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The Walking Dead Meets the Resurrection

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By Nik Ansell

The following piece comes from a chapel talk I gave at ICS on April 10th, 2012—almost exactly three years ago. The theme, echoed in the title above, was designed to appeal to fans of a certain TV series on AMC, The Walking Dead *(the sixth season will air later this year), and to serve as a backdrop for some thoughts related to Easter.*

Just before I spoke, we watched a clip from Season 1, Episode 6. Here our band of survivors find temporary reprieve from the Ultimate Zombie Apocalypse by entering the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, GA: the perfect place, one might think, for analyzing the disease and finding a cure. Needless to say, although the men and women in white coats are still on site, a cure is not forthcoming—indeed it turns out the basement generators are about to run out of fuel; for the characters in this show, reprieve is only ever temporary! Nevertheless, they (and we) do get some scientific analysis, courtesy of a computer playback featuring TS-19—a former scientist-turned-test-subject who, despite being infected by a plague that had already reached 'ep(idem)ic' proportions, still had the foresight to ask his colleagues to record What Happens Next. . . !

And so, on a screen within the screen, complete with a commentary from a certain Dr Edwin Jenner (the character is named, with not a little irony, after Edward Jenner, the developer of the smallpox vaccine), we get to see a brain with "ripples of light" running through its "organic wiring" before the synapses stop firing and it all fades to black. At which point, a technician is asked to scan forward to what is called the "second event." Although in reality this occurs precisely "two hours, one minute, and seven seconds" later, in principle, our commentator tells us, it could have taken place anywhere between "three minutes" and "eight hours," as what he calls "the resurrection times" " vary wildly."

So what happens in this second event, this "resurrection"? Although some of the lights come back on, the contrast is striking as we can see that the virus (or whatever it is) only restarts the brain stem, not the brain itself. As our commentator explains, "Basically, it gets them up and moving. [But] it's nothing like before. Most of that brain is dark. Dark, lifeless, dead. The frontal lobe, the neocortex, the human part—that doesn't come back. The 'you' part. [Now it's] just a shell driven by mindless instinct."

In this particular case, the return from the dead is (in Hobbes' phrase) "nasty, brutish, and . . . "—thanks to a doctor-assisted bullet-to-the-brain—"short"! After all, the Hippocratic Oath does not extended to zombies. Other victims of the plague, however, will be "up and moving" for some time . . . !

Immediately after this very visual account of the "resurrection" of TS-19, we then listened to the long resurrection account that brings Matthew's gospel to a close. You can read Matthew 27:62-28:20 (NRSV) here. What follows is the script that I prepared for my meditation. Whether you are a fan of The Walking Dead *or not, and however you currently make sense of resurrection, I hope you find*

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it helpful as a way of thinking through what we might call the 'im/possibility' of Easter.

AMC's The Walking Dead

A few years ago I was in a mainstream Protestant church where I picked up a pamphlet about the Resurrection. It was fairly predictable material. After Jesus' death, the disciples continued to experience Jesus' presence because they came to appreciate the true meaning of his life and mission. So they were encouraged to live in the same spirit. In that way, Jesus lived on in their hearts, and in their lives, by the Spirit. This was the form that God's presence took for them. And this is how Jesus is present in and for the world today.

I am tempted to refer to this as 'Hallmark card' theology. But I also realize that I should not be such a snob about Hallmark cards. For although they are often bland and sentimental, they can also 'hit the spot' if sent by the right person at the right time. Sometimes, we express deep convictions in platitudes and clichés because the convictions are so deep and personal, we almost have to tone them down. Furthermore, the experience of a loved one still being with us after death is a very real and very profound experience. So rather than mock or criticize the pamphlet, I'd rather say that it is true *as far as it goes*. But I do believe we can go *further*.

One of the interesting things about Matthew's resurrection account is the statement we find in 28:11, "When [the eleven disciples] saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted." Now one thing that has to be said about the experience of a loved one still being 'with you' is that you don't doubt it. You might not have the words for it. It may coincide with missing someone terribly. You may not be able to explain it. But I don't think it is the kind of experience you 'doubt' as such. So what Matthew is talking about here with the eleven disciples is a different kind of experience. One that might involve doubt. One in which doubt might actually be unavoidable.

Furthermore, although the Greek can be translated as "When they saw him, they worshiped him; but *some* doubted," as it is in the NRSV, if we pay attention to Matthew's writing style elsewhere, then it is not just some of the eleven that doubt. They all do. Grammatically the second pronoun is not used in a 'partitive' sense. In Greek, there is a *hoi men . . . hoi de* construction that means 'some . . . others'. *Hoi de* (used on its own) can also mean, 'some on the other hand . . .' But Matthew doesn't use *hoi de* that way anywhere else. So in 28:11, Matthew is actually saying: "When they saw him, they worshiped him; but [they] doubted."

The word Matthew uses for "doubt" here occurs in only one other place in his gospel: in Matt 14:31, when Jesus, after the 'walking on the water' encounter with Peter, says to him "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" In that narrative, worshipping Jesus follows fear and doubt. Here, it seems, seeing Jesus and worshipping him *and* doubting is something the disciples experience at the same time.

So why do the disciples have so little faith? Perhaps the last verse in Matthew's gospel helps explain this. For here (Matt 28:20) Jesus tells the eleven, "remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." The thing about the Resurrection is that no one was expecting it to happen in this age. It belonged to the Age to come, as the beginning of that age when it would be experienced either by everyone or at least by the faithful. The problem is not just that it has occurred at an unexpected time and to only one person, contrary to all expectations; the problem is with the ongoing reality of what Jesus calls "the [present] age"—which in this verse he sees as continuing for some time.

The disciples had no fundamental problem believing in miracles occurring in the present age. This certainly applies to the healings. Even the walking on the water, though it terrified them, was something they came to accept. But the Resurrection for them was of a different order. Why? What is the difference?

In our way of thinking, we tend to assume that possibility precedes actuality. Something has to be possible before it can be actual; before it can happen. So if the Resurrection actually happened as an event in space and time in the first third of the first century AD, then it must have always been possible, at least in principle. And if it was never possible, even in principle, then it didn't happen. In biblical thinking, however, there is room to see things differently. For something can happen by the grace and power of God. And that happening can then change the conditions of possibility. Actuality and possibility are still connected. But possibility does not have to precede actuality. That means that biblically we can say: Before the resurrection of Jesus, resurrection was not possible. In being raised from the dead, Jesus, as the beginning of the new creation, makes resurrection possible.

This way of thinking is something that I think the disciples could have gone along with. The resurrection that they knew from the book of Daniel, for example, was not the extension or continuation of the present conditions of possibility. That way you get an 'unreal' way of thinking in which life gets extended beyond its limits to such an extent that it is no longer life. And perhaps we do end up with something ultimately grotesque, like 'the Walking Dead', if we try to think this way. It is this unreal 'continuity thinking' that makes 'resurrection' unbelievable for many people.

But the closest parallel to *biblical* resurrection in secular thought is probably the idea of revolution. For those with a biblical faith in the early part of the first century, resurrection meant the kind of change that would bring the old world order to an end. Not the end of God's creation, but the end of this present age of injustice and death. For change this radical and this deep, one had to talk of a whole other age, the life of the age to come, a new creation.

What throws the disciples when they encounter the risen Jesus is the continuation of the present age, the ongoing existence of what should be the old age. This means that the Resurrection of Jesus is at odds with the world they are living in. Its possibility and actuality contradicts the possibilities and actualities of the present order. Which means that their problem is our problem. And that make their doubt understandable.

So how do we resolve it? Not by smoothing it over. Not by living in an unreality. Not by saying that the counter-reality of the resurrection is simply our way of remembering Jesus so that he may live on in our lives. But by attuning ourselves to the energies of the New Creation, which has begun in and through the life of the One we follow.

This is why Paul, who clearly sees resurrection as part of the final future transformation and consummation of history (see 1 Cor 15)—as something yet to take place—also sees the Resurrection as a "power" at work in the present age that is at odds with the present age. In Philippians 3:11-13 he even speaks about his desire to "attain the resurrection from the dead" in this life and thus "make it [his] own." That is the actual language he uses. In an apocalyptic phrase that has been much misunderstood, he describes this as "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead" (3:13) not because he is turning his back on the original blessing of creation and not because he is looking to the future of this present order but because he is no longer oriented to what is destined to pass away. His focus is on fulfillment rather than on 'more of the same'. The future he is living towards, the blessing that God always wanted for the world, revealed in the seed that dies in the earth before bringing forth fruit (1 Cor 15:35-38), is the future that has begun in Jesus; a future that, judged by the limits of the present age, is not possible.

In that sense, atheists see something that mainstream Protestant theology refuses to face. The Resurrection is at odds with reality. That's the point! You have to choose which reality is going to energize your life. This is the challenge and hope of Easter:

> Matt 28:16-17: "Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but [they] doubted."

Nik Ansell is a Senior Member at the Institute for Christian Studies. His work weaves together biblical studies, theology, and philosophy. Recently, he published The Annihilation of Hell, an interdisciplinary study of eschatology in dialogue with the work of Jurgen Moltmann. See Ground Motive's interview with Ansell on that book here.

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