

We have seen the Lord (John 20:1-18)

## **"Were you there?" asks the song. No, no one was.**

by [Richard Lischer](#) in the [March 17, 1999](#) issue

Why is it so difficult to sit down at a computer and write a piece about the resurrection of Jesus from the dead? Is it because belief in the resurrection and dependence on technology are incompatible? In his famous essay "New Testament and Mythology," Rudolf Bultmann asked how modern people could possibly believe in miracles in the age of the "wireless." Which calls to mind Northrop Frye's comment that whenever an argument is prefaced by the word "modern," as in "modern psychology" or "modern science tells us," we can be sure that what follows will be about 100 years out-of-date.

No, the problem is not that I am using a computer but that my words will not be embodied by a community's service of worship. They are out of their element or, you might say, *immaterial*. These words of mine about resurrection require a thicker environment--one of smoke and incense, bread and wine, a few trumpets, murmurs of greeting and shouts of joy, dazzling colors and most of all, three-dimensional bodies of real people, including little boys in bow ties and women with fruit and flowers on their hats. You don't sit at a computer and tap out "Jesus is risen." You perform it. The church enacts it.

For example, we might well explain Jesus' words in John 12, "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself," by referring to John's cosmic Christology in which the crucifixion triggers the beginning of Jesus' glorification. But the definitive interpretation of the text will occur in the congregation's performance of it, when a crucifer in Nikes and a cotta leads the procession down the center aisle on Easter morning and the congregation rises to sing, "Lift high the cross, / The love of Christ proclaim / Till all the world / Adore his sacred name."

The pagan writer Celsus complained that everybody saw Jesus die, but only a crazed woman and a few fanatics saw him alive again. Every Easter someone in the adult discussion class asks why the risen Christ didn't appear to Caiaphas or Pilate, the

implication being that such an appearance would have cleared up a lot of misunderstandings. Peter's speech in Acts 10 alludes to the same question. "But God raised him on the third day and made him manifest; not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead."

If the resurrection were meant to be a historically verifiable occurrence, God wouldn't have performed it in the dark without eyewitnesses. "Were you there when God raised him from the tomb?" the Negro spiritual asks. No, in fact, we were not. No one was. "Resurrection" was an event transacted between God the Father and God the Son by the power of God the Holy Spirit. Not a single canonical Gospel tells us how it happened. We don't know if it was a typically warm Palestinian morning or unseasonably cool. We don't know if the earth shuddered when he arose or if it was preternaturally still. We don't know what he looked like when he was no longer dead, whether he burst the tomb in glory or came out like Lazarus, slowly unwrapping his shroud and squinting with wonder against the dawn.

It really happened, but we will never prove it (or disprove it) historically. The proper environment for resurrection is not the Jesus Seminar or anyone's seminar in which the "problem" of the resurrection is treated as the last obstacle to a really modern faith. Jesus' victory over death belongs to the church's ongoing pastoral and sacramental life and its mission to the world. The church practices resurrection in nursing homes, in bombed-out neighborhoods and, of course, in cemeteries. In her provocative study of the resurrection, *Seeing the Lord*, Marianne Sawicki defines the church as a community of those who have the *competence* to recognize Jesus as the risen Lord. It specializes in discerning the Risen One.

The Gospel of John presents a fair number of incompetent witnesses, and we have met some of them in these meditations: a teacher of Israel is stumped by the phrase "born again"; a Samaritan woman responds to the offer of salvation by reaching for her bucket; a faithful friend mistakes the risen Lord for the groundskeeper. But they have this in common: as long as they remain in dialogue with Jesus, their darkness will give way to dawn, and they will become "competent" for witness. When Jesus calls his friend by name, "Mary," and she responds with the intimate "Rabboni," or "My dear Rabbi," Mary Magdalene is transformed from the last mourner of the dead Messiah into the first witness to the living Lord.

As long as we remain in dialogue with Jesus, we too can become candidates for competence.

The resurrection of Jesus achieves its most documentable meaning in each new community's embrace of it. The proof of it lies just in front of our noses. When old adversaries are restored in love and kneel together at the Lord's Table, their reconciliation testifies not to the minister's counseling skills but to the God who raises the dead and calls into existence the things that are not. When a persecuted congregation defies the powers arrayed against it and remains faithful, Jesus is glorified once again and lifted up for all to see. We can't make him real, any more than we can make the wind blow or create life from nothing. But we have seen the Lord. We can participate in his risen life and testify to him in the community.

"Oh dear, oh dear," said Mary, "what have they done with his Body?"

I know, and so do you.