

Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth is one of his earliest, along with the letter to the Thessalonians. The community seems to suffer from divisions already, and part of his purpose in writing is to help them re-set and be unified. What are they divided over, besides who's the best teacher? Over the resurrection. There appears to be passionate disagreement over whether Jesus was raised from death, because as we all know, that can't happen but some people said it did. So Paul reminds them that he did not invent that story, but that the risen Christ had appeared to any number of people, including the disciples, but also to more than 500 brothers and sisters, and in fact, even to himself, Paul, well after the events of Pentecost and the birthday of the church. "I handed on to you . . . what I in turn had received."

He continues, "Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain." Paul is pointing out that faith changes the way we live and the way we see. If the Corinthians see in the same old way and live unchanged, then of course the Resurrection is absurd. They've simply joined a new dining club. But is there a different way of seeing? Paul says yes, and he points the Corinthians to the changes in himself and others.

If you go by what you can find on Google, there is a thriving industry of proofs of the Resurrection. I can't imagine a more useless pursuit, myself—if it were even possible to make such a proof (and it isn't), what difference would it make? The Biblical scholar Walter Wink once proposed this thought experiment about the

existence of God. He said, imagine that one day, finally overcome by the pleas for reassurance from would-be believers, God took the stars in one swath of the Milky Way and re-arranged them so that when viewed from the earth, they spelled out, “I EXIST.” Well, what a miracle that would be, and how many people (who read English) would immediately convert from their atheism or agnosticism and sign up straightaway for membership in a church, synagogue or mosque. Many millions, I expect. And then what? Gradually “I EXIST” would cease to be a novelty, people would stop checking in to the live starcam, and life would go on just as it does, with funding cutbacks and crashed romances and illness and dysfunction in Washington. Right? Seeing the words “I EXIST” spelled out in stars changes nothing for us here on the ground. Intellectual proof of the Resurrection means nothing when you’re so lonely you could howl.

The spiritual teacher Christine Valters Paintner writes, “Our habitual ways of perceiving the world, which help us navigate things like stopping at a red light or stop sign, also stand in the way of seeing the world in fresh and new ways. So often we are looking for information, rather than truly seeing.”¹ (repeat) It’s not what we see, but how we see it, that helps us “get” the Resurrection.

All last semester I had one student who was stuck in a very fixed way of seeing. I happen to disagree with him about a lot, but that’s not the problem. The problem was that he was an ideologue, and completely unable to see anything that didn’t fit his preconceptions. He was about my age, a veteran, and although a good-natured person generally, saw the world in Manichean terms—good against evil. He

¹ <http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/Pilgrimage-of-Resurrection-Christine-Valters-Paintner-04-17-2015?offset=1&max=1>

referred often to the necessity of defending oneself; he sees the world in terms of threats and safety. He is very much an Islamophobe, and believes uncritically a lot of pernicious myths about Muslims.

A couple of weeks ago one of my Muslim students invited Tom and me to attend a fundraising dinner for the Council on American-Islamic Relations, which we happily did. We were greeted very hospitably by her family and their friends. From the table I picked up a little purse-sized publication on knowing your rights and how to counter the dominant narrative about Muslims. We also heard a fairly stringent exhortation about what mosques should be doing: they should be hosting free medical clinics, tutoring refugees, offering legal services, doing blood drives, housing food pantries, caring for children. I thought I was back at church for a couple minutes. After the inspirational fundraising speeches, and after the break for evening prayer in one corner of the ballroom, we were entertained by Dean Obeidallah, a Muslim comedian about whom I will only say that you need to look him up on Youtube and give a listen. He was hilarious. Tom and I were screaming with laughter. When the evening was over, my student's parents and a lot of other community members thanked us for coming and bade us farewell.

The following Monday I had my usual speaker on Islam come talk to my class, and my Islamophobic student aired his views freely. My speaker handled him beautifully, but I could see my student was upset, and my own sensitivity to Islamophobia had been heightened by Saturday evening, seeing how conscious they were of their need to counter the stereotypes. The speaker and I stayed after class with several students who wanted to hear more from her, but the aggressor left. I

was not happy that he had taken so much airtime and attention, but I always maintain that school is about learning, and we have to be able to listen to uncomfortable points of view in order to grow, so I viewed the hour as an unpleasant necessity. I still kind of felt bad for my Muslim student, but I figured she's an adult, I won't wrap her in cotton batting.

So that's pretty dark and unredemptive, isn't it? A nasty attack on Islam, with insufficient time for everyone to process it and think out loud about it. And then the same week, on the morning of the final, my Muslim student and her non-Muslim neighbor who sits at the same table with her brought cookies for everyone in class. They were sugar cookies with frosting *and* sprinkles. They said it was to get everyone in a good mood for the test, so everyone would do their best. The subtext was clear, and all the students totally got it: Do not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good. Oh wait, that's Christianity. Oh wait, Islam teaches the same thing. The Islamophobe got a cookie too.

I know my Muslim student would not tell this story as a sign of the resurrection, because Muslims believe that God whisked Jesus into heaven right away before he died on the cross. But on the ground, this is a mere detail. On the ground, the important thing is that the resurrection, or the whisking, whichever story you know, shows the sovereignty of God—the fact that actually God rules. Actually *God* has the final word.

Proof of the Resurrection, finally, lies not in any external data, but in the fact that we can see reality differently. Our way of seeing is proof of the resurrection. My Islamophobe student sees himself as alone in a hostile world, unsafe until he has

vanquished all his enemies. My two cookie-bearing students bore witness to another way of seeing: seeing God present and sovereign in all situations, so that when one's religion has been attacked, one responds with gentleness and generosity rather than defensiveness. I am well aware that I'm playing fast and loose with "Resurrection" by making my example a person of another faith, but I think it's valid: Resurrection is Christianity's way of saying that God never quits. God offers redemption and life nonstop, 24-7, 365 days a year; it's what God does; all the Abrahamic religions agree on this. That's why she could respond to his fear-based aggression with grace.

God cannot be seen when we draw a line in the sand and say, "Give me proof or I don't step over the line." God can be seen only by those who already step over the line in trust. As former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams has written about the Resurrection that "What is vital to Christian discourse about the resurrection can be stated exclusively in terms of what happens to the minds and hearts of believers when proclamation is made that the victim of the crucifixion is the one through whom God continues to act and speak." And as Louis Pasteur said, chance favors the prepared mind. The proof of the resurrection is transformed lives and cast-out fear.

Let us pray: In a world that is cautious about believing anything it cannot touch and measure, help us, O God, to be people of faith. Open our eyes, open our hearts, let us see that the tomb that held Jesus is empty, and the tombs that threaten to hold us have their stones rolled away by the power of Christ our Lord. Amen.

