

The Communion of the Saints, the Forgiveness of Sins, the Resurrection of the Body: A Couple of Easter Stories

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The business of the artist is to be attentive—or, as Flannery O'Connor put it in one of her essays, to be *stupid*. “There’s a certain grain of stupidity that the writer of fiction can hardly do without, and this is the quality of having to stare, of not getting the point at once.” Alan Jacobs, *Shaming the Devil*¹

“This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Luke 15:2

In an essay honoring his mentor and friend Robert Jenson, David Yeago recounts listening as a first-year student to the great Lutheran theologian as he gave an introductory lecture on theology at Gettysburg Theological Seminary. In that lecture Jenson shocked these new candidates for ministry by affirming his belief that the New Testament’s claim concerning Jesus’ resurrection from the dead was true, and true “in the dumb sense,” that is “in the ordinary-language meaning of the term.”² These students had been taught up to that point to believe something more sophisticated about Easter’s truth, and indeed something less startling than the notion that the crucified Israelite, Jesus of Nazareth, had triumphed over death and was now alive and ruling over this world. Such a claim, if true, might impinge on and even conflict with the firmly held convictions that modernity had taught all but the most backward of Fundamentalists to accept. Easter might be possible in a “spiritual” sense, maybe even pointing to certain moral principles or metaphorical realities, but its meaning was best kept safely within the confines of a disembodied faith at considerable remove from the external world.

It is that “dumb sense” of Easter’s truth that has embarrassed gnostics of old and of more recent years, just as it unfolds so simply, almost one might say stupidly, from the gospel accounts themselves.

Ancient gnostics found the story of God becoming human flesh implausible. Their dualistic view of the world could not comprehend the Divine mucking about in a deeply flawed creation. The whole point of being saved, which was the whole point of achieving *gnosis*, was to escape the confines of one’s own embodiment. Gnostics of more recent vintage are not so easy to describe, and yet their convictions, to the extent they are articulated, are just as “spiritual” and even more preoccupied with “self.” They share with gnostics of old a conviction that one’s own salvation is the only *gnosis* that matters. And like the gnostics of old, they are suspicious of external mediators of the faith, particularly something as mundane and ordinary as the church with its common worship, creedal statements, and historic faith. Of more interest to them is that “self” that is free of time, history, locatedness, and to be blunt, “others.” Our culture’s embrace of technology and the gifts of a disembodied virtuality have only exacerbated this tendency. And given the difficulties that liberal Protestantism

has had in interpreting its own theological convictions to itself and to a culture that is obsessed with its own salvation, a kind of Protestant gnosticism is, in some ways, more representative of the contemporary church's witness than its own creedal statements.³ Gnostics are not "over there" somewhere; they exist close to every believer's heart and represent an impulse the church has always had to struggle against. Though not always articulated, this impulse to dismiss the fleshliness of the gospel in favor of some exploration of self is in fact a deep form of despair, a way of writing off the world as the scene of God's redemptive activity.

Which is why scripture, both in the substance of its narratives and perhaps even more in its sheer externality, presents such a problem to those whose faith consists in constructing a more private spirituality. In this regard, it is striking how little attention the New Testament gives to the self-reflection of its witnesses. Here there is a remarkable reticence, just as there is a pointing away from self toward the Lord whose salvation is not a fleeing of the earthly but an embrace of it. Scripture is almost crude in its insistence on the bodily presence of the risen Lord. It was not a vapor that Luke reports walking alongside those two discouraged disciples on the road to Emmaus, opening the scriptures and revealing himself to them in the breaking of bread. The women fleeing from the tomb on Easter morning in Mark's gospel were not terrified by a rumor of transcendence but by the stupidly impossible promise that Jesus not only was alive but would meet his disciples in Galilee "just as he told you." A dispenser of esoteric wisdom would not have shared the secrets of his spiritual insight by inviting doubters to see and touch his wounded body, much less by offering forgiveness to his own failed disciples, enjoining them to "feed my sheep" and to "follow me." Or As Luke summarizes: "While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?'" What kind of teacher of self-exploring gnosis would have asked such a question? Or insist that his risen presence meant the "forgiveness of sins" to be proclaimed "to all nations" (Lk. 24: 41 and 47).

The creed, in attempting to bear witness to the gospel, speaks of the specifics of Easter's message in two places. The one who was "crucified, dead, and buried," the one who "descended into hell," is the one who "rose again on the third day..." The resurrected body is first of all this body, Christ's body. But the creed does not stop there or even imply that this event exhausts the meaning of Easter. Just as this event has a past, rooted in Israel's story, so it has a promise that extends not just to eternity ("life everlasting"), but more surprisingly still, into a present life together that Christ's resurrected body forms and creates. Resurrection from the dead is what makes the church. Indeed, as Calvin insisted, the church lives only as it is continually raised from the dead.⁴ Which is why the creed links so carefully "resurrection of the body" with "the forgiveness of sins" and "communion of the saints." They are of a piece.

Novelists have sometimes discerned the unsentimental ligaments and the life-giving character of Easter's story better than many of those whose calling it is to interpret this message. These artists have learned "to stare" rather than hurrying to explain. They possess the kind of reticence that the New Testament accounts also evidence. And they describe, or better, they map the struggle of those who, like the disciples of old, seek to come to terms with Easter's "dumb" witness. As works of art, they

do not preach directly, but through the gift of their story-telling, they amplify and illuminate the scandalous depth of Easter's truth.

In this essay, I would like to draw attention to brief portions of two novels, hoping to show how Easter's message of resurrection leads not away from the church but precisely into the communion of the saints; not toward the lonely purity of religious virtuosity but rather into the discovery of one's place in that very mixed company formed by the forgiveness of sins; not to a deeper exploration into self but rather into a joyfully confident trust in the One whose resurrection life renews our own.

One of the greatest novels ever written, if not the greatest, is Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*.⁵ Its many characters are far too numerous and complex to rehearse here and its plot not easily unfolded. It requires a good deal of "staring." Still, few works of art are more evangelically perceptive or more accurate in their diagnosis of the kind of gnosticism that afflicts the modern spirit.

Of the three brothers, Dmitri, Ivan, and Alyosha, it is Ivan who has drunk most deeply from the wells of enlightened reason and who is the most intellectually adroit. For those who have never engaged with the novel and yet are called upon to preach, Ivan's critique of religion is must reading. His complaint is not atheistic. That would be to trivialize his argument. His complaint is that the suffering that afflicts this world, especially the suffering that afflicts the innocent and impoverished and vulnerable in this world, can never be justified or redeemed. If there were no gospel, then this third-rate world could at least be understood and dismissively accepted for what it is: a botched job. But what is unbearable is the notion that God created this mess and that somehow we are expected to be grateful. "It's not God that I don't accept, Alyosha," Ivan tells his brother, "only I most respectfully return the ticket to Him."⁶

Of course, Ivan is right. His appraisal of the way things are misses almost nothing of the depths of human depravity and the quite unequal distribution of suffering. His disgust with this world and with its Creator is not new but voices an ancient unhappiness whose bitter wisdom seems to want to pick at its own entrails. When Alyosha rebukes Ivan for his failure to note the forgiving grace of Jesus Christ that promises redemption precisely for this world, Ivan just laughs at him. He then tells Alyosha his own story, a parable of "The Grand Inquisitor," the gist of which is that Jesus has been imprisoned by the very church that pretends to worship him, a figure whose promises are dangerous illusions best gotten rid of for the sake of piously managing human misery. In the parable, the church is the great enemy of Christ, and its representative is the Grand Inquisitor of Seville, who has put Christ in prison. As the Inquisitor waits in silence for Christ to respond to the indictment against him, there is only silence before the prisoner eventually approaches and kisses the old man on the forehead. The Inquisitor shudders at this physical gesture of love and forgiveness and quickly releases Jesus from the prison, telling him to go from the city and never come back.

Alyosha listens to this parable and its merciless wisdom and sees that if taken seriously, it would lead not to some consoling vision of a more just world, but rather to a kind of suicidal loneliness, a heart completely turned in on itself. So he slowly approaches his brother and kisses him on the forehead. "That's plagiarism," cries Ivan.⁷ And indeed it is a plagiaristic attempt to follow Jesus Christ into the depths of human suffering and misery. Just so it is also the only "answer" the gospel promises to those who would risk discipleship, even as it is the one answer that is not a theory

or idea or exploration of self, but rather a gift that is mercifully and terribly embodied. It is an answer that embraces the earth and insists on its goodness, not because it is a lovely place but because it is the place Jesus loves. It is an answer that overcomes the loneliness of a gnostic disgust with the world, an answer that draws one into the quite mundane “communion of the saints,” discovering there the dignity of life together among forgiven sinners. Thus the “resurrection of the body,” rather than leading into a more spiritual realm, causes Alyosha to embrace this world as Christ’s own.

The novel ends with a meal. Alyosha has befriended a group of boys (12 of them!), and has effected a reconciliation between their leader, a boy named Kolya, and a schoolmate, Ilusha, the son of a poor soldier. Ilusha has fallen ill and when he dies, Alyosha takes all the boys to the funeral. Along the way (and on the last page of the novel), Kolya asks him, “Can it be true as they teach us in church, that we shall all rise again from the dead and shall live and see each other again, all, Ilusha too?” Alyosha responds in language that can only be called stupidly wise and evangelically lucid: “Certainly we shall all rise again, certainly we shall see each other and shall tell each other with joy and gladness all that has happened!”

The excited boys follow Alyosha, and he tells them, “Well, now we will finish talking and go to his funeral dinner. Do not be disturbed at our eating pancakes—it is a very old custom, and there’s something nice in that.... Well, let us go! And now we go hand in hand.”⁸

Hand in hand. That is the way the novel ends, hand in hand going to a breakfast meal and sharing in a common witness to the resurrection in the face of death. Here is life together in the company of forgiven sinners. Here one sees the creed fleshed out: the communion of the saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body—Easter’s gift to a world weary with its own loneliness and disgusted with its own smarts.

Easter’s story of resurrection disconcerts because it is not a story of self-improvement. It’s not even a story about “me.” As Simone Weil has noted, the one indispensable requirement for resurrection is death.⁹ One of the remarkable things about the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus is the consistent manner in which his followers are displaced by his presence. The women, armed with spices, think they are going to anoint a dead body. The two disciples on their way to Emmaus think they have to explain to a stranger something of the tragic sense of life. Peter and the other disciples think that “going fishing” is all that is left for them to do. In every case there is a kind of shock that whatever defined their previous existence no longer obtains. And what is beckoning is a strange new world in which their liberation consists in their not being the center of their own lives.

This is why the “Confession of Sin” is so difficult for comfortable, middle-class, well-educated, therapeutically-minded gnostics today and why our “Confession of Sin” so often resembles a “confession of things we think we ought to be worried about,” or worse, a plea for various schemes of self-improvement. Those who ask why we engage in such formalities, especially since they do not feel particularly guilty, much less penitent, are right to ask. They do not see it as an affirmation of the life that is ours in the risen Lord Jesus Christ, a life that renders impossible our unbelief, making our daily return to such impossibility something like a dog’s return to its own vomit. Our confession is a kind of mortification but a dying rooted not in our sense

of repentance but in Christ's relentless mercy, the only light strong enough to reveal our darkness. Our problem is not our "sins," much less what we have determined our "sins" to be. In fact, determining what our "sins" are is one of the ways we attempt to render them harmless. But the confession reminds us that we have to be taught by the mercy of Christ what it means to be a sinner, even what it means to be given the dignity of being named a sinner. Such knowledge is not self-generated but comes as a gift from Another. It is mortifying, but then how else will we be raised if not from the dead? Or to put it in more catechetical language, how can one die to sin and live to righteousness? That is an Easter story too, and one that Dostoyevsky tells in another novel.

Fourteen years before he completed *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoyevsky penned another novel, *Crime and Punishment*, in which the main character is an intellectual first-cousin to Ivan. He is Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov, an impoverished sometime student in Saint Petersburg, who is convinced of his own heroic nature which has gone unrecognized by his otherwise distracted peers who are preoccupied with their own mundane concerns. Raskolnikov finds embodied life insupportable. A student of philosophy, he goes hungry in part because he is poor but also in part because eating embarrasses him, as it only serves to reveal his own neediness. He is convinced of his own superiority above others, especially those who lead what he regards as worthless lives. He decides to kill a pawnbroker to whom he is constantly in debt. She too is a bother because her very presence reminds him again of his lack of self-sufficiency and more particularly of what he owes to another. Doing away with her, he thinks, would be an act "beyond good and evil" and establish him as a kind of hero, proving him to be a man of action, not just ideas. And such an act, he concludes, would also be benevolent, because the money he would take from the old lady he would spend for good causes, worthy causes. He commits the murder, but in killing the pawnbroker, he also has to murder her half-sister Lizaveta, who has, unfortunately, blundered into the scene of the crime.

As gruesome as the murder is and as morally reprehensible, the "crime" is not really the murder. It is instead Raskolnikov's conviction that he exists unto himself, apart from the human ties that connect him to others, apart from any sort of life together or theological claim that might place him in some dreaded position of gratitude. The presence of his mother and sister embarrasses him, and he flees from their concern about him. His effort to live as an entirely "buffered self"¹⁰ borders on the solipsistic, leaving him in an almost solitary confinement, a status he prefers to the pain of any sort of shared human contact.

Except for one. For reasons that are not clear to him, perhaps having to do at the beginning with some residual sense of pity, he finds himself burdened with the love of another person, an impoverished prostitute named Sonia. She plies her trade to support her family, hoping that the few rubles she earns will protect her younger sisters from further degradation. Incapable of deception or deceit, she unaccountably cares for the poor, confusedly self-centered Raskolnikov. And he, rather than finding liberation or heroism in his terrible deeds, grows increasingly anxious and depressed with his own guilt. One night he decides to visit Sonia in her room, unannounced. He plans to tell her what he has done. But first he asks her to read the story in John 11 of the raising of Lazarus. She is taken aback because up to this point he has shown

little interest in scripture, God, or the church. The New Testament from which Sonia reads to him was a gift to her from Lizaveta, whom Raskolnikov murdered. "She was good," she tells Raskolnikov. "We used to read together... and talk. She will see God."¹¹

Slowly, Sonia reads the story of Lazarus, and at the end, she reads, "I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me though he were dead, yet shall he live." A strange story to read to such a troubled soul, even a murderous soul? Except that Raskolnikov knows that whatever redemption might be extended to him can only come through being raised from the dead. His dying will involve a great deal of suffering which will only be made intelligible through the love that Sonia bears to him. Raskolnikov will prove to be a slow learner. After confessing his crime to her, he expects rejection, perhaps even hopes for it:

They sat side by side, both mournful and dejected, as though they had been cast up by the tempest alone on some deserted shore. He looked at Sonia and felt how great was her love for him, and strange to say he felt it suddenly burdensome and painful to be so loved. Yes, it was a strange and awful sensation! On his way to see Sonia he had felt that all his hopes rested on her; he expected to be rid of at least part of his suffering, and now, when all her heart turned towards him, he suddenly felt that he was immeasurably unhappier than before.¹²

Sonia attempts to give him a wooden cross to hang around his neck, but Raskolnikov refuses, and Sonia relents telling him that the cross will be there for him to wear when his suffering begins. Later, on the way to the police station to confess, Raskolnikov wears the cross and heeds Sonia's words to go

to the crossroads, bow down to the people, kiss the earth, for you have sinned against it too, and say aloud to the whole world, "I am a murderer.".... He knelt down in the middle of the square, bowed down to the earth, and kissed that filthy earth with bliss and rapture....¹³

Sonia accompanies Raskolnikov to Siberia to share in his sentence of punishment. There he falls ill and remains so for a long time. It was not the weather or hard work or the food, all of which he rather enjoyed, but rather it was his wounded pride that made him ill. Some hero! A wretched little prisoner exiled among the dregs of the earth in a Siberian forest. He would have enjoyed even being able to repent. That might be a certain heroism in that. But he felt no remorse, and he did not repent of his crime.

Still, he noticed some strange things about life in prison. "He looked at his fellow prisoners and was amazed to see how they all loved life and prized it. It seemed to him that they loved and valued life more in prison than in freedom."¹⁴ The other prisoners did not care for him and sometimes even laughed at him. But they were all fond of Sonia. They admired her for coming to share his imprisonment. Raskolnikov was ill in the prison hospital from the middle of Lent until after Easter. Upon his release, he was sent to work in the forest, and early one morning he found himself sitting on

some logs by a river bank, when Sonia suddenly appeared and sat down beside him. Reluctant to be touched, almost dismissive of her visits, Raskolnikov on this day lit up by an Easter sun holds her hand and then throws himself at her feet.

They wanted to speak but could not; tears stood in their eyes. They were both pale and thin; but those sick pale faces were bright with the dawn of a new future, of a full resurrection into a new life. They were renewed by love; the heart of each held infinite sources of life for the heart of the other. They resolved to wait and be patient. They had another seven years to wait, and what terrible suffering and what infinite happiness before them! But he had risen again and he knew it and felt it in all his being, while she — she only lived in his life.¹⁵

Later that night, on his prison bunk, Raskolnikov takes from under his pillow the New Testament from which he had asked Sonia to read to him the story of Lazarus, and which he had asked to keep. It was the same New Testament that Lizaveta, whom he had killed, had given to Sonia. Though he still has a long journey ahead of him and struggles to see how Sonia's convictions can become his own, her gift and indeed the gift of the one whom he murdered now minister to him, drawing him into that communion of the saints and forgiveness of sins that the resurrection of the body creates and sustains.

Beyond irony, beyond our enlightened certainties, even beyond our wise despair or private spiritualities, these two stories witness in their different ways to Easter's "dumb" truth embodied in the risen Lord who remains blithely indifferent to our proofs, explanations, theories, and schemes of salvation. His gifts to those who follow are not deeper explorations into some imagined self anymore than they represent a superior wisdom that insulates from others. Rather, they are the quite fleshly means of grace found in scripture, sacrament, church, and common witness. As such, these otherwise unspectacular gifts do enable a kind of self-knowledge, but not as an end in itself. Rather, it is a kind of penitent self-knowledge almost indistinguishable from joy that opens those who follow to that life together that the communion of saints and forgiveness of sins make possible through the risen Lord. This is the Easter story that is not about "me," but about the One who is not ashamed to gather "me," along with so many others into his body, the church. As the scribes and Pharisees knew only too well, "this fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Notes

1 Alan Jacobs, *Shaming the Devil: Essays in Truth-telling* (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 17.

2 David Yeago, "Getting the Gospel Uttered: Robert W. Jenson as Seminary Teacher," The *Pro Ecclesia* Conference, June 4-6, 2018.

3 Cf. Philip J. Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics* (New York, New York, Oxford University Press, 1987).

4 John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, translated by John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 275. The text from his commentary on Micah 4:6 reads: "For the Lord sometimes raises up his people, as though he raised the dead from the grave: and this fact ought to be carefully noticed, for as soon as the Church of God does not shine forth, we think it is wholly extinct and destroyed. But the Church is so preserved in the world, that it sometimes rises again from death...."

5 Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, translated by Constance Garnett, (New York, New York Classic, New American Library, 1957).

6 Ibid., 226.

7 Ibid., 243.

8 Ibid., 700.

9. Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (London and New York: Ark Paperbacks, 1987), 32. The exact quote reads: "Death. An instantaneous state, without past or future. Indispensable for entering eternity."

10. The term "buffered self" comes from Charles Taylor's description of secularity and indicates a move from a pre-modern self-understanding toward a more bounded sense in which one disengages from everything outside the mind. Cf. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 37, 38.

11. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment* (New York, New York: Bantam Books, 1987; trans. Constance Garnett), 303.

12. Ibid., 390.

13. Ibid., 390.

14. Ibid., 500.

15. Ibid., 504.