

Tread Marks and Roses: Glimpses of Resurrection

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“You know, I like Christianity, but I would not like it without the resurrection. Show me your resurrection.”

Zen Master to a Trappist Monk¹

“We do not gather at Easter to celebrate a doctrine, the doctrine of the Resurrection. We come here to rejoice in the presence of one we love, in Jesus who was lost to us and has been found.... Jesus was one of us who was born and died as we do, who left us desolate in his death as all our friends do or will do.... God has mysteriously and wonderfully changed that,... by a miracle of new creation, Jesus, our human friend, is with us bodily again....”²

So says the Catholic theologian Herbert McCabe in a remarkable Easter sermon. On Easter, McCabe reminds us, we are not simply encouraged to work through the intellectual puzzles of the claims of resurrection nor merely to remember what an inspiring person and wise teacher Jesus was. We are, instead, to join the company of the women on Easter morning, running back astonished from the empty tomb, who encounter the living presence of Jesus and who in awe grasp his feet in worship.

When McCabe says “Jesus, our human friend, is with us bodily again...,” he doesn’t mean, of course, that we should expect to see a robed and sandaled Jesus in the produce area at Kroger or the Nazarene passing us on the interstate in a Honda Civic. But he does mean to undermine all spiritualized notions of Christ’s resurrection. The resurrection is not some ethereal light of inspiration, some uplifting ideal that keeps us motivated. No, for McCabe, the resurrection takes root in history and experience and is palpable; Christ is present and at work in our lives in places that we can see and taste and smell and hear and touch.

As the feminist theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson writes in *Friends of God and Prophets*,

As the narratives of the Easter appearances make clear, henceforth [Jesus] is present through the power of the Spirit in word and sacrament, dwelling wherever two or three gather in his name, encountered as a stranger explaining the Scriptures as he walks along the road, recognized in the breaking of the bread, present where human wounds are touched and healed and, in a special way, served where the hungry receive bread, the thirsty drink, and the naked clothing.³

In the spring of 2020, just as theologian Douglas Otatti was reviewing the page proofs for his new and innovative systematic theology, *A Theology for the Twenty-first Century*, the nation swiftly entered the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. This pandemic was in so many ways unexpected and so sweeping in its rapid transformation of our society and our lives. A scholar crafting a theology for our century could hardly ignore what appeared to be a century-changing moment, but his book was

already finished and ready for press. So Otatti penned an addendum to the “Preface” of his book in which he acknowledged the intrusion of the pandemic and said that it could be viewed theologically from the perspectives of both judgment and grace. The pandemic was judgment, he said, not in the sense of divine thunderbolts of wrath but as an exposure of the “deleterious consequences of our skewed devotions to partial interests and communities, our constricted fields of vision and attention, and the destructive actions and practices they support.”⁴

But, Otatti also said, we can look into the experience of the pandemic “for traces of grace and the kingdom.” And where are those? Otatti makes an “incomplete and anecdotal list” of these traces of kingdom grace, glimpses of the resurrection as it were, among them, hospital workers laboring in long and dangerous shifts, a preschool superintendent going to bat for her teachers to receive at least half pay even though the school was closed, and supermarket and pharmacy employees risking their lives to make sure that people can get the food and medicines they need.⁵

We might add to Otatti’s list: a daughter lovingly kissing the Facetime image of her father on her phone screen, saying goodbye, and praying with him as he dies alone in the ICU; a COVID nurse at her dinner break, seated by her computer screen with a cup of grape juice and a morsel of bread, participating in an online Eucharist; police officers kneeling alongside protesters at demonstrations following the deaths of George Floyd, Rayshard Brooks, and Breonna Taylor. Those of us who preach on Easter are not charged with elucidating the resurrection or even with making an apologetic defense of Easter faith to an agnostic culture. Indeed, we are not there to *explain* anything. We are there to *proclaim* with the women breathlessly returning from the cemetery, “The tomb is empty! He is not there. He is risen and alive! Jesus is loose in the world!” The Easter sermon does not move from doctrine to life, but the other way—from the announcement of the risen Christ at work in life to “Aha! So that’s what this is about. That is what our risen Lord is doing among us this day!”

Losing Sight of the Resurrection

In the first congregation at Corinth, they loved their worship. People were speaking in tongues, being transported into ecstasy, finding deep communion and healing, understanding profound mysteries, giving themselves up to God and others, and more. The Lord’s Day at Corinth rocked. What irritated them, though, was the burden of believing the resurrection from the dead. “We have the passion and the fervor,” they said, “but of what use is it to believe in the resurrection?” Why not cut to the chase—an unfettered, experiential faith without the encrustation of resurrection?

“Hogwash,” said Paul. “Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?” he carped. “If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain.... For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile.... But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died” (from 1 Cor. 15:12-20).

That may at first appear to be logical reasoning—if this, then that—but it’s not. If it is logical reasoning, it’s faulty and circular. But what Paul is actually doing is appealing to their experience. “So, you trust the energy that ripples through your community, your worship, your life together?” says Paul. “Well, who do you think is the source

of that energy? And if the Christ we preached to you is alive in your experience, and you *know* that's true, then the preaching of Christ that stimulated your experience is true, and if that's true, then Christ has been raised and there is a resurrection of the dead."

"Show me your resurrection," the Zen master challenged the Trappist monk. Look at the love, look at the prophesy, look at the sacrifices, look at the washing of the feet and the care of the widow, look at the boldness of the saints, look at the awe and wonder. Glimpses of resurrection.

Regaining Sight of the Resurrection

But where do we look to see the risen Christ at work in our world? Each Gospel serves as its own guide to point to those places.

Mark—Mark, for example, ends in what seems an abrupt halt; at least most scholars think so. The women at the tomb are given by the angelic young man two commands: not to be afraid and to go tell the disciples that the risen Christ will see them in Galilee. But the women flee in terror, saying nothing (Mark 16:6-8). That's it.

But then it dawns on the reader: we are now disciples, and we should return to Galilee to see the risen Jesus. In other words, go back to chapter one of Mark's Gospel, back to Galilee, and read it all over again. Some say that the original text of Mark has no post-resurrection appearances, but that's not so. Read a second time; the whole Gospel is composed of post-resurrection appearances. Where is the risen Christ? Precisely where he was the first time. Back at work, preaching, teaching, calling, healing, cleansing, feeding, challenging oppression, and casting out demons. We should look for the risen Christ, then, especially in places where people suffer, where there is defeat, pain, and loss. There is Christ, standing at the bedside of those on ventilators, standing at graveside with those who grieve.

The philosopher George Yancy recently published in the *New York Times* a series of interviews with people of different faiths about what they believed about death and faith. One of these interviews was with Christian theologian Karen Teel. Now, Yancy does not himself believe in God, and he told Karen Teel that physicist Stephen Hawking called faith in a God who brings life out of death "a fairy tale for people afraid of the dark." He asked her, how do you as a Christian respond to the charge that Christians are simply "afraid of the dark."

Teel told Yancy that she had recently cared for her mother as she gradually lost her battle with A.L.S., a disease that had also claimed Stephen Hawking's life. The disease was relentless and cruel, she said. Her mother had been an accomplished pianist, but at the end, her body had deteriorated to the place where Teel had to help her with everything: eating, using the bathroom, controlling her wheelchair, even breathing. But as she journeyed with her mother toward death, she found that in her sorrow, her own faith had been renewed. "Before facing my mother's death," she said, "I never really knew that I believed that life continues, but in caring for my mother, I discovered that I know it, as I know the sun will come up in the morning, as I know I'll get wet in the rain, as I know I love my own children. It isn't about fear. It's a gift and a mystery, this conviction that we come from love and we return to love."⁶

Luke—Luke, the Emmaus Road story is the key: the risen Christ can be seen in the breaking of the bread, in the sharing of bread, of people feeding one another, in

human relationships healed and nourished by hope. My wife Kim, a pastor and a seminary teacher of liturgics, once told in a sermon of this experience after church one Sunday:

When my husband and I lived in Atlanta, we worshiped at a church that had bread machines running in the sanctuary on communion Sundays, so that we could smell the bread of life even before it was time to eat it together at Christ's table. Often there was bread left over after worship, and on one blessed Sunday, I got to take a loaf of it home. This was the perfect loaf of bread—sweet, lightly browned, crusty on the outside, soft on the inside—and still warm. Someone put it in a bag for me, and I carried it to my car like it was a baby. I was so hungry, and this bread was going to be so good.

I got to my car, and I might have buckled the loaf of bread into the front seat. Then I started to make my way home. I headed up Peachtree Street (because almost all the streets in Atlanta are called Peachtree Street), then took a right onto Ellis, the last turn before the highway. And that's when it happened.

I looked ahead, and sitting on the sidewalk about thirty feet apart from one another, were two men, one younger, one older. They had nothing, no sleeping bags, no pieces of cardboard, no backpacks. And I knew what was going to happen next. I was going to have to give up my sweet loaf of bread, for clearly, they needed it more than I did. Reluctantly, I eased over to the curb and came to a stop. I motioned to the younger man, and he leapt up and came over to the car.

"Here," I said, handing him the still-warm loaf. "This is for you and that gentleman to share." He took the bread, said thank you, and quickly made his way to the other man. And then, like a priest, he leaned down, broke the bread, and gave half away.

Take. Bless. Break. Give.

Right before my very eyes, these two men acted out the Lord's Supper all over again there on a gritty sidewalk in the middle of Atlanta. It looked like a miracle.⁷

John—The Gospel of John ends with several followers of Jesus finding the risen Christ in their own ways: the Beloved Disciple, Mary Magdalene, the disciples minus Thomas, and then Thomas himself. But we notice that the sequence comes to its climax with Thomas exclaiming, "My Lord and my God!" What he says is not the resolution of a quadrilateral equation; it is instead a hymn of astonished and sudden belief: "My Lord and my God!" Thomas sings. So the Gospel that begins in song, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God..." moves at the end toward an everlasting song of resurrection: "My Lord and my God..." Perhaps, then, we should look for glimpses of the resurrection, among other places, in fragments of church choirs singing anthems on Sunday morning into empty sanctuaries while streaming to self-isolating congregations, in Zoom choruses singing the "Hallelujah Chorus" even in a time of quarantine, and to all places where human song marks the recognition that Christ's light "shines in the darkness and the darkness has not

overcome it.”

In 1966 a coal mine disaster struck the Welsh village of Aberfan, killing scores of people, many of them children taken down while at their village school. In an episode of the television series “The Crown,” based on this disaster, Queen Elizabeth is portrayed as too distant and emotionally reserved to respond to the crisis. She even refuses to attend the funeral, sending her husband Prince Philip instead.

At the funeral, the camera pans across an almost unbearably tragic sight: the villagers gathered in the cemetery before an open grave holding a row of the coffins of their lost children, dozens of them, one placed next to the other. Phillip weeps as the villagers, in profound grief, begin to sing Charles Wesley’s hymn “Jesus Lover of My Soul”:

Other refuge have I none,
Hangs my helpless soul on Thee;
Leave, oh, leave me not alone,
Still support and comfort me.
All my trust on Thee is stayed,
All my help from Thee I bring;
Cover my defenseless head
With the shadow of Thy wing.

When Philip goes back to Buckingham Palace, the queen asks him, “How was it?”

“Eighty-one children were buried today,” he tells her. “The rage . . . in all the faces, behind all the eyes. They didn’t smash things up. They didn’t fight in the streets.”

“What did they do?” the queen asks.

“They sang. The whole community. The most astonishing thing I ever heard.”

When hope and trust in God, even in the midst of terrible loss, rise up in people’s throats as prayer and song, perhaps we have glimpsed the risen Christ moving through our lives, giving comfort to the grief-stricken.

Matthew—Finally, there is Matthew. There at the end of that magisterial Gospel, the risen Christ sends the disciples to all the nations to teach others what Jesus has taught them. And as they go, the risen Christ promises to be with them “to the end of the age.” Perhaps, then, the risen Christ can be glimpsed when those who love Jesus tenderly teach others, as they have been taught. In a land of hard, rocky, and thorny soil, perhaps we glimpse the risen Christ wherever people hear the gospel with their hearts, wherever the love and mercy of the gospel take root in good soil and grow.

The little town in which I live, Cambridge, Maryland, has two “Main Streets.” One is called “Race Street” (after horse races that were once held there), and it runs through the primarily white business district. The other is “Pine Street,” and it runs through the heart of the African American community. The two streets run parallel to each other, only a block apart, but they may as well be in different countries.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Pine Street was at least as vibrant in terms of business as was Race Street. There were grocery stores, funeral homes, florist shops, druggists, and an incredible collection of musical venues. Since Cambridge is a midway point on the highway between the clubs in Norfolk and the music scene in Harlem, it was

a convenient stopover for the great black musicians of the 40s, 50s, and 60s. Duke Ellington, Sara Vaughan, Ella Fitzgerald, James Brown, and Little Richard, among many other stars, appeared on Pine Street. The street had two nicknames: “Black Wall Street,” because it was flourishing, and “Groove City,” because of its vibe.

Then, in the long, hot summer of 1967, in the midst of civil disturbances across the nation and the stirrings of local racial unrest, Pine Street burned to the ground. A fire was set (by whom, no one knows to this day) in the all-black elementary school. The all-white volunteer fire department refused to answer the call, and the school and several blocks of businesses were destroyed. The white-run banks wouldn’t lend money to the black merchants to rebuild, and Pine Street remains today a shadow of its former glory. On the former “Black Wall Street,” unemployment is now very high, and in “Groove City,” many of the houses are in deep disrepair. Even now the despairing lament “it would only have taken one fire truck” is heard among African Americans. They walk where they are going on Pine Street and rarely stray onto Race Street, which continues as a symbol of white racism and violence.

But after the death of George Floyd, some artists in the African American community came up with an idea. They made a proposal to the City Council, which astoundingly gave its unanimous approval. So, several artists from Pine Street brought rollers, brushes, and buckets of paint over to Race Street, where they were joined by white artists and ordinary citizens, black and white, and they painted a large lovely “Black Lives Matter” mural down the center of Race Street.

That was in June. Several weeks later, in the dead of the night, a pickup truck stopped in the middle of a deserted Race Street and began burning rubber up-and-down the new painting, defacing the art with cruel tire marks. Cambridge woke up the next morning to find the “Black Lives Matter” artwork despoiled. When the police investigated, they discovered that a security camera on one of the stores on Race Street had recorded the truck in action. It turned out to be a distinctive-looking pickup, and the driver was soon identified—a 21-year-old white man, a local who, Trump-like, hated all this agitation by black people.

The main artist was contacted by the City Council, told of the destruction, and invited to repair the painting. She thought it over and replied that she had a different idea, maybe a better one. She invited the young man who defaced the art to have a conversation with her. Shocked and embarrassed that his deed of hate done under the cover of night was now public knowledge, he reluctantly agreed to meet with her. She told him she wanted him to know what it was like growing up black in Cambridge, and she asked him what it was like growing up white in town. They talked, exchanged experiences, and got to know each other. The artist explained to the young man what the phrase “Black Lives Matter” means to black folk. At one point, the young man broke down and said, “I am so sorry. What can I do?”

The following Sunday afternoon, the young man and his parents went to Race Street and stood on the sidewalk next to the painting. They were joined by the artist plus about forty other townfolk, black and white. The young man stepped forward and made a public apology for what he had done. Then he took a paintbrush and joined the artist in the middle of the street. Instead of painting over the damage, the artist had another vision. At the top of each tire tread, the artist and the young man painted the blooms of beautiful flowers. The marks of the tires were now the stems of roses.

No one believes this event has healed over the great racial divide that exists in our town nor has it made a huge dent in the racism that pervades our community. Even as the young man and the artist worked together to paint the flowers, the mocking sounds of other young men gunning the engines of their pickups and burning rubber could be heard in the surrounding streets, and some African American parents at the Sunday event wondered out loud whether the next time their sons get in trouble with the law, the same zeal for reconciliation rather than punishment would prevail. But at least some in town had learned the words of mercy and righteousness that Jesus taught us, and what happened in the middle of Race Street is perhaps a glimpse of reconciliation, what the New Testament would call “a sign and a wonder” of the Easter reign of God.

To look for such rays of resurrection light amid the gloom is surely part of what we call faith. To trust these glimpses more than the darkness as the sure harbinger of the fullness of Christ’s kingdom is surely part of what we mean by hope. To be drawn into the signs and wonders with our labors and our whole heart is surely part of what we mean by love.

Notes

1 Carl Scovel, *Never Far from Home: Stories from the Radio Pulpit* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2004), 124-125.

2 Herbert McCabe O.P., *God Still Matters* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 226, 228.

3 Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 209-210.

4 Douglas F. Otatti, *A Theology for the Twenty-first Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), xxv.

5 *Ibid.*, xxvi.

6 George Yancy, “I Believed That I Would See Her Again: A Christian Theologian Recounts How Her Mother’s Death Affirmed Her Faith and Belief in the Afterlife,” *The New York Times*, May 20, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/20/opinion/christianity-death-afterlife.html>.

7 Kimberly Bracken Long, “Loaves and Fishes,” a communion sermon, unpublished.