

Resurrection and Personality

Public Lecture by Eoin Stephenson at Ireland Yearly Meeting, 9 April 2021

Come and have breakfast.

Spoken in the beautiful luminous light that fills the air just before sunrise.

This light fills the air below the lightning sky
and over the still dark beach.

The lake waters are dark.

The air slowly fills with light.

There is a coal fire, and the disciples gather round to eat.

No one asks who are you?

They know it is the Lord.

His words to them

“Come and have breakfast.”

This is an account of a Resurrection appearance of Jesus of Nazareth.

No mystical music or Hollywood lighting,
just breakfast with his friends at the end of their night’s work.

The setting on the lakeside at dawn is beautiful.

The encounter is down to earth and very ordinary.

Jesus and his friends sit down to have breakfast.

Across a breakfast of cooked fish, they know it is Jesus.

On this moment of recognition rest all of Christian belief and teaching.

Resurrection is a challenge.

Christian belief often focuses on the suffering Jesus on the cross,
or the great moral teacher.

These we can easily grasp and hold on to.

Resurrection is of a different order.

It is not easily grasped and is impossible to hold on to in the way we can hold in our minds Jesus’ suffering or his parables.

The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is the whole source and point of Christian discipleship.

Yet it remains elusive in our religious lives and perhaps for several reasons.

From daybreak on the first day of the week,
time and place get somewhat out of sync.

There is the empty tomb with angels,

go to Galilee there you will see him,
 there is the empty tomb with winding cloth
 and the cloth that covered His face set aside,
 Mary and the gardener,
 the couple on the road to Emmaus,
 the locked room twice,
 there is the appearance by the lakeside in Galilee.
 There is the appearance to the five hundred disciples that Paul mentions but the
 Gospels do not.

The Resurrection accounts in Saint Paul's writings,
 in the Gospels and in the Acts of the Apostles
 do not match up as a neat chronology of events.
 This is because they were not written in that way.
 It is a mistake to try to read them as matching journalistic accounts,
 because they are not.
 The accounts of the Resurrection were first spoken before they were written down.
 How you speak to others about someone who was dead is alive
 does pose something of a communications problem.
 That the Apostles had too much to drink is not an unreasonable reaction.

When the Gospels were written
 they were also written, each, for a particular audience.
 They were each pitched for that audience
 and the situation that community were living in.
 Mathew's Resurrection account presents Jesus as the new Moses
 with echoes of Sinai, an earthquake, bright light and travel to a mountain.
 These were legitimate spiritual writers' tools
 to convey the divine truth at the heart of the Resurrection event
 to a Jewish-Christian community.
 In Luke there is a focus on two ordinary disciples walking to Emmaus.
 In John there is a series of very personal encounters with the Risen Jesus.
 So, when we read the Resurrection accounts,
 we are encountering oral accounts
 in written format
 for particular communities
 so that
 they might believe in Jesus' Resurrection,
 and more tell others that they in turn might believe.
 It takes a special form of listening
 to discern that of God in the telling of the story.
 And it is that of God in the story

that gives it the power to slip between the ribs into the heart
and engender belief through the centuries.

This special form of listening requires a particular exercise of ones' whole person.

When I first mentioned the title of this talk,
Resurrection and Personality, to my family I was pulled up short.
"What do you mean by personality"?
I said I think it is perfectly clear what personality means.
Everyone has one!
That did not wash then,
and I should give some explanation now.
When we meet someone for the first time, we do take a read on who they are.
We do it automatically, unconsciously,
and depending on the situation with varying degrees of intensity, insight and
success.
We assess in an ordinary way who it is we are meeting.
The process continues over time, and we get to know who the person is.
What makes them tick.
How they act and react.
In friendship,
who they are
and who I am,
harmonise across differences and similarities.
Those we meet are made up of complex structures
of intellectual and emotional intelligence.
They have a particular history
set in a cultural context and particular social background.
They have particular talents and gifts
and exercise these in a way unique to each one.
All of these come together in a way that makes each one unique
and recognisable as a particular individual.
It is this complex blend that makes the personality of each of us.
This is a functional way of thinking about personality.
And we recognise those who are strong personalities,
or outgoing, or quiet, or emotional.
There are as many personalities as there are individuals.
And each of us expresses our personality
in the way we use the complex of factors that makes us who we are.
And we can grow and develop or not
depending on how we live and use
all the bits that make us up.
If we listen to the Resurrection accounts with all our personality,

we may discover within,
some way of meeting death, with a sense of coming new life.

A comment made by an American Abbott to his community
"life would be fine except for reality"
catches the human situation well.

We use the parts of our personality that make us who we are
in dealing with the real world.

We use our knowledge,
our emotional and social intelligence,
the cultural riches we have breath in from our family and society,
all these and more come into play as we live out our lives day to day.
We may not always be successful

in dealing with the realities that life confronts us with,
but in using as best we can all the precious elements of our humanity
even with partial success or even with mistakes and failures
we can learn and grow.

The world is not perfect,
and neither are we.

But the true and the good and the beautiful
are discernable and to be striven for,
and when we engage with life with all of the parts that make us up,
we can make life, truer and better and more beautiful.

And that helps to makes us as individual human beings
truer and better and more beautiful.

But reality is not always true or good or beautiful.

And we must acknowledge that each of us have some part in that.
For some their actions can make life bad for others and for themselves.
For others the very best efforts fall short.

In both cases some element of their human make-up
is shut down or damaged or misdirected.

We do engage with the real world around us with both our gifts and our limitations.
We are not all powerful
or all knowing.

What happens around us can have very real impact
on how we function as human beings.

What happened in Mother and Baby Homes,
and to single pregnant women
is a case in point.

Respectability / social judgement and moral condemnation
were rank forces in Irish society for most of the twentieth century.
Being respectable,

having good standing in the community,
being well thought of,
conforming to moral and religious norms in public,
were not just the domain of the craw thumper
but permeated the kitchen and the drawing room,
the classroom and the workplace.

The effect was to restrict whole personality functioning,
closing down intellectual and emotional life
to the extent that we banished the unmarried pregnant,
the poor orphaned,
to Magdalen Laundries, Mother and Baby Homes and Industrial Schools.
What has been shut down in the human personality
to put one's child out of the house,
into brutal religious institutions?

And if we claim that we did not know how brutal they were,

Perhaps, we must admit we did not want to know.

Such awfulness points the need to work
so that we keep our whole personality
and all our gifts of mind and heart in full health
and functioning as best we can.

Courage is an aspect of personality
that is essential if truth is to be honored and humanity served.

Fear is another major shut down factor.

Fear of social judgement
and loss of social status or respectability
was a major force shutting down humanity
so that one's own child could be banished from their home.

Fear in society
dressed up as righteous moral judgement
could ignore the plight of vulnerable young women
condemned to institutional enslavement.

Not seeing or not wanting to see
is a symptom of the closing personality.

Some part of the human person
that enjoys the true the good and the beautiful
has been twisted into a distortion.

The true the good and the beautiful
are a challenge in themselves.

The meaning of what we see to be true,
the enormity of goodness

and the depth of the beautiful,
can at times challenge our sense of security
by taking us out of ourselves into new spaces of growth.
There is some element of going beyond the familiar,
of moving outside our control,
of overwhelming us in the wonders of the world around us.
There is an element of insecurity and the mysterious
built into our experience of the real world.
For some this lights a passion for exploration and expression.
For some of us and at times all of us
the instinct is to retreat to the familiar and secure.
For most of us perhaps we wobble
between exploration and adventure,
and security and retreat.
If our whole personality is engaged,
we will manage this oscillation in the general direction of growth and development
and savoring the good and beautiful things in life.
The structure of our individual personalities
will make this process easier or more difficult to nurture our humanity.
Fear in the face of the mysterious in life
is dealt with variously.
Do we embrace life as it unfolds in all its challenging newness,
or do we stand with the certainties
we have established in our lives?
Giving ourselves a break and a little commonsense
we may have to do both to stay healthy.
The pathway of our lives
moves across a space of love and loss,
pleasure and pain,
youth and age.
Our lives are set in the fragile membrane of time,
a past that is gone,
a future that is not yet,
and a present now,
that disappears as we think of it.
Our lives are a brilliant sparkle
set in the vastness of distant stars
and the aeons of time.
We have come into existence and will go out of existence.
The promise of the Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is that
the love that brought us into existence will hold us in death
so that we share in this new life.

Living as fully as we can,
helps us become aware
of this promise of new life.

Death is an assured fact.
To be born is to die.
We really are in the swallow hard department here.
Life would be fine without this stark reality.
But there we are,
the whole of our personality is faced with
the extinction of our personality.
Our experience of death is that of the death of others, of parents, partners,
children, friends, strangers.
Our sense of loss is the indisputable fact
that they are gone, no longer there.
There is a body, but the person is gone.
On the face of it beyond death there is nothing.
But our very sense of an end point
contains some element of a beyond.
A terminus, an end, of its nature hints at a beyond.
Without this beyond an end would not stand out.
Our very experience of awareness of death
as an end-point
raises in our consciousness a sense of beyond an end.
This awareness is articulated in the major religions in various ways,
as a circle of life,
or a blending into absolute being,
or going to paradise / heaven.
These understandings can be held to
without denying the reality of death.
However, the great closers of personality
Fear and Anger
can lure the Christian disciple into comforting images of heaven,
which are candied or idealized versions of our lives now.
The depiction of heaven as an infinity of pink clouds
populated with harp playing babies
seems to me a place to be avoided at all costs.

Is life after death simply wishful thinking to fend off the awful?
We are free not to restrict ourselves here to logic and measurement.
It is good to honour the full scope of the meaning of our lives
to gather vision of our destiny.

The challenge is to keep the whole personality working in the face of death.

Beyond death we do not know what will or can be.

Paul of Tarsus put it positively,

'eye has not seen, nor ear heard,
nor has it entered into our hearts,
what God has prepared for those who love God'.

But we still face into the dark, nonetheless.

'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me'

was not a pious script,

but a real cry into this very darkness.

Can we see in the risen Jesus of Nazareth

anything that can help us see some way into the darkness?

What can we take from the Resurrection accounts

that can point to what may be for us after death?

Allowing the differences in the Resurrection accounts

I have mentioned already,

for me there are common elements across the accounts.

There is an encounter.

This is an encounter with a real person.

Then there is recognition of this person

as a particular individual,

as Jesus of Nazareth.

There is presence,

a presence of someone that can be touched,

and that eats food.

The real physical presence is also different

in significant ways

in time and space.

Encounter, Recognition, Presence of an individual,

and being present in a new way,

are the elements of the post Resurrection new life of Jesus of Nazareth.

Is it possible that these elements

hold good for us beyond death?

This hope may throw some light into the darkness beyond death,

but it does remain a hope and not a certainty.

And hope by its very nature cannot be certain.

It is also a matter of Faith,

a belief that reaches out beyond the presenting facts of death.

Both hope and faith are religious terms

that degenerate into illusion,
 if they reduce our vision to a comfortably tailored view,
 and ramped up version of the real world around us.
 Both Faith and Hope in a new life beyond death require,
 as whole and open a personality, as we can manage.
 Intellect, emotion, our family setting and background,
 education, our cultural and social setting,
 and then our personal gifts and talents that pull together all of the above
 need to be kept in play
 for progress in following as disciples.
 Much as we need every aspect of our personality
 to nurture and deepen our relationships.
 We need every aspect of our personality
 to nurture and deepen our religious journey.

There is another factor that emerges from the Resurrection period in the New Testament.

This is the active involvement of Jesus of Nazareth
 in the experience of the disciples.

He just turns up and engages,
 in the garden,
 on the road,
 in the upper room ,
 by the lake side.

Paul's encounter with the risen Jesus is somewhat different,
 there is light and a voice
 that identifies not just who is speaking,
 but identifies with those
 whom Paul is seeking to arrest.

All of these encounters seem to match
 to the life experience and personality of those who encounter the risen Jesus.
 Just the use of her name for Mary at the tomb.

It does take serious impact
 to stop the strongminded personality of Paul of Tarsus in his tracks.
 But the encounter fitted the personality of Paul.

An encounter fitting to the personality of each disciple
 has been a characteristic
 of the active involvement of the Divine in Christian life.
 Depending on the make-up of the individual disciple,
 an encounter of recognition can occur in different ways.
 For some it is a clear moment of explicit recognition.
 For others recognition grows slowly over time

into a sense of personal presence.
In both cases the sense of encounter and recognition
comes as gift.
The Risen Jesus acts to elicit the moment of recognition.

There is, in the open personality,
a movement towards a beyond,
to know more,
to savor and appreciate more,
to explore and discover more,
to reach out.

These are the realms of the creative and imaginative scientist,
engineer, artist, writer, theologian.

While this dynamic of personality can be clearly seen in the gifted.
It is the core of, the most ordinary of us,
available in the common place of everyday life.

This capacity of the open personality
can surprise us in unexpected ways
by very ordinary events,
the drift of leaf-fall,
the fit of gear and sprocket,
birdsong,
the sound of children's voices,
a small flower by the path,
a melody, the sound of wind and sea.

Who has not been moved by these in our ordinary lives?
Each of us I suspect has had our personality opened
by something very personal to ourselves
in our own life situation.

But life can be dark.
There are aspects of human darkness
where the trained and expert can help best.
Ordinary day to day living can bring loss of vision and bewilderment.
Sometimes we just have troubles,
that we can deal with or perhaps not.
We do not know the inner vulnerability of others. In these situations,
as Robin Williams said
Be kind.
Always.

A personality monitor is a useful tool.

That is a capacity to be aware of what is happening on the inside.
An eye on my inner workings.

What aspects of my personality are working
and to what extent.

What aspects of my personality are NOT working
and to what extent,
and in both cases, why?

For example

am I shutting down my feelings and overworking my intellect
and am I distorting my vision of what's real as a consequence.

We are gifted with self-awareness and it is a helpful support to keeping our personality working in as open a way as possible.

Our personality monitors have an emergency button
to defend when life becomes too much,
but not to be used

to dodge the discomforting and the challenging.

A personality monitor is very useful,
And is well lubricated by a sense of humour.

There seems to me to be different kinds of darkness,
one, where the very personality is at risk of destruction.

This can be confused with another darkness,
where one's self image is under threat.

One's identity and self image are very different.

But under stress can become confused and an inappropriate response follow.

Sickness, misunderstanding, breakdown of relationship
can land us in a place

where we lose vision, cannot see our way forward.

Confronted with the limits
of what we think is set and certain,
the possibility of moving on

and growth into the new, can fade and dim.

This gloom is an aspect of growth and development.

We are challenged to move out from what we know
across a new landscape

where at times we cannot yet see a clear pathway.

Faith and hope (without capitals)
seem to me to be built into our human condition.

Both the lightsome and the dark have an element common to both.

In both situations the beyond remains,
and it is IN this part of our experience

that the active presence of the Risen Jesus of Nazareth can be felt.
 When life leads us to the limits of who we are,
 there is a possibility,
 that in a form particular to you and who you are
 that an encounter or engagement
 or growing sense of the Other can be gifted.
 This sense of gift is one hallmark
 that sets this event apart from the psychologically induced.
 Another mark of this encounter event is that it is unimaginable,
 it comes from outside ones' experience,
 and is yet recognisable within oneself.
 Whether the sense of Other grows very gradually over time
 or happens in a particular moment
 its effects are
 that it is an undeniable part of one's life from then on.
 For some they are led to particular forms of action,
 like the prison ministry of Elizabeth Fry,
 for others it permeates their very ordinary life in family,
 and day to day work.
 For many Quakers the silent meeting for Worship
 is the place of encounter with Divine Presence,
 and in this encounter our personality grows.
 It does change the practice of religion
 from the following of codes of morals,
 law and authority
 to a very personal following of leadings of,
 in Christian terms
 the Spirit, that reveals the Risen Jesus of Nazareth.
 This following needs to be set in the context of Christian tradition
 and the gathered community.

This encounter experience cannot be pre-prescribed
 and can happen so differently for different people
 and further can develop over time.
 It would be rash to say how this encounter and recognition of the Risen Jesus
 takes shape in the life of different individuals.
 Where we have been raised in a Christian culture
 such presence is often shaped in images from the New Testament.
 For Francis of Assisi the image of Christ poor and crucified
 shaped his way of poverty and reform.
 For George Fox the opening that none could satisfy his search but only Christ,
 And this direct connection shaped his preaching,

the response of those who heard him,
and the gatherings for Quaker worship.

Figures from history have by their very nature a distance from us.
And we live in a very different age from Twelfth century Umbria and Seventeenth century England.

Are there images for our own age that will allow us to recognise the Risen Jesus of Nazareth?

I would like to suggest one image
that is not new
but does suit the working human personality.
We are built for relationship.
Our personalities are relational.

In Jesus', -- do you love me -- dialogue with Peter,
following their breakfast on the lake shore,
Jesus seems to accept the simple love that Peter offers.

There is between them a simple love of friendship.
This is the presence, the presence of a friend
that the Risen Jesus of Nazareth offers to us,
Much like our friends are a presence in our lives,
occupy space in our minds,

and enrich our lives because they are there.

This is different from Paul's Lord of Creation
or the Lord of Judgement coming on the clouds of heaven.

Jesus' presence is the quiet presence of someone who loves you,
and enhances your freedom and love by that presence.

It is a presence that is real,
recognisable
and is both other and ordinary at the same time.

The Risen Jesus of Nazareth is a presence, as a friend.

This is the Jesus of ordinary life and ordinary people.

This is a presence that is with us in the last moment of ordinary life.

It is good to think that Jesus who has died
is with us as a friend
in our moment of death.

Our hope is that in that moment
when we bring the boat of our life to shore,
we will find the beauty of new dawn light
and the voice of our friend say to us
Come and have breakfast.

