

Very Reverend Glenn Jones

Vicar General, Vicar for Clergy, Vicar for Religious

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Now we're deep into the Easter season, which, of course, celebrates the resurrection of Jesus after His crucifixion, thereby (in Christian theology) opening the way to an unending and joyful spiritual life. It is, in fact, the essential reason that we become Christian, for as St. Paul writes: "... if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain... If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied." (1 Corinthians 15:14,19) And as we heard in the Mass opening prayer on May 4: "... [we] rejoicing now in the restored glory of our adoption, we may look forward in confident hope to the rejoicing of the day of resurrection."

Of course, in our scientific age, which emphasizes empiricism—that which is physically verifiable and based on sensory experience—it's difficult to convince some of the unique events of the past, which cannot be replicated. But Jesus' resurrection is irreplicable—a one-time event. At least for now. The Christian belief, based primarily on the teaching of Jesus and His apostles, is that the resurrection of *all* the dead is in the future, plainly attested by Jesus Himself: "... the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment." (John 5:28-29)

To modern thought, trained to regard little else than that aforementioned empiricism, this all sounds quite fantastical. Detractors will sometimes call it something like "the big daddy in the sky," a foolish hope. But the problem for more open-minded (current) unbelievers is the evidence that *supports* the truth of Christianity.

After all, it's hard to realistically deny at least the very existence of Jesus; there's just too much historical basis—in both religious and secular literature. And it's difficult to deny that His followers, the apostles, died testifying to the truth of His Gospel and His works; that, too, is documented. Having lived closely with Jesus for several years, they certainly would have discerned whether He was either a huckster or insane, but they furthered His teaching and their testimony of His works all the way to martyrdom. Seems unreasonable in the extreme that they would do so if they knew His works were a deception. Some of them (Matthew the tax collector, especially) probably lived a fairly affluent life prior to discipleship.

St. Paul, a later apostle, writes of the resistance he himself received: "Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure." (2 Corinthians 11:24-27) All that from a guy who had earlier persecuted early believers until his "turn on a dime" conversion vision of Christ (Acts 9, and in his testimony in 1 Corinthians 15:8). Subsequently, Paul became the most effective evangelizer of all of them. He had been a rising star Pharisee in Israel, and yet he came to "... count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ." (Philippians 3:8)

You can add to this evidence the mere fact of the explosion of Christianity throughout the eastern Mediterranean and its rapid expansion in the centuries to follow, which also seems quite unlikely unless there was some supernatural impetus behind it. And then there are the miracles that still occur; whenever a saint is declared so by the Vatican (not "made" as is wrongly said), it is usually because of some verifiable yet unexplainable dramatic healing (e.g., stage 4 cancers scheduled for excision disappearing overnight; these are well documented) believed due to the saint's prayers to God for the person's healing. As we ask one another to pray for us, we believe saints pray for us when we ask for their prayers.

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A philosopher's thought experiment in past centuries was to wonder whether we are just part of a menagerie...our earth, rather like its own little snow globe. Nowadays, we think more in computer terms like an artificial-intelligence-generated unreality, or "The Matrix." Or maybe even an artificial environment, such as depicted in "The Truman Show," with ourselves barely perceiving something outside our own bounded movie set.

But when one considers the vastness of the universe, should we dismiss lightly such thoughts? Imagine the denizens of an ant colony deep in a forest: they believe themselves powerful and are in awe of the complexity and vastness of their habitation and great numbers. Perhaps some have singular, or rare, encounters with some unfathomably powerful giant two-legged creature and testify to them. Unbelieving hearers might say that the witnesses are charlatans, delusional, or have a "need a big queen in the sky" complex.

The point is: to limit oneself to only what we can sensually perceive, dismissing all else despite evidence to the contrary, seems very ... well ... *limiting*. If you've not come to believe and have never questioned, consider the great explorers of old. They could have stopped at the shoreline and decided: "Well...this must be all there is!" But then there are bits of unknown kinds of driftwood which speak of something else. It is only because they had inquisitive minds that the world was explored, new vistas opened, and the greater truths than those to which they had theretofore limited themselves became known to them. So...dare to venture forth; you have nothing to lose, and perhaps eternity to gain.