

## Terrible Glory



*“Up from the grave he arose! “Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!”*

With such hymns and exclamations Easter worshippers rejoice with one another, celebrating the world-changing event of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the tomb, three days after his degrading, tortuous crucifixion and burial.

It would seem that, of any event in the gospels, Jesus’ miraculous emergence from the tomb ought to attract the interest of visual artists, yet the frequency of depiction of the Resurrection pales in comparison with the countless images of his terrible death and even of the removal of his body from the cross and deposition in the tomb. Images of the Annunciation to Mary and the Nativity are far more popular subjects of art, despite that the Resurrection is the true climax of the gospel narratives and apex of the gospel message, without which, as St. Paul so famously said, our faith is in vain (1 Corinthians 15:13-14).

One reason for the infrequent depiction surely is that none of the gospels actually describe the moment Jesus emerged from the tomb. They tell us of his body’s absence when the myrrh-bearing women and then Peter inspect Jesus’ tomb. John’s gospel gives us Jesus’ poignant first appearance to Mary Magdalen. Luke has him revealed to the Emmaus pilgrims during supper, then he presents himself to other gathered disciples. And finally John recounts his appearance to the incredulous Thomas. But the event of the resurrection is never itself described.

Observing this gap in the Easter account, artists have had to imagine how the very first witnesses, the guards at the tomb (Matthew 28), may have reacted when and if they saw Jesus actually bursting forth from behind the sealed stone. This is the conjecture Piero della Francesca and Mantegna depict with more conventional iconography.



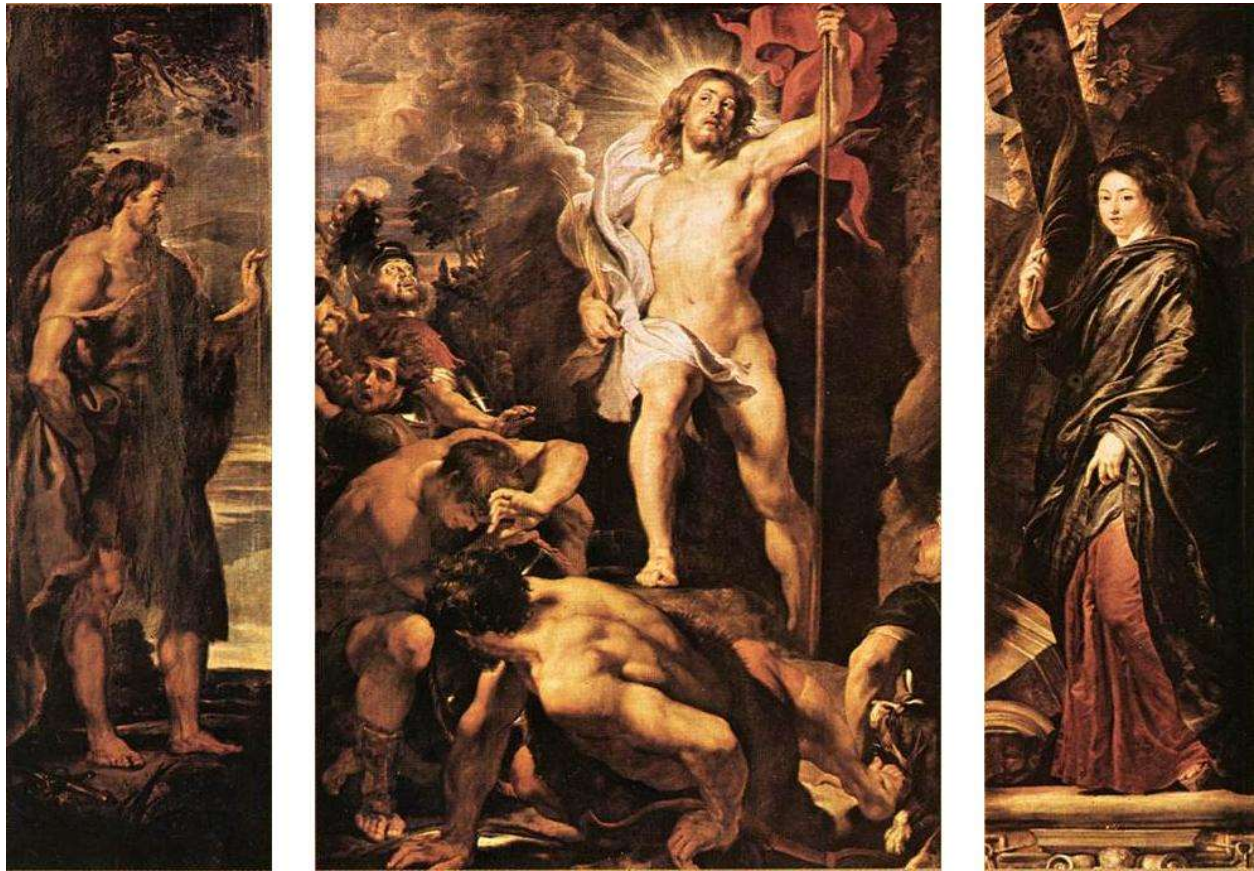
Piero della Francesca (Italian, c1415 –1492), *Resurrection*, 1463-5



Andrea Mantegna (Italian, 1431–1506), *The Resurrection*, 1457-1459

In their depictions, the risen Christ emerges serenely victorious from a sarcophagus, banner of his triumph over sin and death in his hand, with the tomb guards as ineffectual and stunned spectators.

Flemish artist Peter Paul Rubens goes far beyond either artist in realism and raw power. His resurrected Christ literally bursts forth from a rough and rocky hillside tomb like a young Hercules about to do battle.



Peter Paul Rubens (Flemish, 1577-1640), *Triptych with the Resurrection of Christ*, 1611-12

We see here the massive, vigorous, fully corporeal yet divinized body of Christ. The radiant beams emanate from his head, the wounds of crucifixion barely visible. This may be an allusion to the description of the sun (son?) as a young bridegroom in Psalm 19:5-6, a poetic image borrowed from the Babylonian myth of the Sun-god. But more immediately influential is Michelangelo, who used just such an allusion for his drawing of the Resurrection (1532, British Museum), a study for his Sistine Chapel *Last Judgment*, a work which Rubens had seen and greatly admired.



Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564), *The Resurrection* (drawing), 1532



Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564), *Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel (detail), 1536-1541

The Jesus of Rubens' 1612 *Resurrection of Christ*, bears even greater resemblance to Michelangelo's Judge of All.



Peter Paul Rubens (Flemish, 1577-1640), *Resurrection of Christ*, 1612

There is nothing serene whatsoever about this image of the resurrected Christ. His is a terrible beauty. Contrast this assertive, conquering Christ with two other paintings by Rubens' contemporaries. Like della Francesca and Mantegna, the risen Christ in these two paintings is serene and unenergetic, appearing as a spectacle to see but displaying no inherent authority. The guards are merely sleeping—not struck down—uncaring of the miracle before them. A far cry from the commanding stance of Ruben's risen Christ.

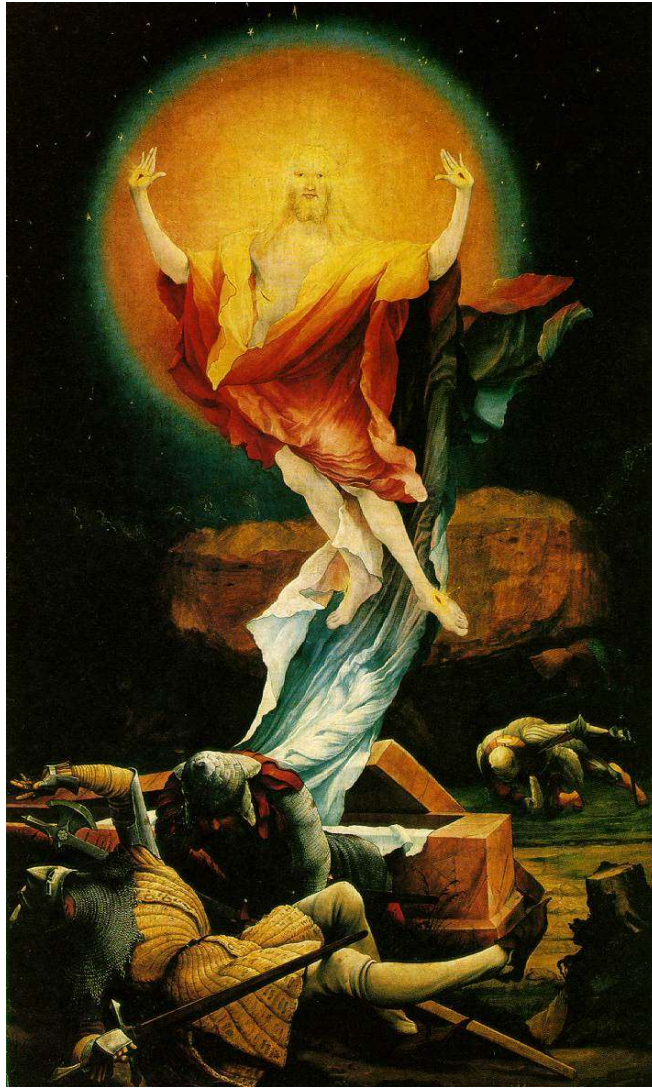


Juan Bautista Maíno (Spanish, 1581–1649), *The Resurrection*, 1612-14



Alonso Vázquez (Spanish, 1564-1608), *The Risen Christ*, 1590

Perhaps most striking of all the paintings of Jesus' resurrection is Grunewald's Resurrection panel on the Isenheim altarpiece. Among the highly idiosyncratic and personal visions of Jesus and the saints depicted in the altarpiece, the Resurrection panel is the strangest. In sharp contrast to the darkness and suffering of the Crucifixion panel, the Resurrection panel is a burst of color, light, and joy. Christ is here wreathed in orange, red and yellow body halos and rises like a streaking fireball, hovering over the sepulcher and the bodies of the soldiers.



Matthias Grünewald (German, 1470-1528), Resurrection panel, *Isenheim Altarpiece*, 1512–1516

Christ rises from the coffin that could not hold him, floating in the air. While his new body declares he is healed, his position above the earth declares that he is more than just a restored man, and is no longer tied to the earthly realm. This is remarkable, for the risen Christ is traditionally portrayed in art as standing in the garden or stepping from the tomb. These portrayals are certainly of a glorified Christ, but he still appears human. Grunewald however depicts Jesus as an otherworldly being, not just a conquering king as in Rubens's work, but as a supernatural entity, eminently powerful, divine. In a scene that appears a composite of the Transfiguration, Resurrection and Ascension all rolled into one, Grunewald's piece captures the resurrection as the moment of an explosion!

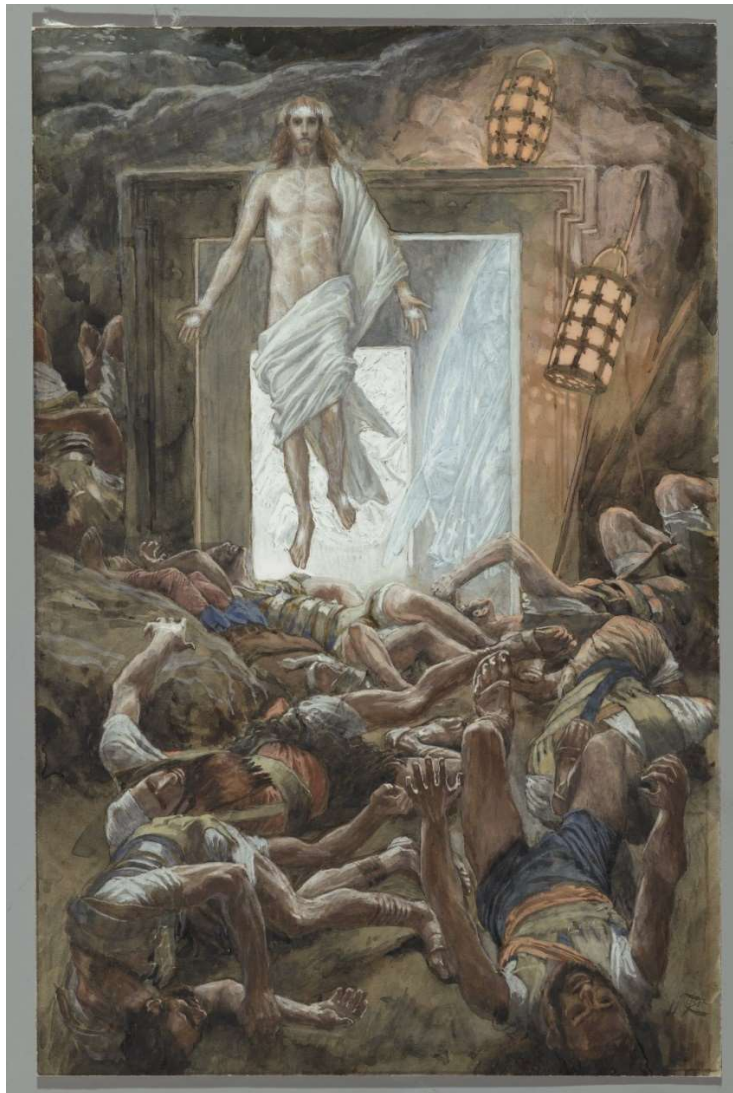
Note too how Christ bursts out of the tomb in a corona of light that bowls over the guards in front of the grave. The soldier in the forefront has fallen to the ground and is using his arm to shield his face, as his foot is still raised in the air from his fall. The guard falling on the

other side of the tomb appears to be kneeling in a position that resembles bowing to a king. This rendering of the guard evokes Paul's letter to the Philippians:

“And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the father.”

It's as if the soldier has been forced to his knees in acknowledgement of who Christ is, and finds himself bowing to his true king.

Gruenwald's risen and vertically rising Christ clearly influenced the 19<sup>th</sup> century French artist James Tissot in his own painting of the Resurrection.



James Tissot (French, 1836-1902), *Resurrection*, 1896



Tissot describes the painting:

The glorified Christ escapes the tomb; silently He rises, His wounds shining luminously. His body, now triumphant over death, no longer subject to the laws to which it had previously submitted. In a moment He will disappear in space to reappear according to His promises. The sudden terror inspired by the earthquake, the blinding radiance which issues from the tomb and the apparition of the angel seated within it plunge the guards into a kind of cataleptic state, and, as sacred text tells us, “They became as dead men.” The Evangelist notes especially the effect produced by the soldiers by the sight of the angel: “for fear of him,” he says, “the keepers did quake,” as though a thunderbolt had fallen. They seemed to see the lightning flash and a terrible meteor flinging itself upon them to crush them to powder.

While not as visually dramatic as Grunewald’s altarpiece, Tissot’s description nevertheless conveys a similar appreciation of the dynamic—explosive—significance of the Resurrection.

In the midst of our joyful Easter celebrations, it may be that we miss this quality of the risen Christ. He does conform to our well-dressed niceties, simply because he is far too strong, and much too *real*.

For some, the Resurrection can seem like a judgment on unbelief. For others, such as the English poet and priest John Donne, it is the pre-eminent ground of faith. Donne connects the Resurrection to the Judgment of God in a manner these painting seems equally to affirm, reminding us that what must appear as a terror to those who do not know Jesus in the power of his Resurrection is for those who do, conversely, an assurance of eternal hope:

*...If in thy little booke my name thou enroule,  
Flesh in that long sleep is not putrified.  
But made that there, of which, and for which t’was;  
Nor can by other means be glorified.  
May then sinnes sleep, and deaths soone from me passe,  
That wak’t from both, I again risen may  
Salute the last, and everlasting day.*

(Holy Sonnet 6, ca. 1615)

The resurrected Lord is glorious, but far from manageable. That, as these artworks suggest, ought to be a source of abiding Christian comfort. He is a great God and a mighty King above all gods.

Christ is risen! Alleluia!