

Thursday Theology: Robert Bertram's "The Lively Use of the Risen Lord"

Co-missioners,

"As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Much of the Church will hear Christ saying this again three days from now, on the Second Sunday of Easter. The day's appointed Gospel is John 20:19-31. That this text gets read on Easter 2 in every year of the three-year lectionary cycle that lots of us follow underscores the vital role it plays in defining what the Church is for—or is meant to be for, at any rate.

Fifty-two years ago, Robert W. Bertram preached a homily on this text that left a deeper impression than usual on those who either heard it at the time or encountered it later in published form. Mention has been made of it more than once in these past few months of Seminex remembrance. For some it was one of those things that made the Aha's start to pop as they sifted through the bitter arguments of the day. These swirled around two key questions: "What is the Gospel?" "How can we trust it?"

Bertram addressed both those issues in that homily of April 13, 1972. His driving points: "Make use of Christ! Don't let him go to waste!"

Perhaps it strikes you, as it does us, that Christ is still being badly under-used in the church of 2024. If so, you'll want to read what Bertram said back then. You'll find some joy in it, we think, to say nothing of encouragement. Hence our decision to re-post it today via Thursday Theology, another gem from our online library.

Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

The Lively Use of the Risen Lord

by Robert Bertram

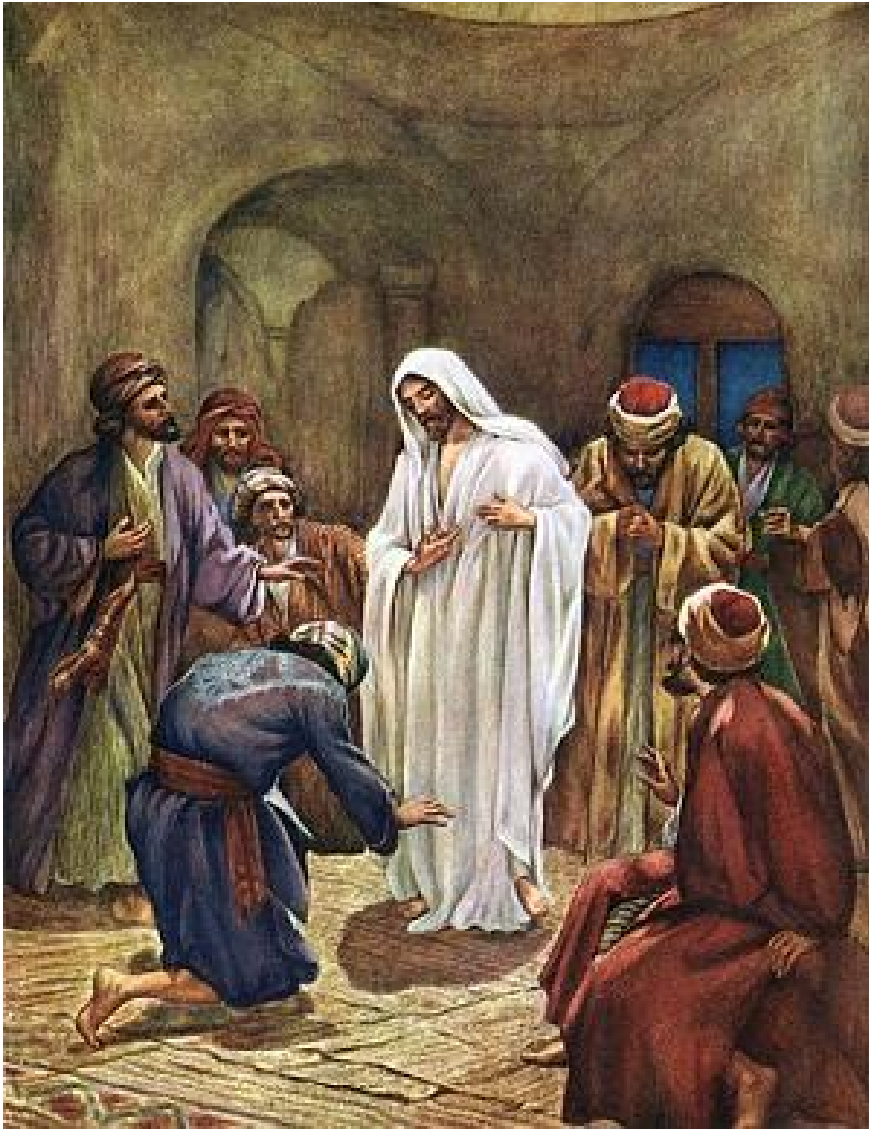
A homily preached at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis
on April 13, 1972

Published in *Concordia Theological Monthly* 43 (July-August, 1972): 438-441. Reprinted in *The Promising Tradition*, a collection of sources for the introductory course in systematic theology at Christ Seminary–Semine

+ + +

Text: [John 20:19-31](#)

So Jesus rose from the dead and showed Himself to His disciples. So what? What is the use of that?



William Hole (1846–1917) – Jesus appears to the disciples

[From Wikimedia Commons](#)

By putting the question that way, I run the risk, I know, of sounding flippant, though that is the very opposite of what I intend. Really, this rhetoric of putting Christ to use rather than letting Him go to waste I have stolen outright from the rhetoric of the Lutheran confessors. They too could sound flippant, although what they intended was something far different from flippancy—far different and far more. What they intended was clearly to call a spade and spade. Nothing less than that would do

when what was at stake was the very Gospel, the very “use” of Jesus Christ. If in order to make their point the confessors had to borrow from the rhetoric of Renaissance bankers and financiers, the usurers, so be it.

But of course the original idea of making use of Christ came, as the confessors’ ideas usually did, from the radical rhetoric of Scripture. For wasn’t it the apostle Paul who employed this notion against his opponents? Not that his opponents denied the history about Jesus, His death and resurrection. But rather, as Paul charges them, they were by their legalism so misusing that history of Christ as to cause Him to have “died in vain.” The situation was similar at the time of the Reformation. The Roman opponents, as the Augsburg Confession cheerfully concedes, had an official christology which was orthodox to the letter. These opponents very properly affirmed the whole Biblical *historia* concerning Christ. However, by the way in which they used His history in practice they undid it. They rendered the history superfluous, “worthless.” Thus Christ might just as well never have died and risen in the first place. Such a criticism does sound flippant. But really it is worse than flippant. It is deadly serious. So am I.

Why? Because the same problem—the problem of nullifying Christ’s history by our legalism—is with us still. That may not seem to be our problem. It never does seem to be the problem, so effective is the camouflage with which the Father of Lies conceals this problem. But for those who have the eyes and the freedom to peer beyond the appearances, that same problem still looms today, demonic and stark, also in our church body. It is the pseudo-Christian heresy of so misusing Christ and His Biblical

history as to obviate any true need of Him.

In exposing this danger, I certainly do not intend to ridicule it. It is part of the piety of people who are near and dear to me. But it is a false prop, a weakness, which actually endangers rather than strengthens their faith in Christ.

Isn't this the real issue before us, namely, that the history of Jesus our Lord, however correctly it is told and retold, is in jeopardy of being voided by our legalistic use of it?

Granted, there are those in our circles, including many people of good will, who deny that that is the issue, who insist instead that the real need is merely to affirm the Biblical history—that is, to affirm that it did in fact happen—and who imply that the use to which that history is put is a separate and a secondary consideration. But is it all that secondary? Isn't it rather the case that, when that one really radical use of Biblical history is allowed to slip from view, the history is then put to other, lesser uses which for all practical purposes make the whole history to have happened “in vain?” Once that happens (and it is happening), then the only question left to debate is *how much* of the history do you believe actually occurred. That then degenerates into a futile debate between the maximalists and the minimalists, all the more futile since real, honest-to-goodness minimalists are not actually represented in the Missouri Synod at all but have to be conjured up to provide an imaginary enemy. But the worst thing about such a dreary debate is that it is beside the point. It is fiddling while Rome burns.

Is an example necessary? All right, then here is one. It is an example of how Christ and His history, when they are put to the wrong use, are made useless. Take the history of our Lord's post-Easter appearance as that is recorded in our Gospel lesson for this week. How might that wondrous history be misused and so become superfluous? Given the question, why was it important for our Lord's resurrection to happen, how might that question now be so badly mis-answered as to miss the whole reason for its happening at all? By answering like this: The reason it was important for His resurrection to happen is this, that if it did not happen, then nothing which the Biblical writers record could any longer be trusted. Then how could we, who have trusted them, be sure that we are right? What is wrong with that sort of reasoning is not that it is illogical but rather that it destroys Scripture's own priorities. For then the whole purpose of Christ's rising from the dead would seem to be nothing more than that by His rising He guarantees the reliability of the Biblical authors. As if He rose merely to give them something to write about, or to give us a reason for believing them.



Caravaggio (1571–1610) – Reproduction of The Incredulity of Saint Thomas by Caravaggio
[From Wikimedia Commons](#)

That distortion of the Easter Gospel finds no support in the text at hand, not even in the disbelief of doubting Thomas. True, his fellow disciples—the “Biblical witnesses,” so to speak—had told Thomas that they had seen the Lord. And true, it was in a way their word which he refused to accept. But notice, when Thomas did finally come around to believing, what was it that he believed? The credibility of the disciples? Was it to them that he addressed his confession? Did he, upon seeing the risen Lord, exclaim to *them*: “I’ll never again question

anything you say, my friends, seeing how reliable I've now discovered you to be?" Granted, for all we know, Thomas may have gained a new confidence in them too, but only as a byproduct of his faith. In any case it was not they who were the target of his faith. Nor was that the fault for which our Lord rebuked Thomas. He did not say, "The trouble with you, Thomas, is that you question the inerrancy of these witnesses." And most certainly does the Lord not say, "See, Thomas, the whole purpose of My resurrection is to provide you an object lesson in the reliability of Scripture." No, Thomas' need was far deeper than that. He needed a far more drastic "use" of Jesus' resurrection history than merely to use it for shoring up apostolic authority. Which is where the legalists in our midst tend to confine the problem, being too timid to exert the full diagnostic force of the Law.

What is more, Thomas' doubt was not merely about "facticity." What he doubted was not just that dead men ever come back to life. His problem was not that he was from Missouri, some scientific skeptic who demanded empirical proof for the possibility of resurrections [1]. In fact, is that ever the real problem for the Easter doubter, Thomas or anyone else? The legalists might have us think so, but that is only because they are too Law-shy to face up to the full terror of the sinner's doubt. No, what Thomas doubted was not about resurrections in general but about this resurrection, the resurrection of Jesus. And what he doubted about Jesus was not just His resurrection but His lordship, and His lordship not just over death, over Jesus' death, but over Thomas' death as well. What Thomas doubted finally was something about himself, namely, who his Lord—his "Lord" and his "God"—really was.

If his Lord was not Jesus after all, then he, Thomas, had staked his life on the wrong lord. In that case, what was left was not *no* lord, but another, very different lord—a lord and god of death and of judgment. In that case the disciples would indeed be justified in hiding behind locked doors for fear of the Jews. For if the law of Moses, if the crucifying of forgiving messiahs, is the last word after all, then “fear” is indeed the only appropriate attitude. For then “my Lord and my God,” whoever he is, is not on the side of the sinner but on the side of the righteous, not on the side of forgiveness but on the side of deservedness, not on the side of this messianic pretender but on the side of those conscientious churchmen who punish such pretenders for blasphemy. If it is that sort of God who is the Lord after all, then any sinner who had dared to hope for life in spite of everything, who had naively cast his lot with this disappointing Jesus, is bound to turn cynical, as Thomas did. Naturally. Wouldn't you? Don't I?

In other words, when Thomas demanded empirical proof he was not doing so in a vacuum. He disbelieved our Lord's resurrection not just because there was an *absence* of evidence in favor of it, but because there was overwhelming evidence *against* it—not just empirical evidence but theological evidence. Moreover, what Thomas was out to establish was not merely whether the risen one really was Jesus, the same friend and Rabbi Jesus he had known before. Thomas was not just interested in determining the identity of this resurrected person. For that, he could simply have insisted on Jesus' fingerprints or some birthmark on His neck or the familiar sound of His voice. But no, what Thomas demands to see are the death-marks, the scars of Jesus'

execution. That is what offended Thomas, and offended him about Jesus, and offended him about Jesus' having let him down.

Understandably so. For anyone to qualify as "my Lord and my God," the least thing He has to be able to offer is "life." But how can any lord promise life who himself winds up in death? What could be more unlordly, more defeated, than a dead lord? What needs overcoming in Thomas' doubt is not just his loss of a friend, an acquaintance, but his loss of his own whole hope for life. That, as we all know from experience, is a doubt of heroic proportions, and it is a travesty to blame such doubt on questions of mere "facticity."

But sure enough, when our Lord does appear to Thomas He presents him with—of all things!—the death-marks. You would think Christ might have said instead, "Why are you so hung up on My death? That's past now, over and gone; forget it." But no, He makes a deliberate point of these signs of defeat, as though He is anything but embarrassed by them, as though they are essential to His very lordship. As though that is the only way to be "Lord and God" for sinners like Thomas, namely, by dying and then first rising. As though that was what He had been sent for, "as the Father has sent Me." As though that kind of sending of His Son, namely sending Him to die and then first raising Him, is what makes God a "Father" at all, rather than only a sender of law and judgement and death. As though it was only through death that the now risen Jesus could meaningfully greet the disciples with "Peace," *Shalom a'lechem*. As though only this kind of Jesus could be "the Christ, the Son of God." And as though the only proper "use" of Him and His history is to believe Him for one purpose and one purpose alone,

namely, that, “believing, you may have life in His name.” And that, come to think of it, is the one reason this history was ever (as John says) “written” into Scripture in the first place. Hallelujah, indeed!

Endnote

[1] “His problem was not that he was from Missouri....” A clarification for non-American readers: the reference is not to the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, but rather to a common slogan for the State of Missouri as “the [Show-Me State](#).”

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use

A publication of the Crossings Community