



Easter Scenes

[Piero della Francesca \(c.1415–92\)](#)

[*The Resurrection of Jesus Christ* \(1463–5\)](#)

[Museo Civico Sansepolcro](#)

[Jacob Epstein \(1880–1959\), *Lazarus* \(1947–8\)](#)

[Chapel of New College, Oxford](#)

[The Turin Shroud \(including digitally processed image of the face\)](#)

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Triptych by Andrew Motion *Mark 16: 1–8*

I think it's such a good idea to base a series of sermons around works of art. But I hope it's not a sign of weakness on my part that I have been unable to be content with just one picture – or that you might think I've chosen three because I couldn't think of enough to say about one.

Piero della Francesca's *Resurrection*

Let's start with Piero della Francesca's *Resurrection*, a fresco painted for the Town Hall of his native city Sansepolcro in Tuscany (Saint Sepulchre). In it you see the sepulchral tomb (the city) literally centre stage with Christ stepping up onto it. This is a Christian and a Catholic city. Christ holds the banner of victory, the red cross on a white field, the symbol of his resurrection victory over death. In many other paintings of the period he holds this banner, even when meeting Mary Magdalen in the Garden. He has a halo round his head and wears a royal robe; at the foot of the tomb the disciples sleep as they did in that other garden – of Gethsemane.

Piero creates a poetic, metaphorical, civic image that places the figure of Christ stepping up, with a mighty step, onto the tomb as if in one movement to segue into the ascension. Apart from being dutiful towards his commission, the artist, who is not a theologian, might be saying, 'Oh, come off it. What do you expect to see?' And this reminds me of the *ordinariness* of theological reflection. Those making theological statements are, like us, grappling with a mystery that most of the time seems just out of reach.

As we know, to ask what the artist means is a dangerous question. It's more relevant to ask what do we see in the work? Or how does the work change across the centuries? And often when we view a picture we lose track of who the artist was and probably don't care very much. Just as when we watch a Shakespeare play: we take it as it comes, often radically interpreted by the director, as if separated from the author.

So, this picture recognises the supernatural, metaphorical, mysterious, out-of-the-box (excuse the pun) nature of this event. Even *event* is loaded word. I am mindful of the public scepticism about resurrection and the very large percentage of our society (that is of those who think about it at all) who dismiss it on scientific grounds as mythological. I'm old enough to remember 40 years ago the then Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins, describing the resurrection as a 'conjuring trick with bones' and his being on the front page of the tabloids and people arguing about it in the pubs. So perhaps less of an event and more a sense of love conquers all, evil cannot have the last word, the irrepressible drive of hope, the amazing force of new life both in physical nature and in spiritual drive?

On the radio at Easter, Richard Holloway repeated his very reasonable mantra that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. He describes himself as a non-binary Christian, by which he means he is neither a believer nor an atheist, sometimes thinking there must be a divine meaning and purpose to life and sometimes not, and often thinking both at the same time. 'I'm a believer and a non-believer at the same time,' he says. 'The Church manufactures *beliefs* as opposed to *faith in an ultimate reality* or a *yes to the universe*.'

The Turin Shroud

And so I move on to the Turin Shroud, which has been venerated for centuries in Italy as the very shroud in which the women wrapped Jesus' body in preparation for burial; and therefore the material through which he must have been resurrected. This then is an event-like artefact. Somehow imprinted on it as if by a sort of x-ray process is an impression of the risen Lord in the act of, as it were, being beamed up. Is it event or is it art? Most of those who have studied it and carbon tested the linen consider it a fake. But the reason I bother to bring it to your attention is simply this: Michael Banner's famous predecessor John Robinson, thought it was genuine and campaigned for its acceptance as such and, for a time, I was willing to go along with him, but what I soon realised was that if it were genuine and Jesus' body did actually beam up through it, this didn't mean it was game set and match for Christianity. People weren't about to say, 'Oh, I'm sorry. I was wrong. Of course, Christianity is true and now I will change my life.' Faith, Christian discipleship, being spiritual, is not about proof of impossible things but about recognising the integrity of Jesus' self-giving life and person. Famously, the early version of Mark's gospel – chronologically the first gospel – ends not with resurrection appearances, but with the women finding the tomb empty and being afraid. The New Testament theologian, Frances Young, suggests that Mark is saying to the reader, 'if you haven't got it by now, you never will.' Or to put it another way: the energy and driving fuel of the resurrection is the self-giving love exemplified in the earthly life of Jesus. That is what creates new life; that is what gives shape and purpose to the meaning of life problem.

Epstein's *Lazarus*

Thirdly, I come to Jacob Epstein's *Lazarus*. Resurrection isn't an idea that crops up for the first time in the aftermath of Jesus' death. His resurrection is prefigured, for example, by Elijah, who ascends into heaven, and by Lazarus, the brother of two of Jesus' female disciples, who is raised by Jesus, even after his body has been decomposing in the Middle East heat for four days. In his gospel John uses this story to assure his readers of Jesus' power over death – a godly power.

Earlier we heard read Andrew Motion's poem *Triptych*, the second part of which is entitled *Lazarus*. A triptych – a three panelled painting behind an altar. In the Wilderness, Lazarus, the Upper Room.

What I love about this poem is the thought that this phenomenon, the resurrected Lazarus, thinks he shines in the landscape – ‘I like to imagine I leave swirling trails of light’ – but, in fact, he seems to everyone as the man he was before. And also, that he is worn out by having to declare repeatedly that he is happy. You may think *new life* ought to be like a permanent legal high, but it’s more a way of re-imagining the ordinary.

Epstein’s *Lazarus* in the chapel of New College, Oxford, brings yet another radical twist to the contemplation of resurrection: the wonderful sculpture shows Lazarus still in linen bandages, not having been zapped through a shroud, glancing over his shoulder as he walks out of the West door of the chapel. Its placing there is intentional and poignant. It seems to suggest the church is a kind of tomb: new life is outside in the open air, not in the confining ecclesiastical space. The figure looks back wistfully into the stained-glass-window light of New College Chapel, but certainly intends to get out into the world.

Anyone who knows D.H. Lawrence’s novel *The Rainbow* will remember how, for Will Brangwen, Lincoln Cathedral symbolises the possibility of fulfilment in an unfulfilled, frustrated life. But for his wife, Anna, the cathedral represents an imprisonment of her feelings. As she looks at the roof she would rather see the sky above; she doesn’t want to be contained or limited by religion. So, their responses to the same religious symbol are in stark contrast to one another. Anna insists that a symbol cannot be all in all. It is to be an introductory experience, not a consummatory one, as it is for him.

Richard Holloway again, criticising the defensive conservatism of the contemporary Church and its clergy: ‘The paradox is that it is the people who think religion is prose who keep it alive for the people who can only use it as poetry. When a religion is in decline, its prose becomes more defensive and assertive. But if it is not careful it loses the capacity for what the poet John Keats called ‘negative capability’: ... that is when man is capable of (has the capacity for) being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.

Thus, Lazarus reminds us that resurrection leaves you the same as you were before and that the Church, which is the guardian of Christian orthodoxy can be restricting whereas its role is to set you free into true resurrection – a new life learnt from Christ’s life and experienced by trying to walk in his footsteps.