.
6. The testimony of St. Paul is especially powerful. He had never laid eyes on Jesus before his death on the cross. Yet one minute he's persecuting the Christians, and the next he becomes one of them and is baptized, insisting that the Risen Lord had appeared to him. That would be equivalent to Hitler - in the midst of the Holocaust - becoming a Jew by having himself circumcised, asserting that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had appeared to him!

Most important of all, with the exception of John, all the apostles died excruciating deaths as

witnesses to the message they were preaching. An anonymous author drew the only conclusion

possible: "Think of the psychological absurdity of picturing a little band of defeated cowards cowering in an upper room one day, and a few days later transformed into a company that no persecution could silence - and then attempting to attribute this dramatic change to nothing more than a miserable fabrication they were trying to foist upon the world. That simply would not make sense."

True, that would not make sense. Nor would it make sense for multitudes to make their way once each week to worshipping assemblies to pay homage and tribute to a crucified Galilean Jew - unless he had conquered the grave. Like Thomas, could anyone in his right mind keep from exclaiming, "My Lord and my God!"

Happy Easter, everyone! May the Risen Lord bless you richly!