

Knowing How to Rise Again

The Joy of the Resurrection

The Jubilee gesture of passing through the Holy Door is a symbolic movement by which we express our desire to leave sin behind us in order to gain access to the life of Christ, the door thrown open to hope and the way that leads us to salvation. The first steps of these Lenten meditations reminded us that, in order to remain firmly united to Him, we must learn to swim in the waters of our baptism, tuning our movements to the rhythm of the Gospel. To the extent that we remain docile to the inner promptings of the Spirit, we discover ourselves capable of following a path that leads us to put the other at the centre in a way that is free and in accordance with God's love.

The most inspiring moment in Christ's life for our discipleship journey is undoubtedly that of His resurrection. By contemplating this stage of the Christological event, so decisive and so mysterious, we can obtain the light we need to direct our steps in the right way, without harbouring false or over-idealised expectations of what God's will calls us to live.

Looking to the resurrection means not allowing ourselves to be overwhelmed by the fear of suffering and death, but keeping our gaze fixed on the goal towards which Christ's love guides us. Passing through Christ, the door that leads to the fullness of life, requires a precious renunciation: abandoning the conviction that it is impossible to rise again from failures and defeats with a trusting heart that is ready to begin again and to open itself once again to others—especially to those who have hurt us, but were not able to break the bond that unites us.

1. Don't take it personally

The greatest surprise contained in the Gospels is not so much the fact that a man—the Son of God—rose from the dead, but the way in which He chose to do so, leaving us with a marvellous testimony of how love is capable of getting back up after a great defeat to continue on its unstoppable path.

We would do well to start from our common experience. Whenever we manage to pick ourselves up and recover after having suffered a great trauma in the sphere of affection, the first thing we start thinking about is how we can take some revenge: for example, by making those we hold responsible for what we have suffered pay. Having emerged from the underworld of death, Jesus feels no need to lash out at anything or anyone

for what has happened, nor to assert His superiority over those who have been protagonists or accomplices in His death. The only thing that Jesus—by now Lord of life and death—chooses to do is to manifest Himself to His friends, with great parsimony and joyful modesty.

In every Gospel we can find confirmation of this manner of Jesus rising from the dead, devoid of any spirit of revenge and need for redemption. The greatest evidence is perhaps found in the text of Mark, especially if we read it by stopping at its original conclusion, with the women coming out of the tomb in fear and not reporting to anyone the announcement of the resurrection received from the young messenger (cf. Mark 16:8). The earliest Gospel ends in this way, without any account of an apparition of the Risen One. For the first Christian generations, the sign of the empty tomb was sufficient both to believe in the resurrection and to announce to others the joy of new life in Christ. The twelve verses with the apparitions of the Risen Jesus and His ascension into heaven before the apostles (Mark 16:9-20), added later to the text of Mark, contain information that was considered true and inspired by the Church, but initially considered unnecessary for believing in the mystery of the Resurrection.

Matthew's Gospel otherwise emphasises the great sobriety of the Easter event. When the women leave the empty tomb, Jesus appears to them to confirm the resurrection announcement received from the angel. However, immediately afterwards, the evangelist is concerned to explain why Christ's resurrection was a historical event about which enormous doubts were raised from the outset.

While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sum of money to the soldiers and said, "Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.' And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." So they took the money and did as they were directed; and this story has been spread among the Jews to this day. (Matthew 28:11-15).

In the face of this weakness with which Christ's resurrection was accomplished, we naturally ask ourselves: Why did the Lord Jesus, rising from the dead, not prefer to manifest His victory with greater force and evidence? Why did He choose such a manifestation so reticent that it could generate not only misunderstandings, but also a certain scepticism towards an event so superior to our faculties of comprehension and, at the same time, so necessary for the salvation of the world? Wouldn't it have been

better to take a suitable vengeance and exhibit the truth and power of God, so as to make the resurrection event more persuasive?

The only way to answer these questions is to read the resurrection as an experience of love, and not as an act of power on God's part. In the logic of love, we can understand why Jesus does not feel any need to impose Himself, but only a great desire to continue to propose Himself. As St Paul wrote, after meeting the Risen One, love "does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong... Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Cor 13:5-7). This intensity of love, capable of letting everything slide, does not mean that God is impervious or insensitive to suffering. Those who truly love do not feel the need to count the wrongs they have suffered, because the joy of what they have experienced overcomes all resentment, even when things have not gone as they had imagined.

Perhaps we too, in order to rise up in an evangelical way from the inevitable traumas to which relationships expose us, should examine how much freedom there is in the words and gestures we offer others. If we find that we are often disappointed or take it too seriously when things do not go as we had imagined, perhaps we should ask ourselves how freely we are living our relationships. Otherwise, we risk spending our time complaining, pointing out wrongs, and seeking compensation for the disappointments we have suffered, becoming burdensome to ourselves and others. But then we forget that true happiness, that which makes us truly lovable, does not depend on circumstances or on others, but on the peace with which we welcome what life offers us. After all, if one is not happy with what life allows one to be, what use is it to come back to life after a death?

2. Arise

The accounts of the apparitions [of Jesus after the Resurrection] show how the resurrection of Jesus can in no way be considered the reanimation of a corpse, but the awakening, indeed the rising, of a living person. The new and eternal life that the Father gave to the Son after His burial is not another existence, but the consequence of that life that was so full and overflowing with goodness that death could not annihilate it.

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. (John 20:19-20).

After descending into the underworld to take by the hand those who had died, Jesus enters the closed room of those still imprisoned by the fear of death and the sadness of failure to offer the gift of unprecedented peace. If already the greeting to the disciples—so simple and so ordinary—can come as a great surprise, the gesture with which Jesus decides to show Himself subverts all the etiquette to which we are accustomed. Why show, rather than hide, those wounds that could reactivate the painful memory of the passion, when from the Twelve the worst of humanity—betrayal, flight, denial—emerged? Why do it in such a blatant and brazen manner? More importantly, why do the disciples, instead of being saddened, rejoice?

As we have already observed, Jesus immediately shows the signs of passion because He is completely reconciled with what He has experienced and suffered. But His desire is that His friends also soon find peace and not remain locked inside a useless sense of guilt. For this, He stands before their eyes naked and unarmed, visible and recognisable, without emotional blackmail, and without pretence. Jesus did not want to give up on His disciples and now wants to offer them the same opportunity. Only when we see in the face of those we have offended or betrayed the sign of genuine peace, can we hope to find ourselves in a new, perhaps more solid communion with them and with ourselves.

Jesus stands before His disciples with the happiness of one who has had a good reason to suffer and die: *they* are precisely that reason. The wounds shown with kindness and benevolence become the sign capable of confirming a true offer of forgiveness. We generally have much more modesty when we have to reconcile with someone, not because we are better, but because we are less at peace. We say to those who have disappointed and embittered us: “Don’t worry”, “It’s all in the past”, while we carefully hide wounds that are still open, more to appear magnanimous than out of a real impulse of compassion and forgiveness. Jesus, on the other hand, unreservedly shows His wounded body to the disciples, not to flaunt strength nor to arouse guilt. The disciples can finally understand that to rise again is to enjoy the smile of someone who is happy even though you have disappointed them, because this was an opportunity for them to offer you their love in any event. Such love cannot be taught or explained, but only transmitted.

Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.” And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20: 21-23).

The apostles are by no means removed from their charge, but confirmed, through a task to be understood not so much as the exercise of a power, but as the assumption of a splendid responsibility. It is as if Jesus were saying to them: “After what you have suffered and experienced, if you will not be able to be an instrument of reconciliation in the world, who will be?” The book of the Acts of the Apostles—and, after it, the entire history of the Church—is a succession of men and women who forcefully proclaim the forgiveness of sins, not because they consider themselves the sole guardians of love, but because they cannot keep silent about what they have seen, heard, and experienced (cf. Acts of the Apostles 4:20).

Jesus manifests Himself as the Risen One not only to release guilt or arouse a passing emotion. By breathing upon the disciples the Holy Spirit, who guided Him in His mission on behalf of the Father, the risen Lord communicates to them His own life and ardour of charity. To rise again also means this: giving life back to those who have lost it or restoring confidence to those who no longer have the strength to believe. After all, if living means being generative and fruitful, why should we be happy to return to life if there is no one to whom we can give life?

Allowing oneself to be regenerated, however, is not easy. Thomas, who was not present when Jesus appeared and gave the disciples the Spirit and peace, knows something about this. His behaviour, hastily labelled as “unbelief”, is actually something uncomfortable that one must come to terms with if one is to access the joy of Christ’s resurrection.

Thomas is not easily seduced by the news of Easter. Not because he has less need of it than the other disciples, but because, before he can breathe and smile again, he wants to be sure that God does not just forget evil and suffering, but also knows how to remember them in a new way. Getting a pat on the back or having the slate wiped clean is not enough for Thomas. He does not believe in the Resurrection until pokes his nose into it, because he does not just want to see the wounds, he wants to touch them.

“Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in His side, I will not believe”
(John 20:25).

Thomas embodies that part of us that is not content with wiping away our tears and tracing a forced smile, but longs for genuine, full, and definitive joy so that we can truly live again. It does not seek passing consolations, but a true response, capable of holding up in the face of the scandal of pain and loss, of that painful mystery whereby even the most beautiful things, inexplicably, can come to an end. That is why, before

allowing himself to be touched by the Resurrection, he wants to touch the wounds of love. He is not content with reassuring words or vague hopes: he demands concrete proof, a tangible sign that the pain has not been erased, but traversed and transformed. Only then can he believe that there really is a happy ending in which the truth of the facts is not denied, but redeemed.

Eight days later, His disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. The doors were shut, but Jesus came and stood among them, and said, "Peace be with you". Then He said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see My hands; and put out your hand, and place it in My side; do not be faithless, but believing." Thomas answered Him, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:26-28).

Eight days later, on the day when the community gathers in remembrance of Jesus, the Risen One appears bringing the gift of peace. Without needing to be invoked or prayed to, He immediately turns to Thomas. He does not rebuke him, but offers him everything he needs. Thomas did not reject faith out of obstinacy, but because he wanted to have an authentic experience of Easter, recognising it as true with his own sensitivity. Rather than passively accepting the accounts of others, he chose to take the time to allow himself to be reached by the love of Christ, until he could have a personal and profound experience of it. It is not said that Thomas actually stretched out his hand and finger, but that the opportunity to do so gave him a giant leap of faith. With that tiny possessive adjective repeated twice, we discover that, while everyone saw the Risen One, only Thomas was able to appropriate Him.

Jesus said to him: "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and have believed!" (John 20:29).

The leap of faith taken by Thomas is far greater than what reality has shown him. While he has before him only the evidence of a body plagued by suffering, Thomas comes to believe that he is standing before his Creator and Redeemer. Jesus' words resonate like a proclamation of hope: they reveal that this growth in faith is a happiness accessible to many throughout history. The joy of the resurrection belongs to those who have the courage not to stop at a faith made up of slogans and pre-packaged ideas. The bliss of new life is for those who choose to embark on an authentic journey, a living and passionate encounter with the Risen One. An encounter that always takes place in the community of brothers, but with full respect for the unique sensitivity of each one.

3. Reignite

As we scroll through the Gospel accounts of the Resurrection, we encounter the singular evidence that the Risen One has no need to make flashy and extraordinary gestures to be able to reveal the gift of His new existence. The light of His Resurrection is far less dazzling than that of the Transfiguration. None of His friends seem able to recognize Him: Mary of Magdala mistakes Him for a gardener, the apostles take Him for an importunate fisherman, the disciples of Emmaus for the most uninformed of Jerusalem's inhabitants. Why all this reluctance to enrich reality with some special effect, with which it would have been easier to highlight the truth of the Resurrection? Why, after proclaiming deliverance in the underworld, does the Lord manifest Himself to the world with almost disarming discretion?

We would have expected a solemn revelatory discourse on the mysteries of history and the universe, or a manifestation of power capable of transforming reality and overcoming its limitations. Instead, the Risen One is seldom-seen and speaks modestly. He chooses to approach with discretion, to greet without instilling fear, to make Himself a dinner guest and to share, with serene simplicity, the joy of a fraternal table.

As they were saying this, Jesus Himself stood among them. But they were startled and frightened, and supposed that they saw a spirit. And He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do questionings rise in your hearts? See My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; handle Me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have." And while they still disbelieved for joy, and wondered, He said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave Him a piece of broiled fish, and He took it and ate before them. (Luke 24:36-43).

So, would Christ be resurrected only to be able to say to the disciples, "Shall we eat something together?" Yes, because in this simple conviviality that is once again possible, two important meanings are revealed. The first is very simple: Jesus is not a ghost or a spirit, but a body risen from the dead. This reveals what destiny also awaits our humanity: the resurrection of the flesh, not just the salvation of the soul. The second meaning is more difficult to describe, but splendid to taste. Jesus takes time to do something absolutely ordinary, showing the disciples that after His resurrection from the dead every moment of life can become a manifestation and anticipation of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Eating, working, walking, cleaning, writing, fixing, waiting, hurrying: everything — really everything — that reality allows us to live can express a

new way of experiencing things, that of God's children. Everything is now grace and, therefore, everything can become thanksgiving. This is the wonderful and terrible consequence of Easter: reality — any reality — as it is can become an opportunity for happiness, if we know how to live it in the logic of communion with others and in gratitude.

Madeleine Delbr  l, a mystic of the last century, seemed to have understood this well, and in the pages of a justly famous book she writes:

Giving ourselves over to his will at the same time gives us over to the Church, whom the same will continuously makes our saving mother of grace. Each docile act makes us receive God totally and give God totally, in a great freedom of spirit. And thus life becomes a celebration. Each tiny act is an extraordinary event, in which heaven is given to us, in which we are able to give heaven to others. It makes no difference what we do, whether we take in hand a broom or a pen. Whether we speak or keep silent. Whether we are sewing or holding a meeting, caring for a sick person or tapping away at the typewriter. Whatever it is, it's just the outer shell of an amazing inner reality: the soul's encounter with God, renewed at each moment, in which, at each moment, the soul grows in grace and becomes ever more beautiful for her God. Is the doorbell ringing? Quick, open the door! It's God coming to love us. Is someone asking us to do something? Here you are! ... it's God coming to love us. Is it time to sit down for lunch? Let's go—it's God coming to love us. Let's let Him. (We, the Ordinary People of the Streets)

Only one shadow remains that can prevent us from savouring the joy of a life free from the fear of death: the naive expectation of a life devoid of the cross. In His wanderings among His friends after Easter, before returning to the Father, Jesus tried to shed a light even in the midst of this darkness.

“O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, He interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning Himself (Luke 24:25-27).

The two disciples of Emmaus walked sadly away from Jerusalem. The risen Jesus catches up with them and joins them on the journey, but their eyes fail to recognize Him. He makes them talk, grants them the right to spit out the bitter pill of their resignation. They remember everything, even the fact that Jesus' body is no longer in the tomb. But they cannot smile,

because they were hoping for a different ending. Jesus helps the two disciples understand the great mystery with a long catechesis of which we are told not the words, but the meaning: suffering was not necessary, but it was necessary that Christ should suffer in order to reveal the extent to which God loves the world.

When He was at table with them, He took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized Him; and He vanished out of their sight. They said to each other, "Did not our hearts burn within us while He talked to us on the road, while He opened to us the scriptures?" (Luke 24:30-32).

The two disciples do not notice this immediately, but only when they sit at table with the mysterious traveller. Precisely in breaking bread with Him, they discover that they are already inhabited by the hope of eternal life and the joy of resurrection. The great surprise of this account is not so much that the two disciples did not immediately recognize Jesus, but that they did not realize that their hearts were still on fire in spite of everything.

The resurrection experience to which every man and woman is invited is not inferior, nor less incandescent: discovering beneath the dust or ashes of one's personal history the existence of embers that pain and death could not extinguish. Embers ready to set the soul on fire once again and to purify the gaze, making it capable of grasping the mystery of Christ's Easter in all things.

Conclusion

In His Resurrection, the Lord Jesus left us a precious testament, revealing to us the treasures hidden in our humanity when it allows itself to be shaped by the Spirit, conforming to the image and likeness of God. These attitudes and ways of being should not be reserved only for times of difficulty, when we need to pick ourselves up and get back on track. Christ did not improvise His Resurrection, but prepared it over time, learning to live out those inner dispositions in which, silently, the seed of eternal life ripens.

By establishing relationships of gratuitous love with us, the Lord understood that getting upset when things do not go as planned is futile. It is more fruitful to set out anew on the path of encounter, with the confidence that there is still much to be experienced and discovered.

Remaining free even in the most difficult relationships is the only way to revive the possibility of life through genuine forgiveness, capable of regenerating bonds frayed by time and sin.

Only in this way, without rancour or resentment, does one become a witness to the greater love that neither the waters of evil nor death can extinguish. The power of resurrection is directly proportional to the tenacity of charity, the flame imprinted in our hearts by the Lord and the seal of an eternal life already in this world.

O Father, who through your Only-begotten Son conquered death and opened for us the passage to eternal life, grant that we, who celebrate the Lord's Resurrection, may be reborn in the light of life, renewed by your Spirit. Through our Lord Jesus Christ.

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