A Matter of Worldview

By Fr. John Riccardo, ACTS XXIX

"If Christ has not been raised… we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Cor 15:14, 19). So writes Paul to the Christians in Corinth in the early 50s, less than a generation after Jesus was executed by Pontius Pilate.

But if we claim he has been raised, are we of all people the most unintelligent, gullible, naive, or downright stupid? How can men and women in the 21st century, with all of our vast knowledge and education, believe something like this, let alone preach it and share it with friends? I've celebrated hundreds of funerals, buried my own mother, father, brother, and many of my friends, and if I know one thing it's this simple truth: death is final.

Or is it?

N.T. Wright's *The Resurrection of the Son of God* is arguably the most persuasive book on the historical credibility of the empty tomb and the bodily appearance of Jesus. For those who might not have the time to read an 800 page book, however, Wright also has a much shorter chapter entitled "Easter and History" in *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*. This chapter is literary gold, and it offers a concise summary of his other book (though for the Catholic reader certain other chapters will be troublesome).

In "Easter and History," Wright offers the following summary of the most common objections made against the historical credibility of Jesus' resurrection:

"1. Jesus didn't really die; someone gave him a drug which made him look like he was dead, and he revived in the tomb. Answer: Roman soldiers knew how to kill people, and no disciple would have been fooled by a half-drugged, beat-up Jesus into thinking he'd defeated death and inaugurated the kingdom.

"2. When the women went to the tomb they met someone else (perhaps James, Jesus' brother, who looked like him), and in the half-light they thought it was Jesus himself. Answer: they would have noticed soon enough.

"3. Jesus only appeared to people who believed in him. Answer: the accounts make it clear that Thomas and Paul do not come into this category; and actually none of Jesus' followers believed, after his death, that he really was the Messiah, let alone that he was in any sense divine.

"4. The accounts we have are biased. Answer: so is all history, all journalism. Every photo is taken by somebody from some angle.

"5. They began by saying 'he will be raised', as people had done of the martyrs, and this quickly passed into saying 'he has been raised' which was functionally equivalent. Answer: no, it wasn't.

"6. Lots of people have visions of someone they love who has just died; this was what happened to the disciples. Answer: they knew perfectly well about things like that, and they had language for it; they would say 'it's his angel' or 'it's his spirit' or 'his ghost'. They wouldn't say 'he's been raised from the dead'.

"7. Perhaps the most popular: what actually happened was that they had some kind of rich 'spiritual' experience, which they interpreted through Jewish categories. Jesus after all really was alive, spiritually, and they were still in touch with him. Answer: that is simply a description of a noble death followed by a Platonic immortality. Resurrection was and is the defeat of death, not simply a nicer description of it; and it's something that happens some while after the moment of death, not immediately."

Wright goes on to say:

"Equally, we may just notice three of the numerous small-scale arguments which are often, and quite rightly, advanced to support the belief that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead:

"1. Jewish tombs, especially those of martyrs, were venerated and often became shrines. There is no sign whatever of that having happened with Jesus' grave.

"2. The early church's emphasis on the first day of the week as their special day is very hard to explain unless something striking really did happen then. A gradual or even sudden dawning of faith is hardly sufficient to explain it.

"3. The disciples were hardly likely to go out and suffer and die for a belief that wasn't firmly anchored in fact. This is an important point, though subject to the weakness that they might have been genuinely mistaken: they believed

the resurrection of Jesus to be a fact, and acted on that belief, but we know (so it would be said) that they were wrong."

We, in ACTS XXIX, stress over and over again that the first essential principle (of which there are three) for transformation in the Church is to reacquire a biblical worldview. Now, a quick note of importance. Everyone has a worldview, a way of seeing reality, a pair of "lenses," if you will, through which we look at the world. Everyone. The question, or at least a question, is where did that worldview come from?

The biblical worldview includes, to be sure, the compelling and attractive proclamation of the gospel, or what is commonly called the *kerygma* (Greek for proclamation). This proclamation, we argue, is the most urgent evaneglistic task in the Church today. However, reacquiring a biblical worldview is much, much more than this. It means not simply that we see some things differently but that we see everything differently. This is especially true for the [season] we're celebrating: Easter.

In short, we could put it this way: do we see the world and history as something closed, with God either non-existent or so irrelevant that He might as well be? Or, do we see the world as having been lovingly called into existence by God, a place where He acts and which He is leading somewhere?

Wright again:

"The empty tomb and the meetings with Jesus are as well established … as any historical data could expect to be. They are, in combination, the only possible explanation for the stories and beliefs that grew up so quickly among Jesus' followers. How, in turn, do we explain them?

"In any other historical enquiry, the answer would be so obvious that it would hardly need saying. Here, of course, this obvious answer ('well, it actually happened') is so shocking, so earth-shattering, that we rightly pause before leaping into the unknown … [Of course] it is always possible for anyone to follow the argument so far and to say, simply, 'I don't have a good explanation for what happened to cause the empty tomb and the appearances, but I choose to maintain my belief that dead people don't rise and therefore conclude that something else must have happened, even though we can't tell what it was.' That is fine; I respect that position; but I simply note that it is indeed then a matter of choice, not a matter of saying that something called 'scientific historiography' itself forces us to take that route."

This is brilliant stuff. And it makes it clear that what's at the heart of the problem of the resurrection with so many of our contemporaries is worldview.

Without knowing it, perhaps, many of us, and our contemporaries, have a worldview that has been deeply shaped not by Scripture but by the Enlightenment (or what many have more accurately called "the Endarkenment"). And the fruit of this worldview, for all its blusterous claims, has been massive destruction and despair.

The past two plus years have greatly exacerbated the mental health crisis and despair that has been raging in our country for some time now. We are a nation—a world—desperately in need of hope. Not optimism, not wishful thinking, but hope! And it is found in the shocking, explosive and extraordinary news that is the gospel. This is what we are called to proclaim and attractively bear witness to.

And the heart of the gospel is this: you matter. I matter. You are worth the trouble. I am worth the trouble. To… God! To the Creator of a universe that is 90+ billion light years across, infinitely happy, lacking nothing, and not bored out of His mind because March Madness is over and we're in the doldrums that is baseball's regular season.

These, hard as they are to believe, are the lenses through which God is inviting us to see both Him and ourselves.

Ours is not "a tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." Ours is a love story, a dramatic rescue mission, revealed by a good Father, signifying that creation is—you are, I am—heading somewhere: to unspeakable, unimaginable, and abundant life for ever and ever.

We adore You, O Christ, and we praise You; for by Your holy cross, You have redeemed the world!