

TOUCHING THE RISEN JESUS: A RESPONSE

It is not simply an exercise in academic civility to begin by saying that it is an honor to offer a response to this or any essay of Dr. Sandra Schneiders. In my experience, she represents one of the most competent and creative Johannine scholars in contemporary Christianity. This paper is no exception, and I commend its careful study.

It comes as no surprise that a topic such as “Bodily Resurrection” has enormous pastoral implications. Recently, while reading a response from the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod to John Paul II’s *Ut Unum Sint*, my eye happened to catch the title of another article in the same periodical, labeled “Five things you should not say at funerals.”¹ The point is that this theme has enormous practical and pastoral consequences for everyone.

Dr. Schneiders begins her paper with the acknowledgment of the three texts in the New Testament which deal explicitly with bodily resurrection, namely, 1 Cor 15, Luke 24:36-43, and John 20. Only the first is explicitly rooted in a formal primitive pre-Pauline creed (1 Cor 15:3ff), and for that reason has unique value for a theologian. Each of these three textual witnesses, however, has its own cultural presuppositions and theological assertions. The very fact that these texts were eventually collected into the inspired library which we call the New Testament, and published by early Christians within the covers of a single codex, suggests that they must be in conversation with each other as well as with the reader or recipient community. I point out this fact, not because I would expect Dr. Schneiders’ paper to include the entire task, but rather to note that the complete study of the topic from a biblical perspective requires such treatment. I would also acknowledge, as would Dr. Schneiders, that any attempt to build an entire theology or spirituality on a single verse is very risky . . . in fact, it is my shorthand working definition of heresy. Such texts are often designed to complement and balance each other. They exist in creative tension with each other in the received Canon.

In this paper Dr. Schneiders provides a thorough study of one of those three privileged witnesses to apostolic faith, namely the Johannine Resurrection Narrative, and she brings all her well honed skills to the task. Moreover, she does so with an eye to the structure of the narrative and the dynamic interrelationship of the pericopes, in this case the contrasting and sequential theological development of the appearances to Magdalene and Thomas. That precise perspective is one of her unique gifts. As a literary method of exegesis, it is essential for understanding any text.

¹*Concordia Journal* 29 (October 2003): 363-66. Although influenced by classical Lutheran concerns, the list includes forbidden statements such as the homiletic proclamation that the deceased “has received the crown of righteousness,” “entered into eternal life,” “gone to his/her eternal home,” “is with the Lord now forever,” and that the funeral is “a victory celebration.” The author, Dr. Jeff Gibbs, insists that anything which minimizes the reality of baptism, suggests bodily resurrection as a mere afterthought or presumes to render divine judgment is a misuse of the charism of preaching in the Church.

In keeping with the theme of this meeting, Dr. Schneiders explores the role of the bodiliness of the Risen Jesus in the post resurrectional relationship of Jesus and his disciples. She concludes that his pre-Easter existence, at least in the Gospel of John, was characterized as flesh, σαρκί / רֶשֶׁת, namely, conditioned by mortality and subject to time, space and causality, whereas his post-Easter existence, though also bodily—namely, real, numerically distinct and personal—was no longer physical in the sense of being subject to such limitations.

Several points made in Dr. Schneiders' exegetical presentation are worthy of note, that is, the fact that the closed doors in the upper room delineate the community in two different mindsets (20:19, 26); the fact that Thomas is not "the doubter" but one who refuses to believe; the double character of Thomas the Twin, namely pre-Easter follower and post Easter believer; the ecclesiological and sacramental nature of the Johannine appearances; the assertion that the wounds of Jesus are sources of understanding not proofs; and the clarification of the differences between resurrection eschatology and sapiential immortality eschatology (not new, but exceptionally helpful for understanding Intertestamental currents).

I would agree with this paper's conclusions regarding the dependence of the Johannine Resurrection Narrative on the sapiential eschatology of the theology expressed in the Wisdom of Solomon, with exaltation rather than vindication being the point of John's conclusion.

It also seems appropriate to take this occasion to underscore the existence of multiple currents of thought in Intertestamental and first century prerabbinic Judaism.² Without that knowledge neither Judaism nor Christianity can be adequately understood.

Finally, there are at least five questions which remain for further conversation among those gathered for this meeting, issues which will undoubtedly be raised elsewhere in the various sessions. I mention them here because they flow from this initial presentation and require further research and reflection.

First, in Dr. Schneiders' paper she states that the covenanted community, namely, the body of Christ, becomes the ordinary mode for experiencing the presence and action of the glorified Jesus. What are the implications of this statement for *ecclesiology*? The Church is presented in this paper, and arguably in the entire Gospel of John, as the fully realized bodily (but not physical) and definitive presence of Jesus in the world. What does this say about the nature and the vocation of the Church—so clearly delineated and characterized, at least in our contemporary experience, by σαρκί—still subject to all the limitations of time and space, and deeply inculturated in countless variations of human society? As one who shares however minimally in ἐπισκοπή, I find it imperative to know what this might demand of the flesh and blood of the covenanted community of disciples which we call church.

²*Judaisms and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era*, ed. Jacob Neusner, William S. Green, and Ernest S. Frerichs (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

Second, what does the pointed Lukan reference (24:41-43) to consumption of food by the Risen Jesus, while admittedly not the specific focus of this paper, add to the early Church's convictions regarding his post-Easter existence?

Third, what is the line of continuity and *doctrinal development* from these three biblical texts which deal with the bodily resurrection of Jesus to the early assertions of belief as found in the ancient Western form of the Apostles' Creed—[εἰς] σαρκος ἀνάστασιν “[in] the resurrection of the *flesh*”—and then in the subsequent article expanded by the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed—ἀνάστασιν νεκρῶν καὶ ζωῆν τοῦ μελλόντος αἰῶνος “resurrection of the *dead* and the life of the age to come” (AD 381)?³

Fourth, in light of this development, what do we really ask our people to accept when we propose to contemporary Catholic Christians belief in “resurrection from the dead” as one distinct item among the fundamentals of our faith? In terms of *pastoral catechesis* and liturgical praxis, at least forty times during this past Easter season I have stood before candidates for Confirmation and requested their assent to this ancient article of faith.⁴ What in the judgment of their Church's theological community did I really ask of them at that moment in their young adulthood?

Finally, what was the full *influence of Hellenism* on early Judaic belief and praxis, for example, in terms of disembodied spirits patiently awaiting the final general resurrection (or even the study of Torah as a means of salvation)? Did early Jewish Christianity presume, as I would suspect, a new creation immediately after death in order to preserve the bodyself presumed essential and integral to each person?

There are many questions raised by Dr. Schneiders' paper this morning. I rise to pay tribute to her work and to the contribution which she has made to our 2005 gathering.

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³Carolyn Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

⁴In the ecclesiastical province of Wisconsin, as in most of the dioceses of the nation, these candidates are required to be at least juniors in high school or sixteen years of age. Precisely what is being proposed in this question as part of the ritual examination of their faith? This is an important challenge for the catechetical ministry of our church.