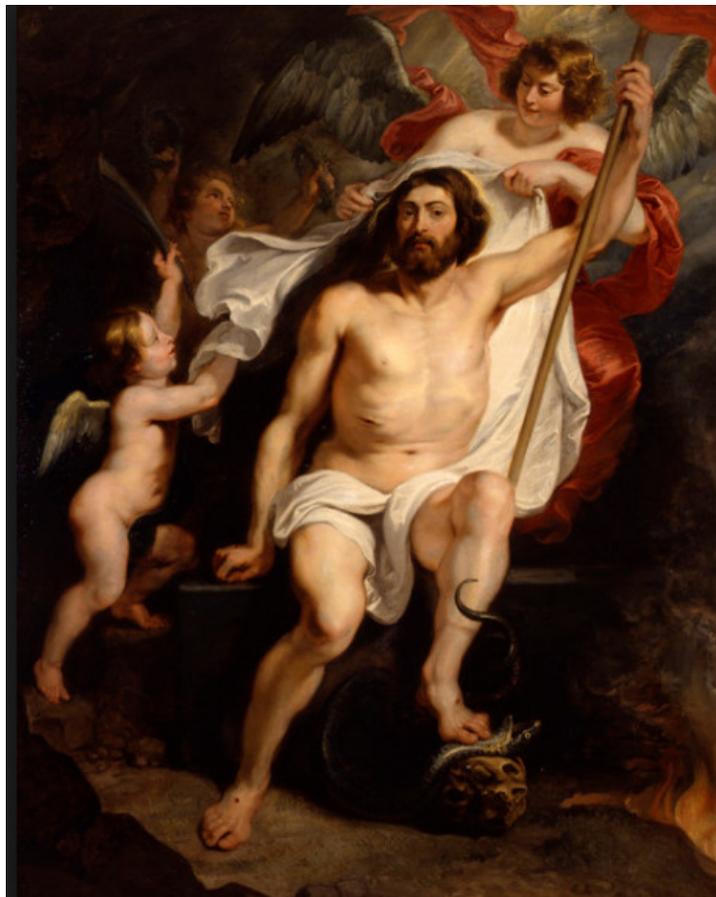


Why
Trusting in
Christ's Resurrection
Reduces or Eliminates
the Fear of Death



Christ Triumphant over Sin & Death, Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640)

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Introduction & Background to Question

The title is more a statement than a question but the underlying quest is to address doubt and offer tangible examples from the Resurrection appearances and accounts to remove the fear of death and to inspire trust in the Resurrection. Man can believe that life goes on after death, or that it does not. The Catechism teaches:

*We believe in the resurrection of the dead
because Christ rose from the dead,
lives forever, and causes us to share in this eternal life.¹*

Life after death is an attractive proposition! This paper is a support handout to a PowerPoint presentation for the class requirements. The selected topic is the Resurrection and my emphasis is looking at the Resurrection in our cultural context which is a general avoidance of death and the misunderstanding of what the Resurrection means.

It seems we live in an increasing era of mistrust and doubt. Mistrust of the church as an institution perhaps due to the scandals. The increase in secularization of society and the increase in distractions also lead us away from faith. On top of this mistrust Christians have a poor understanding of the Resurrection and what it means personally. A Barna Group study in 2010 asked America adults the meaning of Easter. Over two-thirds of Catholics did not connect it to the Resurrection and its meaning². Ratzinger invites us back to the Christ of Faith from the movement of the Christ of History.

“Jesus Christ chooses to come to mankind only through the faith of the disciples to whom he reveals himself; that he continues to knock gently at the doors of our hearts and slowly opens our eyes if we open our doors to him³.”

“If we attend to the witnesses with listening hearts and open ourselves to the signs by which the Lord again and again authenticates both them and himself, then we know that he is truly risen. He is alive. Let us entrust ourselves to him, knowing that we are on the right path.⁴

¹ Youth Catechism of the Catholic Church. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011. Paragraph 15. (CCC 988-991)

² Barna Group. Easter Meaning Study 2010. Sourced 16 June, 2018 on the Internet. <https://www.barna.com/research/most-americans-consider-easter-a-religious-holiday-but-fewer-correctly-identify-its-meaning/>

³ Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI. *Jesus of Nazareth. Vol. II: Holy Week, from the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011. Pg. 276. Ibid Pg. 277.

Death Denial & Fear

Over the millennium the culture has displayed concern for the dead and life after death. Funerals for those we love and public figures are no less ritualistic. We visit cemeteries and have the feeling that death is not the end and that there something more. Over 100 hundred years ago we were primarily an agrarian economy living close to the cycle of life and death. On farms we'd experience the seasons and the births and deaths of farm animals. As we moved to the manufacturing era we concentrated in urban centres away from natural cycles. Today we live in an information era featuring 24-hour by 7-day access to artificial light, information and entertainment. In addition to these changes the age of scientific discovery has changed the culture in its quest for proof and tangible explanations to all aspects of our existence. I work for Catholic Cemeteries and these changes have impacted the funeral and cemetery industry. We are seeing more of a "cremate now, celebrate later" movement, more scattering, and a foregoing of ritual. Father Benedict J. Groeschel, a well-respected lecturer, psychologist, retreat master and monk had a near death experience and went on in his ministry to publish *"After This Life."* In his 40 plus years of working as a psychologist, he cites the most common personal problem as anxiety and fear⁵. He goes on to cite that man does all that he can to avoid the plain fact that we are mortal. The denial of death being one of the primary characteristics of our contemporary culture. The vision of the church gives us of death is one where fear is replaced by hope. Groeschel encourages us to fear sin, not death. Death has become an element of God's great work of redemption. I love a question from his book in his encouragement for us to ask, "what happens next?" He teaches: "what we believe happens next is very much going to define what is happening to us right now." An interpretation here is to face death, accept it as part of life, then fear seems to subside (vs keeping one's head in the sand in ignorance). Deeper insights into the Resurrection offers us hope. The Resurrection appearances provide ample evidence and inspiration to engage in the faith and to trust in the Resurrection and its meaning for us to share in eternal life.

⁴ Ibid Pg. 277.

⁵ Benedict J. Groeschel. *After This Life, What Catholics Believe About What Happens Next*. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing. 2009.

Man's Quest for Meaning

I find it interesting that we live in a culture that avoids the topic of death on one hand but on the other hand is hard-wired to explore the meaning of life. In John Paul II's 1999 encyclical *Fides et Ratio* traditional philosophy is cited. *Fides et Ratio* relies on a straightforward quote from Aristotle "all humans desire to know." Those that inquire on the meaning of life and what happens after death can be pleasantly informed if they have faith. John Paul II claims:

Each of us has both the desire and the duty to know the truth of our own destiny. We want to know if death will be the definitive end of our life or if there is something beyond – if it is possible to hope for an after life or not⁶.

We are offered meaning through Jesus, he says: "I am the way, the truth, the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." John 14:6

In Jesus Christ we encounter that perfect communion of God and humanity to which all persons are called. Humanity from the beginning has been called to union with God, which is made perfectly visible in the ultimate sacrament, or symbol of God's presence with us: Jesus Christ. This is eternal life.

⁶ Pope John Paul II. *Fides et Ratio*. Vatican Press. Rome, 1999. Article 26. http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html

Christ's Death, the Empty Tomb

Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI (Ratzinger) cites Jesus Christ's moment of death as the moment the old temple is over, when the face of God as truly being revealed that was previously concealed.⁷

The empty tomb reveals that God has not rejected our world. The earthly body of Jesus has been transformed by the Holy Spirit into something new. Our risen bodies will be joined. I found a footnote from Kereszty's chapter on *The Death and Resurrection of Jesus* to be very insightful.

We could ask: If the risen Christ is the firstborn of many brothers, why do our tombs not become empty on the third day? Why do our bodies disintegrate even though we are also promised the resurrection of the body? We need to reflect on the relationship between body, sin and death in biblical revelation.

He cites Gregory of Nyssa, a father of the church 335-395.

Our bodies must decay because they have become permanently and irreversibly distorted as the embodiment of our sins. In the resurrection we will receive a new body whose continuity with our earthly bodies will reside only in the spiritual core of the person; radically transformed, we will still be the same persons. Decay and disintegration, however, could not claim the body of Jesus because it was not the body of sin.

⁷ Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI. *Jesus of Nazareth. Vol. II: Holy Week, from the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011. Pg. 209.

Resurrection Appearances

Kereszty points out that the appearances seem to have two main purposes⁸. First, to convince the disciples of reality of resurrection and this meaning with Christ's new permanent presence within them and among them. (MT 28:20; Mk 16:20) The second purpose is to send the disciples into mission.

Saint Paul explains quite dramatically what faith in the Resurrection means for the Christian message overall.

“If Christ was not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he Raised Christ.”

1 Cor 14:14-15

³ For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance^[a]: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas,^[b] and then to the Twelve. ⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

1 Corinthians 15:3-8 New International Version (NIV)

Ratzinger teaches that only if Jesus is risen has anything really new occurred. The Resurrection is the crucial point. Whether Jesus was or whether he is – depends on the Resurrection.

⁸ Roch A. Kereszty. *Jesus Christ: Fundamentals of Christology*. Third Edition. New York: St. Paul's, 2011. Pg. 47.

Appearance Story: Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene

The first witness account is with Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb. She was grief stricken and trying to cope and make sense of the empty tomb. When encountering Jesus, she did not recognize him attesting to his different form but recognized him when he called her. The account provides a foreshadowing of the ascension and a witness account of the Resurrected Christ.

¹³ They (angels) asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." ¹⁴ At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

¹⁵ He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher").

¹⁷ Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

John 20:13-18 New International Version (NIV)

Another insight from this passage is the Trinitarian nature of Jesus and the Father which he says will be "your God." She is being invited into the Trinitarian nature of the new relationship.

Appearance Story: Doubting St Thomas

Like Thomas our culture doubts and is seeking proof. We need to metaphorically encourage those we encounter to place their finger into the truth. Thomas believed, Jesus indicates blessings to those that have not seen but whom believe.

But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came.

The other disciples therefore said unto him, we have seen the Lord. But he said unto them, Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe.

And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them: *[then]* came Jesus, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, Peace *[be]* unto you.

Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and **thrust *[it]* into my side: and be not faithless, but believing.**

And Thomas answered and said unto him, **My Lord and my God.**

Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed:

blessed *[are]* they that have not seen, and *[yet]* have believed.

John 24-29

Appearance Story: Jesus Reinstates Peter and Affirms His Commission

Ratzinger indicates the “twelve” remain the actual foundation stone of the Church but speaks of the special task given to Peter. The commission was first assigned to him at Caesarea Philippi and then confirmed at the Last Supper (Lk 22:32).

That he appeared to Cephas,^[b] and then to the Twelve.

1 Corinthians 15:4 New International Version (NIV)

After the Resurrection, the Lord appears first to him and renews Peter’s particular mission. Peter’s is a special witness and confirms his commission to be the rock on which the Church is built.

Interesting...after the 3 denials during the Passion we have the risen Lord’s threefold question to Peter.

“Do you love me?”

¹⁵ When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?”

“Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.”

¹⁶ Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.”

¹⁷ The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my sheep.”

JN 21: 15-17

Feed my sheep being reference to mission.

Appearance Story: Paul's Dramatic Encounter & Conversion

According to the account in [Acts](#), it took place on the road to Damascus circa AD33, where he reported having experienced a [vision](#) of the resurrected Jesus. The account says that "he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?" Saul replied, "Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutes." ^[Acts 9:4-5]

According to the account in [Acts 9:1-22](#), he was blinded for three days and had to be led into Damascus by the hand. During these three days, Saul took no food or water and spent his time in prayer to God. When [Ananias of Damascus](#) arrived, he laid his hands on him and said: "Brother Saul, the Lord, [*even*] Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost." ^[Acts 9:17] His sight was restored, he got up and was baptized. ^[Acts 9:18]⁹

⁹ Conversion information of St. Paul as sourced 16 June, 2018 from the Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_the_Apostle

Trinitarian Faith

Emery calls the Holy Spirit an “agent of salvation”. He cites Jesus is the beneficiary of the Spirit and also the giver of the Spirit. In humanity Christ receives the Holy Spirit thereby preparing himself the reception of the Holy Spirit by the Church.

“This Spirit descended upon the Son of God made the Son of man, becoming accustomed in fellowship with him to dwell in the human race, to rest with human beings and to dwell in the workmanship of God.”¹⁰

The spirit is the Paraclete -- the protector, the advocate, the intercessor, the consoler and the interior teacher of doctrine. The Paraclete makes the work of Christ active in the believers whom he teaches, helps and protects in fidelity to Jesus. He is the Spirit of Truth (Jn 14:17; 15:26; 16:13)¹¹

When Jesus appears before the apostles he provides instructions:

"Baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt 28:19).

Paul recalls the Trinity in connection with the Resurrection of Christ and of us all:

"If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ ... from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit who dwells in you" (Rom 8:11).

Jesus recognizing the trepidation of the apostles encounters them with “Peace be with you.” He is indicating his resurrected state, albeit physically different.

“And I, when lifted up from the earth will draw all people to myself.” Jn 12:32

¹⁰ Gilles Emery. The Trinity An Introduction to Catholic Doctrine on the Triune God. Washington, DC. The Catholic University of America Press, 2011. Pg. 38.

¹¹ As sourced from Catholic Culture online: <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?id=2797>

Conclusion & Call to Elicit Acts of Faith and Childlike Trust

Our challenge is to trust in God fully, to participate in the Trinity and to be disciples eliciting acts of faith, trust and confidence in the Resurrection. We need to foster the religious sense to enter the story.

“If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” Romans 10:9

Like Saint Thomas may we proclaim: “My Lord and my God!” JN 20:28

Something that caught me as wise is the call to become like little children. Kereszty cites this aspect of *metanoia* meaning a conversion of heart¹². He says:

Children are aware that they cannot earn their living and that they are dependent in everything on their parents. They trust in their parents’ care regardless of what happens and are convinced that their parents are able and willing to do what is best for them. Thus, an unconditionally trusting, loving, and joyful surrender to God as one’s Father and a grateful acceptance of the Kingdom as pure gift characterize the disciple of Jesus.

Let us encourage those we touch to be like trusting children. At Catholic Cemeteries, may we help people to reduce and eliminate the fear of death through the hope of the Resurrection perhaps citing inspiring appearance accounts. Christ comes to meet us and lead us into eternal life if we trust him “in view of Jesus’ suffering and death, death itself can become easier. In an act of trust and love for the Father, we can say yes, as Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane¹³.” Groschel recommends that we contemplate our own reactions to death and to that great and mysterious reality that transcends it. For the believer the promise of eternal life is the greatest of all hopes.¹⁴ Life after death and the promise of eternal life should fill us with awe. Death comes to us bearing the promise of eternal life.

¹² Roch A. Kereszty. *Jesus Christ: Fundamentals of Christology*. Third Edition. New York: St. Paul’s, 2011. Intro. Pg. 114.

¹³ Youth Catechism of the Catholic Church. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011. Paragraph 155.

¹⁴ Benedict J. Groschel. *After This Life, What Catholics Believe About What Happens Next*. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing. 2009. Pg. 85.

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