

*Move Out / Move In:
The cycle of death and resurrection
in a college community*

Trip Porch
Columbus, Ohio

I never thought the sight of a dumpster would make me well up with emotion. And yet, each year, it happens. I sit under the stained glass of our large stone cathedral of a church, a monument to the unchanging nature of God, and I see the dumpsters arrive. With them comes a restless procession of beds, desks, and memories crammed into vans and rental trucks. Young faces once brimming with curiosity and the weariness of finals are now hollowed by farewells. The air reeks of sweat, fried takeout, and change.

This is what every August looks like here, as the community of college students surrounding our church undergoes its annual changing of the guard. Leases are ending, and the vast majority of our neighbors are moving out. The off-campus student population we've come to know over the past year shifts, and with them, the houses they've occupied are emptied. Hence the dumpsters—a convenient spot the city provides in order to at least attempt a proper disposal of the sofas and other large furniture (long past their expiration dates) vacating the homes in our neighborhood.

Every year, these dumpsters symbolize a sort of death for me. When they appear, it's a clear indication that the past year is fully and completely over—that those students are gone and what once was won't be coming back. But their appearance is not some grim reaper; these dumpsters also remind me of something else: that these homes are being emptied in order to soon be filled. They are a reminder that our community is preparing to welcome a whole new population of students who will arrive in just a few short weeks.

Yes, it might seem like a strange Easter meditation, but every year these metal containers line the streets like tombstones. Out with the old: broken futons, discarded textbooks, shredded flyers for last semester's parties. What remains behind is what cannot fit, what is no longer wanted.

Amid it all, our church property stands as a refuge in this impermanence, lovingly cared for with a church lawn that includes a hammock garden and painted pews repurposed as garden benches—an offering of love. Yet, it, too, bears witness to the flux. Whatever we build is only briefly held by these young lives. Alongside the sorrow of goodbye, though, is a stubborn hope. It's the same hope that courses through the Easter story: the hope of what comes next.

This is the constant context of ministry in a college setting. Every year brings renewed energy, enthusiasm, and new life as students arrive, but it lives right next

to the grief of remembering those you only got to know for a short while. Death and resurrection exist side by side.

It feels unique to our context, but it's really the truth of the world, isn't it? In Eastertide, we treat resurrection as if it is a state of being we transition into with Jesus once and for all, moving fully out of death and into new life. But here, resurrection feels more like a dance—a seasonal back-and-forth movement between letting go and opening up.

Our congregation is small, eclectic, and stubbornly welcoming. Over the years, we've forged bonds with students who wandered in, some drawn by music, others by curiosity, and a few by sheer hunger. Some sang in the choir, others joined class discussions, some even helped lead our youth group. Many came just to find solace and community in meals shared in our fellowship hall. For a time, they become woven into our lives. We are their home away from home, the hands that offer shelter, and the voices that lift prayers over their fears and accomplishments.

And then the cycle turns again. The university rhythm is relentless, forcing us to hold tightly and then release. There's a unique grief in loving what will not stay. We hear Jesus weeping at Lazarus's tomb, knowing all the while that resurrection is near, and yet his tears fall for his friend. To be in ministry here is to hold the weight of goodbyes and keep our arms open anyway.

But every September, a miracle happens. The hammocks fill again with fresh faces—students who have never heard our organ or walked through our doors. They bring their own questions, hurts, and need to belong. Slowly, carefully, new relationships form. It's like planting seeds without any guarantee of harvest, but trusting anyway. Our work as preachers and as a faith community has taught me that resurrection is not a one-and-done event. Easter keeps coming back, demanding that we reimagine hope when the streets seem empty and grief threatens to steal our breath.

I'd be remiss not to acknowledge the particularities of this place. The university district is not only transient; it's unruly. Greek life thrives around us, sometimes so close you'd think our hymns and their house-party bass beats were collaborating. On more than one Ash Wednesday, I've stood in the streets offering ashes while next door, beer pong balls hit the pavement. It's surreal. It's sacred. And it's full of potential.

These students need resurrection stories, even if they don't realize it. They need community that can bear their grief and help them hold on to hope at the same time. They need a place where they can sing with generations past, cry without judgment, and eat casseroles and cookies made by grandmas who've adopted them as their own. They need us to be the kind of Christians who endure their absence and greet their return.

Ultimately, Our resurrection story is not only about loss alone or renewal but about trust. Trust that what we sow—whether through worship or unseen acts of hospitality—doesn't fade when the faces change. When I think of all the sermons

preached and meals provided, I'm reminded that even as faces come and go, as the seasons ebb and flow, God holds a thread here and is active beneath the surface.

In the cycles of grief and hope, our church, like the disciples at the tomb, is learning to hold space for the mystery of what comes next. It's what makes each new Easter feel like the first: the hope that, against all odds, we will love, serve, and be surprised again. So in this season of death and resurrection, may we sow even when the ground feels rocky. May we sit in grief and lean on the persistent rhythm of resurrection. And if you find yourself in our neighborhood, know there's a hammock waiting for you, too.