

On the Third Day

Shadows of the Resurrection in Everyday Life

What does the number “three” mean? Given our context, that may seem like a simple question, and I suspect that more than few minds have jumped immediately a Trinitarian formulation. Your unconscious willingness to participate in this little thought experiment affords me the opportunity to spend a few moments in a discussion of semiotics. You see, the original question is actually not all that simple.

Semiotics is the study of signs, that is, the human propensity to allow a thing, (object, word, symbol, concept, etc.) to represent another thing that is more real than the sign itself. Semiotics can be broken down into three major fields of relationships: 1) the relation between the sign and that which it represents, 2) the relation between signs themselves, and 3) the relation between the sign and those who use the signs. While I will touch on all three of these fields, my goal is to focus on the third field in such a way as to develop a new relationship between my hearers and the number three, or to be more precise, not in its cardinal form, but in its ordinal form, “third.”

Semiotics also includes the study of the motivation for the use of such signs. The analysis is extremely complex but may be summarized by suggesting that human beings use signs for a quick, simple representation of a thing, while at the same time allowing the investment of enough ambiguity that the sign may say more than the thing itself. Here there is room for caution. This ambiguity may be used for both positive and negative ends. Signs generally carry layers of meaning that may be exploited for good or for evil. This means a sign may be used on its primary level of interpretation as a way of reminding its interpreter of something real that brings comfort. The shepherd’s crook reminds me of my Good Shepherd, Jesus. It also means that when enough ambiguity exists in the sign, the sender of the sign may use it to control the receiver. For example, he may demand that he alone knows the true meaning of the sign.

With respect to the ambiguity inherent in every sign let me ask, what does making the sign of the cross actually mean? Is it to remind the user of the death and resurrection of Christ, perhaps a primary meaning? Or is it to remind the user of his baptism? Is it a symbol by which he is protected from evil, or is it a public testimony giving glory to God, or is it a demonstration of his denominational persuasion? Does making the sign of the cross mean the same thing as the cross that hangs on the wall or around his neck? What happens to the significance of the cross, originally a tool of torture and death, when it is represented in gold or silver and encrusted with fine jewels? Each of these questions touches on an ambiguity in a very common sign in the Church. We will not have time to deal with these questions but we should be aware that they exist.

Since we will be talking about the number three, our discussion today also necessarily touches on the subject of numerology. Numerology is not technically a branch of semiotics because it carries a sense of a divine investment of meaning in particular numbers, thereby raising the specter of mysterious powers or cryptic revelations. For our purposes, however, the question of whether God intended to use numbers as signs that might serve various functions for His hearers, is lively. In other words, is our use of the number three as a sign simply our

choice, or has God Himself actually given the significant use of this number as a gift that may bring comfort and peace. I hope to demonstrate that the latter is true.

To illustrate how this may occur let's try another thought experiment. Imagine that I have promised to take you out to dinner and asked you to meet me on the southeast corner of the public library. To stay out of the sun you chose to sit in the shade on the east side of the building. You are highly anticipating the evening's meal. (The scenario may include the somewhat surreal, and highly unlikely to be fulfilled detail that I have invited you to an expensive restaurant that you have always wanted try but could not afford, at my expense.) So you wait. As the appointed hour passes, your anticipation, if not anxiety grows. The sun is low behind me as I approach, so the first indication that you have of my arrival is my shadow. (Thought experiments are so much fun because you can easily control for variables: there are no other people around. You know that it is my shadow.)

What is your response to the shadow? First, you know that the shadow is a sign. Secondly, you know that the sign is not me. Thirdly, you know that the shadow is significant of something more real than itself. The shadow represents me, or perhaps, in a bizarre twist, only represents a fine meal. You do not immediately begin to speak to the shadow, because you know that it is only a sign. It is not real. However, some of you may begin to salivate at the presence of the sign, which indicates that the sign, which is not real in itself, does have a real impact on its user. (Other reactions to the sign: release of anger at my lateness, relief, joy, etc. will be ignored.)

The conclusion that I am willing to draw at this point of introduction is that it will benefit the Pastor to invest time and energy in his use of signs so that they have the desired, positive, and very real, impact on his people.

I. Jesus prophesies that He will be raised on the third day.

Having whetted your appetite, or thoroughly confused you, (each may have its benefit), let us look at the object of our study, the third day. The sign, that is, the words "third day" must have a correspondent reality. I am submitting that the real, the "ding an sich," in Kantian terms, is the actual day of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

There is plenty Scriptural evidence that this is an historical reality. Jesus did rise from the dead, and He did so on the third day, (by Jewish accounting of days), after His death. He prophesied this would occur. Interestingly enough Matthew records three such incidents.

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. (Mt 16:21)

As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day." (Mt 17:22-23)

And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way he said to them, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day." (Mt 20:17-19)

Similarly, the Gospel of Luke records three references to the fact that Jesus did indeed rise on the third day. First, by the angel at the tomb:

“He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise.” (Luke 24:6-7)

Second, by the Emmaus disciples:

“But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things happened.” (Luke 24:21)

Third by Jesus Himself:

Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead. (Luke 24:45-46)

That the Scripture testifies there was an actual third day on which Jesus rose from the dead is irrefutable. But does the Scripture use the third day as a sign, which, while being a simple, quick reference to the historical reality, also says much more?

II. The third day is used as a symbol of the end of the old, the beginning of the new, or of new life.

I am suggesting that Jesus Himself uses the third day as a sign at least twice. First let's look at how Jesus uses it in marvelous understatement in Luke 13:32. In response to the Pharisees attempt to ingratiate themselves by warning Jesus of Herod's threat to kill him, Jesus says, “Go and tell that fox, ‘Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course.’”

Something wonderful, something significant happens in this text. On the one hand Jesus is speaking about three days after the day on which this conversation is being held. On the other hand He is using that “third day” as a sign of the actual day of resurrection. This interpretation is supported by Jesus' use of the word τελειόω to note the completion of His task. When used as a sign the “third day” begins to mean something more than the historical day of resurrection. It means that something old will end, something new will begin and it will be an entirely new life. So Jesus wants Herod to know that there is more to Jesus than meets the eye. How Herod has known Jesus up to this point will come to an end, and he will know Jesus in an entirely different way after the third day.

When Jesus makes reference to the incident of Jonah and the fish He opens up an entirely new and pregnant arena of investigation. The Old Testament, being written by God as a sign to point to Jesus, is replete with the use of the “third day” as a sign of resurrection, of the end of the old and the beginning of the new. Jesus certainly saw Jonah's experience as a sign of His own resurrection. “For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” (Mt 12:40) When Jonah was spat out, it was the end of his old way of life and the beginning of a new. In this case, the sign did not entail an actual death and resurrection, so the sign is summarized by the day of its occurrence, the “third day.”

Let's push on with a few more uses of the "third day" sign in the Old Testament before we return to some possible new ways of looking some New Testament incidents. The next clearest Old Testament reference to death and resurrection on the third day is the sacrifice of Isaac. We are probably all familiar with the similarity of Abraham's offering of Isaac on a hastily constructed altar of wood, to the sacrifice God the Father makes in offering Jesus on the cross. However, we may easily overlook this reference to resurrection, "On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar." (Gen 22:4) The fact that God intended us to catch this little detail is supported by the interpretation of the event by the writer to the Hebrews, "By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, 'Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.' He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back." (Heb 11:17-19) Isaac was dead to his father Abraham for three days.

As with Jonah, Isaac did not physically die and rise, but the fact that the event occurred on the third day, (seemingly from the time that Abraham was told he would have to sacrifice Isaac), demonstrates that this third day is used by the Scripture as a sign of a greater reality, that of the resurrection of Jesus. For Abraham and Isaac the event represented the end of something old and the beginning of something new, a different kind of resurrection. We are pointed the resurrection of Jesus and ours.

Hosea's plea for the people of Israel to return to the Lord is coupled with an intriguing sign of the resurrection.

"Come, let us return to the Lord; for he has torn us, that he may heal us;
he has struck us down, and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us;
on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him." (Hos 6:1-2)

Long before the greater reality ever occurred in history, the third day was the day of resurrection. The people of Israel were able to look forward to their own resurrection, figurative as it may have been, because some day, on the third day, Jesus, the people of God reduced to one, would be raised from the dead.

Perhaps God intended the principals in further stories, and us, to think of His power to raise from the dead, to bring an end to something old and to bring about a whole new life by using the sign of the third day. "On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court." (Esther 5:1) Her plea, before a king who could have put her to death, was the end of the sentence of death for her people. Joseph told his cell mate that on the third day Pharaoh would lift up his head and restore him to service. (Gen 40:13) And Moses was lifted up out of the waters of the Nile to begin a new life as Pharaoh's grandson in the third month after his birth. (Ex 2:2)

With that clear Old Testament intent to use the third day as a sign to point to the resurrection of Jesus let's return for a few moments to the New Testament. Perhaps God intends for us to think about His resurrecting power by His use of this number in a few other events.

The old way Mary had of relating to her son, Jesus, came to a screeching halt on the day of the wedding at Cana. "On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there." (John 2:1) The fact that it is impossible to know what numbering

system John was using in order to call this the third day, suggests that John just wanted us to think about death and resurrection from the very beginning of Jesus public career.

Does God intend for us to see resurrection in the feeding of the five thousand? “Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, ‘I have compassion on the crowd because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat.’” (Mt 15:32) They were hungry, to be sure, but they were not actually dead. However, Jesus was able to raise them, and His disciples, (perhaps us as well), from a spiritual kind of death through this miracle. They could now begin to see Him as the bread of life, come down from heaven.

Peter certainly needed to be raised from the death of his sin, the theatrical denial of his Lord. Jesus completed this work on the third run at it. “He said to him the third time, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’” (John 21:17) The beauty of this incident, properly read, is that it teaches us that no resurrection, no new life can happen apart from a relation to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus wanted Peter to know that he could be raised because Jesus had been raised.

Paul had at least two, third day resurrection experiences. The first, most dramatic, and life-changing was his conversion to faith in Jesus as his savior. “And for three days he, (Paul) was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.” (Acts 9:9) Paul was figuratively dead in Damascus for three days. But God, in His mercy, raised him, by the hand of Ananias, and thus began one of the most remarkably new lives the world has ever known. Later in Paul’s life it would occur again. The ship was going down. Everyone was certain they would die, until the third day. “And on the third day they threw the ship’s tackle overboard with their own hands.” (Acts 27:19) On the third day they were all saved. What is interesting about this event is that the symbolic resurrection undoubtedly included pagans.

Further possible uses of the “third day” sign could be cited from both the Old and New Testaments. Perhaps these will suffice to support the legitimacy of its use in our everyday lives. That, after-all is the stated goal of this essay.

III. Finding shadows of the resurrection in our everyday lives.

Resurrection is not only an historical event, as in the resurrection of Jesus. Nor is it only an anticipated event, as in the resurrection on the last day. Resurrection is, and should be noted as such, a part of our everyday lives. One way Pastors can help make this a reality is through the use of the sign of the third day. Here are a few ideas to get you started.

When I had the great privilege of teaching young catechism students I enjoyed using the third day sign when appropriate. One that arose frequently was during our study of Genesis chapter three. It began one day when an inquisitive kid asked how long Adam and Eve remained in the state of unforgiven sin. How long did it take them to make the fig leaf dresses? How long did they hide? How long were they miserable? The text does not say. So I was able to insert my own answer. This is what I said. “Here is a riddle for you. On what day, following their rebellion, did God proclaim the Gospel to Adam and Eve?” The answer, of course, is the third day. That was the day of their resurrection and ours. Believe it or not there were kids who got it.

I want the resurrection to be a part of my everyday life so I look for it everywhere, and I do not believe the sign cheapens the greater reality. It only gives me more opportunity to think

on the greater reality. When I plant my seeds in the garden on what day do I look for them to sprout? The third day. When I have had a fight with my wife on what day do I say that we confessed and absolved each other? The third day. When my congregation asks what day I will announce whether I am taking a call to another congregation, what do I tell them? The third day. When we want to announce, before an actual date has been set, on what day our grandchild will be baptized, we say, the third day. The possibilities are endless.

This sign can also be of immense comfort to those who are going through dark times. I am sure we have all personally experienced, and that we have all carried members through tomb-like days, when it seemed like the walls were closing in, when there was no way out, when everyone seemed to be throwing shovels of dirt on our heads. Those are days when the power of the resurrection can be brought to bear through the fullness of this sign. You can say, as I recently did to a very troubled brother, "The third day will come. There is always a third day. This is God's irrevocable promise to you, because He has already fulfilled it in Jesus. We who have been united with Him through faith live in His resurrection."

"If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins." (1 Cor 15:17) This use of language and sign is an attempt to remind my hearers that we are nothing, and have nothing apart from the resurrection of Christ. So I find it a healthy spiritual exercise to discover the resurrection in my life every day. God bless you as you see the third day in your life.

S.D.G.

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