

WHERE IS THE BODY?

Ted Schroder, April 4, 2010

I am a fan of detective stories. At the moment I am working through an anthology of early twentieth century short stories. Their authors are highly educated, literate, with sharp minds, and a satisfying turn of phrase. When I attend antiquarian book fairs or visit used bookstores, I carry with me a notebook which contains a list of authors whose books I am searching for. As an undergraduate student at the University of Canterbury I used to see the famous author of detective novels, Ngaio Marsh, directing the student Drama Club. The first words out of the mouth of the Principal of my theological seminary in England when he welcomed me as a graduate student was, "I am a great admirer of Ngaio Marsh."

What is so satisfying about reading well written stories of crime and their detection, or watching such successful television series as *Law and Order*? I think it is a combination of intellectual curiosity, of wanting to know the truth of what happened; of moral values, the desire to see good triumph over evil, and justice to be done, the perpetrator of the crime being discovered and apprehended; and also of entering into the lives of interesting and believable characters experiencing real life dilemmas and crises, and identifying with their doubts and conclusions. Excitement and apprehension builds as the story unfolds until the denouement, when the truth is revealed.

The Gospel accounts of the first Easter morning read like detective stories. When Mary Magdalene arrived at the tomb, the soldiers guarding it had disappeared, the stone closing the entrance had been removed, and the body of Jesus was missing. She ran to Simon Peter and John and jumped to the logical conclusion that someone had stolen the body. Where is the body? The men cannot help her. They were as mystified as she was and go home. Mary stayed weeping by the tomb. When she looked into the tomb again she saw two angels. They asked her why she was crying. She accused someone of removing the body of Jesus and hiding it. Then Jesus appeared and spoke to her and she did not recognize him. She thought he was the gardener and accused him of taking the body. "Tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." Then Jesus opened her eyes so that she recognized him when he called her by her name. But many of the disciples take some persuading that her encounter with Jesus was real. They had to have a similar experience before they were convinced that he was not simply a ghost or hallucination. They had no understanding about resurrection – it was not part of their view of death, except at the last day of judgment. They only came to believe in the resurrection of the body because they saw that the tomb was empty, the body was gone, and they really did see and talk with someone who gave every appearance of being a solidly physical Jesus, though strangely changed.

In every detective story there are various theories of how the crime was committed and who was responsible for it. Characters come to different conclusions. There are both believers and skeptics about the witnesses and suspects. Some skeptics want to interpret the resurrection of Jesus as a metaphor for a new religious experience rather than an actual historical event. That would be to doubt the reliability of the apostolic witnesses who proclaimed that Jesus was raised from the dead. John Updike wrote a poem about that approach:

Let us not mock God with metaphor,
analogy, sidestepping, transcendence;
making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the
faded credulity of earlier ages;
let us walk through the door.

What are some of the other theories which are rival explanations of the resurrection?

Tom Wright (*Surprised by Hope*, 61-76) lists several:

1. Jesus didn't really die; someone gave him a drug that made him look like dead, and he revived in the tomb. Answer: Roman soldiers knew how to kill people, and no disciple would have been fooled by a half-drugged, beat-up Jesus into thinking he'd defeated death and inaugurated the kingdom.

2. When the women went to the tomb they met someone else who looked like Jesus, and in the half-light they thought it was Jesus himself. Answer: they would have noticed soon enough.
3. Jesus only appeared to people who believed in him. Answer: the accounts make it clear that Thomas and Paul do not belong to this category; and actually none of Jesus' followers believed, after his death, that he was really the Messiah, let alone that he was in any sense divine.
4. The accounts we have are biased. Answer: so is all history, all journalism. Every photo is taken by somebody from some angle.
5. Lots of people have visions of someone they love who has just died; this was what happened to the disciples. Answer: they knew perfectly well about things like that, and they had language for it; they would say, 'It's his angel' or 'It's his spirit' or 'his ghost.' They wouldn't say, 'He's been raised from the dead.'
6. Perhaps the most popular: what actually happened was that they had some kind of rich 'spiritual' experience, which they interpreted through Jewish categories. Jesus after all was really alive spiritually, and they were still in touch with him. Answer: that is simply a description of a noble death followed by a Platonic immortality. Resurrection was and is the *defeat* of death, not simply a nicer *description* of it; and it's something that happens some while *after* the moment of death, not immediately.

There are three arguments that are often advanced to support the belief that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead:

1. Jewish tombs, especially those of martyrs, were venerated and often became shrines. There is no sign whatever of that having happened with Jesus' grave.
2. The early church's emphasis on the first day of the week as their special day is very hard to explain unless something striking really did happen then.
3. The disciples were hardly likely to go out and suffer and die for a belief that wasn't firmly anchored in fact.

How do we explain the missing body and the post-resurrection meetings with Jesus unless they actually happened? The skeptic will say: 'dead people don't rise and therefore something else must have happened.' But what if what happened ushers in a new possibility, a new act of creation? If you can't explain something perhaps you need to look at the situation from a new perspective. God, who made all things, is capable of creating life out of nothing. This is not just wishful thinking or mere blind optimism. The witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus experienced a way of knowing in which a new thing was possible. They began to look at the world from a different angle of possibility. If the resurrection of Jesus really happened then such a belief can transform our view of the present and the future. It enables us to think out of the box. God can defeat death. God can create new life now. Jesus invites us to enter into his new resurrection world, and see the possibilities of a new creation. He wants to create a new world, a new kingdom, and he calls us to be his ambassadors in this enterprise. Nothing could be more exhilarating.

In Oscar Wilde's play *Salome*, King Herod hears reports that Jesus has been raising the dead. 'I do not wish him to do that,' says Herod. 'I forbid him to do that. I allow no man to raise the dead. This man must be found and told that I forbid him to raise the dead.'

Tom Wright comments, "There is the bluster of the tyrant who knows his power is threatened, and I hear the same tone of voice not just in the politicians who want to carve up the world to their advantage but also in the intellectual traditions that have gone along for the ride." e.g. the secular skepticism of atheism and modern agnosticism.

"But Wilde's next, haunting line is the real crunch, for us as for Herod: 'Where is this man?' demands Herod. 'He is in every place, my lord,' replies the courtier, 'but it is hard to find him.'

God is out of the box. The body is missing. Instead he is everywhere. Jesus is alive! What a game-changer? The conclusion of the case is this. You would be advised to enter the service of the Risen Lord of all. Give yourself to the greatest enterprise in the world and eternity. You will not be disappointed.