

Matthew's gospel tells us that the women who came to the empty tomb that first Easter morning encountered an angel who told them to go tell the male disciples that "He has risen." But on their way, the women meet up with Jesus himself, who repeats the instruction to go tell, and gives the next step of meeting up in Galilee again. It is only John's gospel that tells us what it was that Mary told the other disciples – "I have seen the Lord."

In traditional Easter liturgies, the proclamation is made "Christ is Risen!" with the response "The Lord is risen indeed!" There's even an apocryphal story that during the Stalin era in Russia, when all the churches had been closed down, that a high ranking Soviet official, sometimes identified as Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin who had been in the Bolshevik Revolution, was speaking to workers in a closed cathedral in Kiev. Crowds had come to the cathedral where they had been prohibited from entering for years, and listened to the communist leader utter propaganda about how God is not real, religion is the opiate of the people, and how communism was the best political and social order ever. He finished his speech and asked if there were any questions. There was silence, as speaking out against anyone in the Stalin regime was known to have severe consequences. But then a young Orthodox priest came forward, looked out over the beleaguered people in the church, and then shouted out the traditional Easter greeting: "Christ is Risen!" And everyone automatically shouted back "The Lord is risen indeed!" Only they said it in Ukrainian, not English.

The Easter message of the Christian Church has long been about how the Lord is risen. The physicality of the resurrection became a cornerstone of Catholic faith and that of most Protestant churches. But the proclamation "The Lord is risen" is 3rd person, a story told about something that happened, instead of a 1st person story of what happened to me, what I experienced. In the early church Mary was called the Apostle to the Apostles – the term apostle originally meant someone sent, and Mary had been sent to tell the others about Christ, that Jesus hadn't stayed dead in the tomb. Mary's message to the other disciples was 1st person – "I have seen the Lord!" So, instead of "The Lord is risen" why isn't the Easter proclamation "I have seen the Lord!"?

The conclusions of the gospels of Matthew, Luke and John have the risen Jesus appearing to the disciples in Jerusalem and in Galilee, as well as to several others... like on the road to Emmaus. Paul's letter to the Corinthians says that the risen Jesus was seen by up to 500. But there was just a limited time that the Risen Lord hung around here on this planet, this plane. The once dead now alive Jesus, who walked and talked and ate food like a regular person on earth, but also seemed to pass through doors and unexplainably appear and disappear, stayed around just a few weeks at most. Luke's gospel reports that Jesus got

carried up into heaven from Bethany; which wasn't near as spectacular as when the prophet Elijah got carried up into heaven in a whirlwind on a flaming chariot.

Why has the power of Christ's life and message been reduced to insisting on a literal, physical reanimation of a dead human body? I don't get it. It seems kind of sad that the incandescent truth of God's light and love would hinge on the reality of a dead body brought back to life for only 49 days at most. What has happened in the years and decades and centuries ever since is that, out of that time and far away from that place in Ancient Palestine, individual persons have continued to meet up with Christ and share Mary's experience: "I have seen the Lord!" Not the body of a Jewish man who lived 2000 years ago named Jesus, but Jesus as the Christ, encountered spiritually, mystically.

The Pharisee Saul not only didn't believe the story that Jesus had risen from the dead but was violently opposed to what he regarded as heresy against the true Jewish faith. Then, as he rode with letters of condemnation towards Damascus, he encountered the Risen Lord. In I Corinthians 15:8 the changed man renamed Paul says that last of all, Jesus was seen by him also, as one born out of time. The Apostle Paul, like the Apostle Mary Magdalene and the other original disciples, could proclaim "I have seen the Lord!" While Paul vigorously defends the Resurrection in his letters, he clarifies that what is sown a natural body is raised a spiritual body (I Cor 15:44). In Galatians 1, Paul described his own experience: "The gospel which I preach ... came through a revelation of Jesus Christ." Paul doesn't say he met the body of the historical Jesus, but that he had an overpowering mystical experience.

In the 4th c., Augustine, who had been living a life of sexual indulgence and selfishness, had a mystic conversion experience starting with a child's voice telling him to take and read the Scriptures. In the 18th c., John Wesley experienced a pivotal moment while hearing Martin Luther's preface to Romans being read, which he later described as his heart was strangely warmed.

In the 21st c., Christianity has grown the most in the Global South and East, mostly through conversion – from another religion or no formal religion. Roman Catholic theologian and ethicist James P. Hanigan wrote in 1983 that individual conversion is the foundational experience and the central message of Christianity. Hanigan understands Christian conversion as beginning with an experience of being "thrown off balance" through cognitive and psychological "disequilibrium", followed by an "awakening" of consciousness and a new awareness of God. Like other theologians throughout church history, Hanigan compares conversion to "death and rebirth, a turning away..., a putting off of the old..., a change of mind and heart." Hanigan, a Christian ethicist, unsurprisingly interprets

conversion as accepting a call to holiness, insisting that there are resultant ethical changes in lifestyle after conversion.

Christianity, like other world religions, didn't start with intellectual postulations or philosophical musings but with somebody or somebodies experiencing a transcendent, mystical power. Something about Jesus and his teachings revealed the power of God. Something supernatural and supremely profound opened eyes to a deeper truth about life and revealed powerful truths beyond the world as we know it.

Mystic experiences are described as **ineffable** (beyond words), **noetic** (providing insight), **transient** (brief but lasting in impact), and **passive** (experienced as happening to a person, and feeling overwhelming, something that they could not control). These numinous experiences evoking awe, fear, and fascination, are interpreted as a direct encounter with the sacred. Mystic experiences often involve not just encounter with the divine but a unitive consciousness with the divine, in which the separate sense of self dissolves into the sacred. Mystic experiences are transformative and life-altering, changing one's perspective of self and of the world, and also changing habits and behavior.

Some mystic experiences involve visions, other are auditory, others are a felt perception. In the years that I have served as an ordained pastor to 8 churches in various places around the country, church members and others have shared their experiences of meeting up with the living Christ. Someone felt Jesus' comforting touch on their shoulder as they agonized over placing a declining parent in a nursing home. Someone saw a shaft of light and angels at a deathbed. Someone felt an empathetic hug after a pregnancy loss. Someone heard a message of encouragement during a time of deep despair. Someone saw a man help at an emergency scene, who then disappeared and hadn't been visible to anyone else. Someone was reading the Bible when inexplicably a certain verse seemed to light up and the words echoed not just in their head but around the room as if spoken aloud and amplified. Ironically, the individuals who have a vision and have seen the Lord usually report that Jesus wasn't what they imagined he would look like! Which made them think the vision couldn't have been something they made up with their own mind.

I did not grow up in church and had only been attending worship services for 3 months when I got baptized in college. I did not know all the dogma of Christianity. I had not been told that I had to believe in the literal, physical resurrection of Jesus' dead body in order to qualify for membership. I just knew that on the spiritual quest I had embarked upon, checking out various religious traditions, old and new, Eastern and Western spiritualities, that Christianity had been the last place I expected to discover any spiritual truth. So I was confounded when I kept having mystical, unexplainable experiences. Despite my modern,

scientific worldview, and my pride at almost always being the smartest person in the room, I kept being shown that God was real and that following Christ was the way to go.

On March 22, 1970 I tagged along on an afternoon trip to a Baptist Church outside Davis CA, a building that featured a baptismal tank. I watched other college students don white robes and get dunked down into the water, and get all emotional. I got up and walked outside. I didn't want any part of that, I didn't want to be like them. Yet God just had hold of me, and outdoors I could feel it more clearly. I finally just surrendered, I just gave up because despite my resistance, there was this presence, there was Truth with a capital T, there was Christ, and apparently what I needed to do was go along with the tradition and let myself get baptized, whatever that was worth. I had to put on a wet robe, because all the dry ones had been used, and I approached the baptismal tank, the last person to get baptized that day, still not sure I wasn't going to bolt. But I got in the water and let the male minister and his young male assistant push my head under.

I cannot adequately describe it, but it was like an energy shaft opening me up, flowering with joy and light and a sense of being multi-dimensional. I could hear people around me singing and praising God in the background but what I really heard was God calling me to be a minister, although my rational mind said, Wait a minute, I don't think these people let women be ministers! But the light filled presence was just laughing and joyous and I couldn't stop spontaneous praises from pouring out of my own mouth. When I got back later that afternoon to my college room, I still felt transported and wondered what the heaven had happened, but my eyes were still seeing both the real world and like a numinous reality behind the usual reality I was used to seeing. It gradually faded, re-ignited when I went to church on Easter Sunday a week later.

I didn't tell other people what I had gone through, not at the time and not years later, not even when I went to seminary after undergrad and applied to be a ministerial candidate. I would just say that I argued with God about being called to ministry, which was true, but I'd leave out that whole seminal numinous experience from getting baptized and officially becoming a Christian.

Does being a Christian hinge on some miracle of the physical body of Jesus of Nazareth coming back to life for 7 weeks after he was murdered by the joint powers of Empire and religion? Well, I guess it does if Christianity is just some doctrinal system that you have to subscribe to. But if you're talking about being a follower of Christ, you can meet up with Jesus in the strangest of places and in the weirdest of ways. I don't know what really happened with the Resurrection. I do know that God deals in the unexpected. One of the times God spoke to me directly startled me so much I fell out of bed. I'd been up most of

the night praying at a critical juncture of my life. I was complaining that one possible direction for my life was so unlikely it seemed crazy, absurd even. I finally shut up and was just silent, when unexpectedly words clearly formed in my mind as I heard a gentle, deep voice filled with empathy and humor, "But I specialize in the absurd." I floundered on the floor of the bedroom, my mind scrambled but remembering that God had chosen a very old man Abraham to become patriarch of the nation of Israel, God had chosen David, the least likely youngest son of Jesse to become king after Saul, God had chosen Paul, the former Pharisee attacking followers of Jesus to become the Apostle to the Gentiles. How absurd.

The Easter Story, the story of the Risen Lord, is an unlikely one, an impossible one, totally absurd. I don't know about the physicality of the bodily resurrection, but I do know that God specializes in the absurd and I know that there is a deep, vast spiritual universe overlaid and overlapping and threading through what we regard as scientific, measurable reality. There's a wonderful resonance in the affirmation that Christ has Risen indeed! But the pivotal question is – Have you seen the Lord?