

Jesus vs. zombies: Explaining the risen Lord to a first communicant

Melissa Musick Nussbaum | May. 4, 2013 My Table Is Spread

It's first Communion season, and we are in the thick of it. My grandson, Luc, is preparing for his this month. He has questions. The question on his mind lately is this: If we believe Jesus rose from the dead, then we must believe in zombies. Right?

Zombies have, as zombies are wont to do, made a comeback. They are featured in books, movies, flash mobs and video games. Works by authors like Jane Austen are dug up and retrofitted with zombies. Children have them, if, one hopes, not *in* the brain, then certainly *on* the brain.

Luc's parents do not feel ready to wade into the Jesus vs. zombies fray. (They have other children, and a duck and chickens and a dog and a dwarf hamster and jobs.) I, however, live for just such conversations as these. It is my (undead) cup of tea.

Also, I think it's a reasonable question.

So, I fetch Luc from school, where it has been, he tells me, "a very hungry kind of day." We head out to McDonald's for a snack. (Luc is at the age where the snack is large and contains whole food groups.) After Luc has ordered his Quarter Pounder with cheese, and fries and a chocolate shake, and after Luc has pumped enough ketchup from the condiment vat to dye the fries red, we sit down and begin to talk.

Luc says zombies die, then they come to life again. Just like Jesus.

But zombies are not alive, I counter. They're the "walking dead." They have no independent will, only hungers. They have no capacity for love or joy or friendship or play. There is only what they want and what they will have.

"Human brains," Luc mutters.

"Exactly," I say, "and not to admire the brains of others or to learn from them, but to consume them."

Zombies are ambulating appetites.

Borrowing a page from *The Screwtape Letters*, I tell Luc this is the difference between evil and good: Evil is empty and consumes, but goodness is full and provides.

We talk about Jesus appearing to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias. Peter, Didymus, Nathanael, Zebedee's sons and two "other disciples" were together there. Peter tells them he's going fishing and they join him on the boat. As they return at dawn, they find a man waiting on the shore. The man is the risen Jesus, and even though it's the third time Jesus has appeared to his disciples since the Resurrection, they don't recognize him right away.

He asks the disciples this question: "Children, have you caught anything to eat?" (Which sounds like a classic zombie question.)

"No," they say, sounding like Luc when I asked him if he did anything interesting at school today.

Jesus tells them to cast the net over the right side of the boat. They do as he says, and the net fills with so many fish the men can't lift it. They drag the net onto the shore, where Jesus has built a charcoal fire. He is cooking fish and bread.

Jesus says, "Come, have breakfast." He feeds them. He gives them food; he doesn't use them as food.

When they've eaten a good breakfast (and I love that part of the story: the risen Christ as mom, cooking), Jesus turns to Peter. He asks him, "Peter, do you love me?"

Peter says, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you."

Jesus says, "Feed my lambs." Not consume my lambs, or market my lambs, but feed my lambs.

Jesus and Peter have the same conversation three times in a row. That is not surprising to Luc, who is used to being told the same thing day after day and, like Peter, still not getting it right.

Jesus has fed Peter; now he wants Peter to go out and feed others. It's the flip side of the zombie way.

Zombies may be moving, I tell Luc, but they are not alive. And their fake life is a counterfeit of the real thing, Jesus' risen life.

"Ma-Maw, I know zombies aren't real," Luc says. "But how do we know Jesus really rose from the dead? How do we know somebody didn't just make that up?"

Now, I think that's another good question. I tell him we don't have the kind of proof lots of people demand. But I ask him to consider how he would go about making up a convincing lie.

"You wouldn't tell everyone the first person to find the tomb empty was a woman. Women couldn't own property or testify in court. They weren't reliable witnesses."

"I know," Luc said, solemnly and jumping forward many centuries, "they didn't even have the vote."

"You wouldn't tell a story that makes the first pope look the coward he was," I say. I tell Luc how the Gospels give one account after another of Peter hiding and running and abandoning the man he'd promised to serve, the man he said he would never betray.

"Peter wasn't alone," I say. "All the disciples went into hiding, scared that what had happened to Jesus would happen to them."

By this time, Luc has finished most of his food, and what isn't in his mouth or stomach is on his face and hands. And clothes. I sense the older couple with their hamburgers at the next table would like to move. The phrase repeated several times at our table -- "reanimation of a corpse" -- cannot make their all-beef patties look one bit better.

"Something happened," I say. "Something happened to change them all. Completely. Forever. They stopped being scared and went out into the streets, into the world, telling everyone about Jesus. And what they told them was, 'Jesus died on a cross and rose from the dead. He's alive.'

"Remember how afraid they were that what happened to Jesus would happen to them?" I ask. "It did. Every bad thing that happened to Jesus happened to them. They were arrested. They went to jail. They were all martyred. All but John. And they went to jail giving thanks. They died singing hymns and praising God. They didn't die like frightened men. They lived and died like men who knew death would not win."

And then I took Luc home, where his little brother, Leo, had been crying because he wanted to go to McDonald's. Leo told me that he's written a book for me. It's called *Leo and Ma-Maw: Leo Spends the Night at Ma-Maw's House Forever*.

Which is what I had been trying to say all along. Ma-Maw's house is where the lambs are given good things to eat.

Joy is to spend the night there forever.

Amen. Alleluia.

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