

Easter Sunday 2013

There are many foods to be found in the supermarkets, these days that are substitutes for something else – usually with a view toward being “healthy”.

There is ice cream that is not made with milk; bacon that is made to taste like pork, but is made out of turkey, or some other substance. Diet soft drinks are supposed to taste like the regular ones, but they are sweetened with something other than sugar.

Some of these foods are more successful than others in looking and tasting like the “real thing” when they are not; but there are those rare substitutes which can fool the taste buds completely, and it is nearly impossible to tell the difference because the authentic and the substitute.

The authentic Christian faith has particular ingredients, and Easter Sunday presents us with an indispensable ingredient – the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Over the ages, many have found this particular ingredient of the Christian faith to be “unhealthy,” something to be rejected, while at the same time wanting retain the appearance of the Christian faith. And so, many people have sought to find a substitute for the resurrection of Jesus Christ; they look for a substitute ingredient that their religion looks, smells and even tastes like Christianity, but it is in fact a fake, a substitute, not at all the real thing.

Often, this is accomplished by make the basis of the Christian faith something other than the resurrection – doing good deeds, being kind to one another, or even, as one prominent denominational leader said in an Easter message for this year, “The Easter story reminds us that there is always hope, that out of death comes life.”

Now, all of this sounds good, and in many ways is true. Our Christian calling bids us to do good works, to follow the teachings of Jesus. God does indeed bring life out of death. But these concepts and actions, separated from the resurrection, do not constitute authentic Christianity.

Saint Paul very pointedly says so in 1 Corinthians 15 – “If Christ be not raised from the dead, our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain... and you are still in your sins” (1 Cor 15:14, 17). In other words, if this ingredient is missing, your Christianity is may be a very convincing substitute, but it is no longer Christianity.

We may wonder what is it about the resurrection that causes people to work so hard in finding a substitute?

Many will say that the notion of the resurrection is just too incredible to believe. How can someone who has been dead for three days rise again?

The assumption that usually goes along with this objection goes something like this: “People in ancient times could be taken in by such superstitious stories, but we are too sophisticated today to believe such things and be taken in by them.

But if we read the Scriptures, we see that such is not the case at all. People in ancient times were also skeptical about such claims.

We are told in Acts 16, that Saint Paul preached in the city of Athens about Jesus to the philosophers of that day. Everything was fine with Paul’s presentation until he mentioned the resurrection of the dead. We are that at that point, he lost most of his audience and was ridiculed and mocked for believing that Jesus rose again from the dead.

But it is not just those people, who are alien to Christ, that have difficulty with believing in the resurrection. The Scriptures tell us that even Jesus’ disciples had a hard time accepting this, even after Jesus himself had told them on several occasions about his impending death and resurrection.

Matthew 16:21 – “From that time forward Jesus began to show to this disciples how that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things of the leaders and chief priest and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day.”

Our Gospel lesson for today tells us about Mary Magdalene when she finds Jesus’ tomb empty on that first Easter morning. She

quickly responds to the situation by running to Jesus' disciples, Peter and John. Now, at this point, we may expect her to say something like, "The Lord is risen, just as he foretold." But she doesn't. She says, "They have taken away the Lord out of the sepulcher, and we know not where they have laid him." In spite of the fact that Jesus clearly spelled out what was going to happen, Mary's first thought is that someone stole the body of our Lord.

What then does Peter do? Surely he is quick to chastise Mary and remind her of what Jesus said. Perhaps we expect him to say, "*Now Mary, remember when Jesus told us about this...*" But he doesn't, does he? He and John run to the tomb to see if the story is true. It was at that point, we are told, that they "believed."

So why was the resurrection so unexpected to the disciples who should have known better? Why was it a shock to those who were following Jesus? The Gospel of John gives us some insight: "**For as yet they knew not the scripture, that he must rise again from the dead.**" (Jn 20:9).

It is hard for me to accept that the disciples were suffering from a lack of Biblical literacy; that they did not have sufficient data about what was to happen to Jesus. After all, we just noted that Jesus had explained all of this ahead of the time. They did not understand the Scriptures in the sense of applying them to faith in Jesus Christ. In short, the problem lies with the disposition of the heart.

Let me provide another example. Every person who possesses the gift of sight looks at the same material of this world. Some look at nature, the wonder of the stars and planets, the minutiae of the plants and insect world and clearly see it all as the handiwork of God. Others look at the same material and simply see what, in their minds, is the end-product of random, irrational events. The difference between the two perspectives is not a matter of intelligence or information, but it is a matter of whose heart is open to God. It is the commitment that is made from outset. As the writer of the letter to the Hebrews observes,

"He who comes to God must believe that he is, and that he rewards those who diligently seek him." (Hebrews 11:6).

In other words, faith comes first.

Jesus says something like this in St. Luke, chapter 16. He tells a story about a rich man and a poor man who died at the same time. The poor man, Lazarus, had sat by the rich man's gate every day, hoping to be fed something from the rich man's table, but apparently the rich man had no compassion and did nothing to help poor Lazarus. Both died and went to the place of the departed – Lazarus to be comforted in "Abraham's bosom" and the rich man in a place of torment.

The rich man, seeing Lazarus afar off, wants him to bring some water for him to cool his tongue, but Abraham points out that there is a division between the place where the rich man is and where Lazarus is, and the two cannot meet. The rich man then he begs for Lazarus to be sent to his family who are still living, so that they may be warned and avoid ending up in the same place where he is.

Abraham said – "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them." In other words, they have sufficient data, sufficient material, sufficient information.

The rich man says, "No, if someone from the dead goes to them, then they will repent."

Abraham then says, **"If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead"** (Luke 16:31).

We know that someone did rise from the dead. That is what we are celebrating, today. And yet, many do not believe and do not repent.

Instead, apart from the grace of God, humanity searches for a substitute ingredient for the Christian faith. We don't have the taste for the real thing, because the real thing has a great deal of baggage that goes with it; namely, if Christ rose from the dead, he indeed is Lord of all, even over me. I have to submit to his rule in my life, and I can't do things the way that I want. Again, it is a matter of the condition of the heart.

Now, we who are here today have made some sort of commitment

to follow Jesus, otherwise. We are here to celebrate the resurrection. But, as we noted early, even for those who follow Jesus, faith is difficult at times. why is faith difficult at times.

St. Luke tells us about a time, shortly after Jesus' resurrection, when our Lord appeared to his disciples as they were gathered together. They were afraid at first, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. Then Jesus ate some food, demonstrating that he was not an apparition or vision, and he said,

“These are the words which I spoke to you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets and in the psalms concerning me. Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scripture, and said to them, Thus it is written, and thus it behooved Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day.” (Luke 24:45-46).

Jesus needed to open their understanding. They knew about the Scriptures; knew them well, but their heart and mind needed adjustment. So it is with us. We need the Lord, through the Holy Spirit, to open our understanding that we too may understand the Scriptures that speak the necessity of the resurrection.

Where I grew up in Southern New Jersey, there is a place called Cowtown, where a rodeo is open for the summer months and all year-round there is a huge flea market. There is a sign at the entrance of Cowtown that reads, “Often Imitated: Never Equaled.” The same could be said of the Christian faith. There are many versions, many substitutes that present a Christianity without the resurrection; but these imitations are not the real thing. May God give us grace to desire the authentic faith, once delivered to the saints – the faith that proclaims, “Christ is risen from the dead!”

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