

DaVinci and Resurrection
Homily of February 8, 2004
by Fr. Brian Joyce

We are only thirty-eight days, barely a month, into the new year of 2004, and I think I already know what the biggest surprise of the year is for me. It was the turnout on the evening of January 16th for the “DaVinci Code and the Gnostic Gospels.” With just two brief announcements in our bulletin, we had over seven hundred people show up for that talk. Now, maybe I shouldn’t have been surprised because “The DaVinci Code” has been number one on every U. S. Best Seller List during the past year. There are over four million copies in print, and it has already been translated into thirty-five different languages.

But, why is it so popular? Well, first of all, it’s not a bad story. It is filled with action and adventure. And, secondly, everybody likes to hear about a conspiracy. And it’s got a big conspiracy! Thirdly, everybody loves a controversy. And here is the controversy. If this book is taken as anything more than a piece of fiction, it challenges almost every basic Christian belief. It is not just attacking the standard notion of the family line of Jesus, but, as one character in the book says, “What I mean is almost everything our fathers taught us about Jesus is false.” According to the “DaVinci Code,” there is a huge conspiracy perpetuated, first of all, by the early apostles, then continued by the civil authorities, and then carried on in an ongoing way by the Church and its leaders. It questions the books of the Bible. It questions whether Jesus was divine. And it questions the Resurrection of Christ.

Now, all of us, at some point, have questions and have doubts. Around things like faith and things like love there are always questions and doubts. That is part and parcel of what faith is like. We ask, now and then, “Can it really be true?” or “Isn’t it too good to be true?” Or, “How does it really work?” or what I call the teenage question, because it came to me as a teenager and it comes to people before they have a wide education and view of the history of our world, the question like, “Did somebody just make all this up?” We all have those questions and faith includes and demands raising questions, whether it is Doubting Thomas in the Bible in the first century or Tom, Dick, or Harry or Mabel in the twenty-first century. There is a place and a need for doubts and questions, because what makes us question helps us to learn. And what makes us struggle helps us to grow.

But here we are talking about what is foundational and essential to our faith, even if that faith must live alongside of questions and doubts. What we are talking about is what is of “the first importance.” I got that phrase from St. Paul. This is what he said in the second reading today. This is what he said. “Brothers and sisters, I handed on to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day,

that He appeared to Cephas,” (That is a Greek name for “Peter) “then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred people, most of whom are still living.” St. Paul says this, in our faith, is “of first importance.”

Now, since it is a matter of faith, you are never going to get a mathematical formula to prove it. You are never going to get the kind of proof of Columbus discovering America. But you are going to find solid evidence to justify our belief and our faith. The first piece of evidence does not come from Bible quotations, does not come from our tradition. But it comes from the actual life and historical record of early Christians, or, as one modern scholar puts it, “The only plausible explanation for Christianity, for its believers, for its martyrs, and for its amazing growth in the face of being illegal, being outlawed, and being fiercely persecuted, the only plausible explanation for that amazing growth is not some conspiracy, but that there was an empty tomb and some people actually did experience Christ as living and alive.” That’s the first piece of evidence.

The second piece of evidence comes from the New Testament itself, first of all from St. Paul. That is the earliest report we have, before anything else, and then a little later, from Mark’s Gospel, and then about ten or twenty years after that, from Luke’s Gospel and Matthew’s Gospel, and then, many years after that, from John’s Gospel. But what we find, is not an agreed-upon script from some conspiracy, but a variety of traditions from different sources and different angles and different witnesses, some of which do not really easily reconcile with one another, because they are from different angles. But they are all kept and presented to us. And also we find the embarrassing admission from the disciples themselves that, at first, they didn’t understand. They didn’t get it, and they didn’t believe. And also we find that those who meet and experience the Risen Christ are not just His followers, but people who did not follow Him, people who did not believe in Him and people who actually persecuted those who did.

The third piece of evidence, which comes after the early centuries and right up to today is the personal experience of saints and mystics and ordinary people like you and me and our parents and grandparents, experiencing along the way, somehow, a personal relationship with the Living Christ, even though that experience gets accompanied with questions and doubts, and a leap of faith. It is just like everything else in life that is really important, things like trust, friendship, and love. It looks very much like those important things.

But why is our belief in the resurrection of Jesus so important? Why does St. Paul say, “It is of the first importance?” Well, for one thing, he says somewhere else that, “If Christ is not risen our faith is in vane.” And I think what he is saying is if Christ is not risen and does not live, then Jesus died as a good man. Jesus died as a wise man and, ultimately, as a pretty ordinary man. But, beyond that, the risen life for Jesus means risen life for us because what we know about Christ back then and up to now tells us a lot about ourselves right now and later on.

You know, we talk about the gospel being “Good News.... Good News.” What’s the good news?

Well, first of all, it is the good news that God personally and unconditionally loves each one of us, and that is great! But that is not all. There is more to the good news. Secondly, the good news gives us the values and wisdom by which to live a truly and fully human life and live it well. And that's good news! That's great! But that's not all of the good news. The gospel, the good news, also tells us where we are going and that we have a reserved place at the table of the Lord in God's kingdom. You know, what a difference it makes in people's lives, or would make, if we knew what was going to happen, if we knew how things would eventually turn out, if only I knew..... The older you get, the more often you say that, "If I knew then what I know now, things would have been different, and I would have known to act differently..... If I only knew..."

A few years ago, PBS put out a wonderful special documentary by Ken Burns on the American Civil War. And, in that, there was a marvelous scene. It had to do with one of the war's bloodiest, most vicious and most savage battles. It had to do with Gettysburg. And his documentary contains a scene from fifty years after the end of the war. And we actually in very early black and white films, have the film of it. In 1913, the Rebel and Union veterans, now all of them old, gathered for a reunion on the field at Gettysburg. And, at one point, during that fifty-year reunion, the veterans decided to re-enact the so-called Pickett's Charge up Seminary Hill. They lined up, Union and Confederate, on each side of the field, opposing each other. Only now, in 1913, fifty years later, they weren't carrying rifles and guns. Most of them were carrying canes and crutches. At a signal to charge, the two groups "rushed at each other." Well, I looked carefully at the film. They don't rush. They hobble and do the best they can, getting across the field. And, when each side met, they did not fight. But they hugged each other and they fell into each other's arms and they began weeping and embracing each other, for they were celebrating who they were and what they had been through, and they knew they were really brothers. If only those doddering old veterans had known fifty years earlier what they saw clearly fifty years later, what a difference it might have made for their lives, for their families, for their fallen comrades, and perhaps for a whole nation. If only they knew....

If only we could know.... If only we could know. Well, in the Resurrection God comes to let us know. In the Resurrection God comes to tell us the end of the story. At the end of this life, no matter what the struggle, even if like the men in the gospel, we have worked hard all night and have caught nothing, our God says, "There's more." And our God says, "You have a reserved place at My table." And that's good news. And that good news should help us to live life a little differently. That good news should help us to live life very well. Amen.