

Suffering Glory

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If we preach that the Resurrection changes everything, then it is important to look more closely at the kinds of suffering that make us desperate for its deliverance. Next, we need to ask why the good news of the Resurrection gives hope for those who experience these sorts of suffering. To pursue that question we will look more closely at Luke 24:13-49, the Gospel text for Easter evening—when most of our churches don't have worship services—a text that undergirds everything we do as Church.

While preparing for my presentations at the Columbia Seminary Colloquium 2000 under the title, "The Hope of Worship in a Culture of Travail," I became increasingly saddened in my reading and watching by how deep the travails of our culture are and by how much its citizens long for hope. A few months before the colloquium, I was teaching in Australia and discovered the book, *Turning Point*, by that nation's leading social researcher, Hugh Mackay. The social maladies he expounds bear arresting similarity to circumstances in North America, so we will let six of his insights serve to highlight some of the travails of our times.

Why Is Our Culture in Travail?

First, we recognize that the suffering of our time is very different from hardships experienced by previous generations. In a chapter discussing "Grey Power" Mackay observes, "Here's a surprise: the very generation who had a depression and a world war under their belts before they reached adulthood, believe that today's young Australians are facing a tougher world than the one they faced." Another surprise is that, though the elderly believe their own hardships helped positively to form them, they don't think "today's brand of hardship is character forming in quite the same way." Mackay concludes,

The solution to those puzzles seems to lie in their perception of a difference between hardship then and hardship now: hardship based on the struggle to prevail, in the face of deprivation beyond your control, can be good for the soul; hardship based on a breaking down of society's values and structures can be more cancerous than productive.¹

Not only are social foundations and frameworks breaking down, with a resultant loss in character formation. Community, too, is in crisis—which furthermore deprives young people of mentors and guides by whom character is nurtured. Mackay lists these as some of the contributing factors to community breakdown: upheavals in patterns of *marriage and divorce* and the emergence of *the working mother* have fractured the dynamics of neighborhoods; the *falling birthrate* has reduced household size, which breaks the nexus between family and neighborhood; upheavals in *the labor market* have redistributed incomes (257); *new technology* tempts us to spend time with machines instead of others; *mobility* (U.S. residents move every five years) changes local communities; *new ethnic groups* are initially disruptive; impressions of a rising

crime rate keep people from moving freely around their neighborhoods (258). To Mackay's list I am sure we all could add other factors that cause people to become more isolated—and, consequently, more desperate for community, security, relationships, mentoring. And yet persons in our society do not frequently engage in the practices that build friendships and communities, as is evidenced in the research reported in Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone*.²

A third source of cultural travail is the deception of society's technicization. I could hardly bear to read Robert J. Lifton's *The Nazi Doctors* as he demonstrated how euphemism after euphemism led to a toxic confusion between healing and killing that allowed German physicians to still consider as "medicine" the "experiments," euthanasia, and slaughter in which they participated both before, and in, the death camps. The whole system was built upon initial terminology behind which doctors could maintain an innocent illusion that what they were doing was "not murder [but] a putting-to-sleep."³ In the same way, euphemisms such as "mass communication" help to confuse the gifts of technology with the values of humanity, and consequently destroy both intimate association and genuine expression in our culture.

I'm not a Luddite, I always have to assure readers, but as Hugh Mackay attests, "You don't have to be an *opponent* of technology to be a techno-sceptic." We simply must keep reminding ourselves that "information technology is unnatural. No matter how sophisticated, brilliant, convenient, or effective it might be, it is inevitably taking us further and further away" from the kind of society for which we yearn (100). Mackay explains,

It is easy to be seduced by the dazzling performance of the electronic media and to ascribe almost magical powers to them. But the truth is that machines can only move information around. They do it very well, but that's all they do. Data transfer is their one trick. No matter how brilliantly they do it, they can't approach the complexity, subtlety and richness of person-to-person communication. Communication is not simply the exchange of information: it is information attached to a personal relationship.... Communication is something we do *with another person*: we share meaning with them. Information, whether in the form of words, facial expressions or a particular tone of voice or rate of speech, is merely the set of signs and symbols we use for expressing and exchanging our meanings. (What a pity we ever coined the term 'mass communication' to describe a process which is really only the mass dissemination of information.) (101)

Mackay acknowledges that "Everything from the printed staff newspaper to e-mail has its proper place in the total information system of an organisation," but he warns that "whenever we fall for the trap of thinking that the dispensing of information is communication, we are in serious trouble. Communication rarely occurs in the absence of face-to-face contact" (102).

To Mackay's term *mass communication* I would add the phrase *user-friendly* as an equally destructive euphemism, one of many we could cite. We label machines and liturgies as user-friendly and thereby hide from ourselves our society's decreasing ability to make friends and to be hospitable toward those who come as strangers to our worship services. I've never yet met a machine that was really my friend, but persons

who are friendly have taught me how to use them. Similarly, no style of worship can be a friend, but welcoming members of a congregation can help their guests participate more fully in the worship service.

Our deceptive language, which hides from us the travail of our profound alienations, is closely related, furthermore, to this fourth, self-inflicted source of suffering in our society: one of the major elements of communal breakdown—namely, the overload of information—is the very thing we choose as means to hide from the breakdown. Mackay observes three ways in which our preoccupation with information becomes unbalanced or addictive.

Sometimes we keep absorbing information, so that we won't have to make sense of what we already know, and so we use the data as a *distraction from thinking* (104). Besides letting information hinder our processing of it, sometimes we immerse ourselves in it as an *insulation from reality* so that we don't have to confront the people and events around us. A third way in which information causes cultural breakdown and suffering is that so many persons in our society gather it as a *constant stimulation* to create the illusion that something is continually happening. Mackay admonishes, "If you let the information keep coming, you will practically guarantee that your capacity to make sensible judgments about it will be dulled. We already have the example of the TV junkie to show us how uncritical we can become if we abandon ourselves to constant stimulation" (105). We thus experience various kinds of suffering and alienation because our immersion in information fails to lead to knowledge, much less wisdom.

I found numerous examples of these three escapes from truth by means of information in Barbara Kingsolver's best-selling novel, *The Poisonwood Bible*, an epic of great misunderstandings in mid-twentieth century Congo. Thirteen years after her sister's death by snakebite, Leah, married to a Congolese, was teaching English to construction workers' children in a surreal U.S. compound, "Little America," while the U.S.-backed President Mobutu stole the country's resources. She observes that her students "were pale and displaced and complained of missing their dire-sounding TV shows, things with *Vice* and *Cop* and *Jeopardy* in their titles. They'd probably leave the Congo never knowing they'd been utterly surrounded by vice, cops, and the pure snake-infested jeopardy of a jungle."⁴ So many personal and global tragedies in the novel reflect the problem of misplaced, distorted information.

A fifth source of travail is generated by our lack of a unifying framework by which to sort the deluge of information. Increasing postmodern fragmentation, the randomness so praised by postmodern philosophers, leads to a whole host of distresses. As Australia's highly respected pollster, Rod Cameron, declares, "Never before have so many felt so unhinged in such good times" (194). In describing one manifestation of this disconnectedness in the political realm, Mackay contends, "What seems to be lacking is a 'guiding story' that connects leaders and people: a set of coherent ideals, values and beliefs, imaginatively couched, that gives us a framework for making sense of our national life, and encourages us to take more confident steps towards controlling our future" (139). The same sort of lack of a meta-narrative has similar consequences for people's making sense of their spiritual lives and all the aspects of daily life.⁵

A sixth source of travail in our culture arises because the very reservoir that could bring comfort—namely, faith—seems to be dissipating into too many streams to generate unifying power. Mackay observes that "Times of uncertainty—especially

when linked with a half-formed sense of expectancy—have, in the past, been fertile breeding grounds for religious revivals,” but he concludes from his detailed examination of the social landscape that such a mass movement seems unlikely in Australia (302). Is it likely in North America—or are our religious institutions failing us so badly that people turn instead to the myriads of religious options offered on the Net or to personalized amalgamations of whatever strikes their fancy?

In such a culture—suffering from the hardships of social and communal breakdown, the deceptions of society’s technicization, our choices to let the information overload hinder us from reflection about it or from interaction with larger realities, and the lack of metanarrative or rooted faith—does Christianity bring any gifts? What can we learn from a Resurrection text that helps us preach to counteract these sources of cultural travail?

The Glory of the Gospel for a Suffering World

Please read Luke 24:13-49 carefully and keep that text before you as the rest of this article demonstrates practices of pondering it for the sake of worship and ministry. The seven sets of questions I will ask here are merely examples, models of listening to a text so that our preaching enables our listeners to work through their own sufferings and to *be Church* for the sake of a suffering world. How can we be agents for the shining of the Gospel into the hearts of members and neighbors “to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6)? Though there is not space in this article to discuss these questions in terms of the life of our churches’ members and of their corporate existence, the *way of life* characterized by the awarenesses, attitudes, words, and deeds these inquiries suggest is crucial as the entire environment in the midst of which God’s people worship, handle their sufferings, love their neighbors, and witness.⁶

What kinds of suffering and sorrow keep our eyes from recognizing Jesus? (Luke 24:13-16)

Luke uses three of his favorite words at the beginning of this Easter evening narrative to set the stage for what is about to take place. His *idou* (“behold!”) at the beginning of verse 13 reminds us that what we do as the Church at worship is help participants behold. How will the music, our sermons, whatever liturgies we use display the presence of God?

In verse 15 Luke introduces the coming of Jesus to join the two walking to Emmaus with *kai egeneto*, a phrase not usually translated any more. The old King James Version would say, “and it came to pass”—the phrase many of us remember from the way as children we memorized the Christmas story. I wish we could recover that phrase in our translations because it seems to me to carry the connotation that something comes to pass because of God’s sovereign care. How, in our worship, do we help those who struggle with our cultural lack of meaning and purpose or the dearth of meta-narrative to know that there is available to them an overarching story (encompassing all of time from its beginning to its end) that gives sense and significance to our lives? Do our sermons ground the listeners’ hope in the story of a Promising/Fulfilling God, under whose Lordship we can trust that good does come to pass?

The third word that Luke engages frequently and particularly is the verb

poreuomai (“to go,” vv. 13 and 15). Ever since the turning point of his Gospel in 9:51, when Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem,” Luke has used this verb as a continuing drumbeat to announce Jesus’ going, going, going toward the completion of his mission and the day “for him to be taken up” in the Ascension. Then, after the Ascension described at both the end of Luke’s Gospel and the beginning of Acts, he employs the same verb to describe the continued going, going, going of the apostles as they carry the news of Jesus into the world. In Luke 24:15 he adds the preposition *with* to the front of the verb to signify Jesus’ accompaniment of the conversing disciples as they go. How do we tell the texts of Scripture, and how do we celebrate the Sacraments to enable worshipers in our churches to know that Jesus is going, going, going with us—and through us?

In the midst of a culture in which communities fail, how do we equip worshipers to know that in whatever griefs they encounter in life and work, we can behold the presence of Jesus going with us? How do members of the community incarnate that presence? How can we as a congregation practice together looking for his accompaniment to strengthen the fabric of our community life? In a society suffering from various travails, how do our sermons assure their listeners that Jesus attends them with potent care?

What details do we miss? (Luke 24:17-24)

As the two disciples recounted for the man whom they didn’t recognize “the things about Jesus of Nazareth,” they missed the most important detail, his resurrection! Luke’s switch from “one of them” responding in verse 18 to “they replied” in verse 19 suggests to me two voices. While one wistfully recounts the prophet’s might in deed and word (v. 19), the hope that he was the one to redeem Israel (21), and the astonishing news given by the women (22-23), the other voice sounds more cynical in judging the chief priests and leaders (20), wondering why the promise of the third day doesn’t appear to be fulfilled (21b), and noting that the men (?) of the group didn’t find what the women had declared (24). Perhaps we, too, miss important details about God because of our cynicism or because in our wishful thinking we overlook the hidden ways God works.

That is why we need the entire meta-narrative of the Scriptures in all its historical particularities to make sure we do not reduce God to our own ideological convictions. That is also why we need all the gifts of the members of our parishes so that we can display more fully all that God can reveal through us.

What details might we be missing? How in our worship and preaching can we utilize more of the gifts of the whole community for the sake of learning more about God? For example, some Presbyterian pastors near where I live make use of the practice of *lectio divina* with the teenagers in their congregations before they prepare their sermons. They know that the youth will help them to see details in the text or about God they would otherwise miss.

In a culture with too much information and no framework by which to understand it, our preaching can offer a sense of the goodness of the biblical meta-narrative for overall understanding and can be filled with meaningful details that display the fullness of God’s salvific work on our behalf.

Why are we not willing to have the Messiah suffer? (Luke 24:25-27)

Jesus rebuked the cynic and the wistful one as “foolish” and as “slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared.” The problem of the two disciples was that they were not able to fathom that the Messiah would have had to suffer before entering into his glory. That seems to be the problem in many churches these days, and the difficulty manifests itself in two primary ways.

Sometimes Christians want only a victorious Jesus in control of culture, but God does not usually work in such ways. Even as Jesus was not often understood by his disciples because he worked out of vulnerability and weakness, submitting to suffering and death, so God’s ways are often strange, hidden, wild.

The other source of our uneasiness concerning a suffering Messiah is that we realize that if we follow such a one we will be called to suffer also. In Colossians 1:24-29, the apostle makes the outrageous (and truthful) claim that he is “rejoicing” in suffering because he is “completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.”

If we want to follow Jesus, we have been called to take up our cross, too. Do our worship services give us opportunity to repent for our unwillingness to do so?

I often say that I would love to have heard Jesus’ discussion, “beginning with Moses and all the prophets” as he interpreted to Cleopas and his companion “the things about himself in all the scriptures.” Could our worship services and sermons include more of the prophetic texts that enable us to receive a suffering Messiah? What rebukes might it be necessary for us to give in our sermons against the “theology of glory” that makes us incapable of being “theologians of the cross” (to use Martin Luther’s terms)? Do our sermons equip their hearers with God’s motivation, courage, and strength to enter into the various sufferings of their neighbors?

How does Jesus stay with us? (Luke 24:29)

When Jesus appears to be going on, the two disciples beg him to stay with them. Luke underscores the strength of their plea in verse 29 and then later records their intense reaction to Jesus, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” (32). Whether it was primarily his discourse on the Scriptures or something less tangible, such as the sense of hope Jesus must have given these two disciples, they knew that they needed him, wanted him to be with them. By what means could our sermons, similarly, stir in the listeners a yearning to be with Jesus, a longing for Jesus to remain with us? How can we more strongly encourage the saints in their practices of spiritual disciplines in an age that specializes instead in “quick fixes”?

Even more important, in a culture where values and relationships don’t seem to last, where many suffer from the hardships of social and communal breakdown, how can we equip the saints to know the presence of Jesus? If faith is like a language, how can we teach listeners the vocabulary and grammar of faith, so that they can engage in its practices throughout the rest of the week? Do our sermons model practices of prayer, Bible reading, meditation, and other disciplines by which we experience the “staying power” of Jesus? In a society inundated with “toxic” deceptions and rootless information, it is essential that our hearts burn within us because of truth and genuine meaning, as communicated by the abiding Word.

How is the glory of the risen Christ revealed to us? (Luke 24:30-35)

Throughout this entire narrative from Luke 24, we see that Christ is revealed in the Scriptures, as he recounts them to the two and then to the larger crowd of disciples. Luke especially stresses that Jesus opened the disciples' minds to understand the prophetic words and their fulfillment (v. 45). However, the clearest revelation takes place in the breaking of the bread (30-31, 35). Perhaps in some Protestant churches there needs to be a re-evaluation of the relative weight of the sermon and the celebration of the Eucharist and a rethinking of how the two can better reinforce each other's revelation.

As Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas asserts, it is the Eucharist which constitutes the Church (and not the reverse),⁷ for in this meal the absence of Jesus becomes a presence.⁸ How could our sermons nurture the worshipers' openness to receive this marvelous mystery? How can we train listeners in skills for recognizing Christ's presence? In a society in which many choose immersion in information to hide from larger realities, how can the details of our sermons equip people instead to engage in the largest reality of all, the presence of God in the glory of the risen Christ?

What frightens us about Jesus? (Luke 24:36-45)

Of course the gathered disciples were "startled and terrified, and thought they were seeing a ghost" when the one they thought was dead suddenly appeared among them. Sometimes we, too, become frightened by Jesus. Does our rationality get in the way of wonder and faith?

I am certainly not asking for a sacrifice of our intelligence, for indeed we use our best exegetical and homiletical skills when we prepare our sermons. However, many times I find myself questioning the way God works because it does not make sense in human terms. Yet this is the God whose thoughts are not our thoughts, nor are the LORD's ways our ways. For the LORD says, "as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8-9).

One great gift of the postmodern world is its recognition that the modern quest for complete scientific objectivity is inadequate, that there are more ways to know than can be demonstrated empirically. As we prepare our sermons, do we leave room for mystery? Do we let the Spirit of Jesus open our minds to understand the Scriptures? And do we trust that same Spirit to bring understanding to the minds of our hearers? Do we let Jesus give us peace in the midst of the world's objections to faith?

Correlatively, one great gift of the Church is that, in contrast to the communal breakdown of our society, our confidence in the truth of the Gospel is based in the authority of a community over space and time that has preserved and passed on the testimony of faith, even as that community has itself been preserved by the presence of the Triune God in its midst. Our faith is rooted in the fullest of thinking, not limited to mere rationality, but instead augmented by the reflection of the entire global, centuries-old community under the direction of the Spirit of Jesus.

Are we ready to be witnesses of all these things? (Luke 24:46-49)

The last few verses of this Gospel text raise numerous questions to guide our preaching the glory of Christ in a suffering world. Do our sermons thoroughly proclaim both the suffering and the rising of Jesus? Do we invite our listeners into

repentance and clearly announce the enduring, unwavering forgiveness of God? Do we help worshipers to know assuredly that in their baptisms and in the feast of the Eucharist they have been clothed with power from on high? Do our sermons equip them for their daily mission to be witnesses of Christ's presence to their neighbors?

In a society starved for genuine community, do we communicate joyfully the confidence that we are embraced in Triune fellowship in the breaking of the bread? In a culture deceived by toxic euphemisms, can our sermons enable our listeners to rejoice in the genuine presence of the authentic Word of God? In a world longing for a meaningful meta-narrative, but immersed instead in megatons of information, will our preaching give witness to an abiding story of details that matter because they demonstrate promises fulfilled?

I phrase these points as questions instead of offering answers because each of us who preaches faces a unique situation of cultural travail and to it we bring our particular insights from the texts for the day and the gifts of the communities we serve. The questions thrill me with the possibilities that our preaching can bring great hope and comfort from the glory of the risen Christ to listeners immersed in various kinds of suffering. This text and the foregoing suggestions give rise in me to this closing prayer:

Risen Christ, in your presence, in your breaking of bread,
in your opening of the Word, in your opening of our minds,
in your Father's gift of the Spirit and in that Spirit's power,
enable us to proclaim to our listeners a vision of your glory
to comfort them in their own troubles,
to equip them for their mission of witness and travail
for the sake of a suffering world. Amen.

Notes

¹ Hugh Mackay, *Turning Point: Australians Choosing Their Future* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan Australia, 1999), 78. Page references to this book in the following paragraphs will be given parenthetically in the text.

² Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

³ Robert Jay Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 57.

⁴ Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1998), 457.

⁵ More thoroughly than is possible here I have documented the difficulties of our lack of metanarrative and possibilities for the Church's response in chapters 4 and 5 of Marva J. Dawn, *A Royal "Waste" of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999).

⁶ See chapters 10 and 30 of *A Royal "Waste" of Time*.

⁷ John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 20f.

⁸ See Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), for a thorough discussion of the importance of this mystery.