

Invasion of the Dead

Preaching Resurrection

BRIAN K. BLOUNT

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Introduction

Invasion of the Dead

I did not begin with resurrection. Who does? Except, perhaps, during the Easter season. The Gospels do not even begin there. In the earliest, Mark, Jesus gets to the subject only after his narrative journey is half over (8:31). He reconsiders it infrequently (9:31; 10:34; 14:28), perhaps because his audience seems incapable of comprehending (9:10), not to mention believing it (12:18–27). In the end, completely baffled by it, what is left of his discipleship corps runs away from it (16:6–8). As we follow the Gospels' lead, it is no surprise that, though resurrection is arguably the most important element of our faith (1 Cor. 15:14), all too often we take much time, energy, and striving to get to it, too. Babies must be born. Children must grow. Young adults must journey. Families must bond. Careers must blossom. Temptations must appear. Trouble must threaten. Crosses must be carried. Victories must be won. Death must be endured. And yet, still we hesitate. Anxiously, desperately, even incredulously, we contemplate and reconsider resurrection. It is as much our destination as it is our destiny. But the rigors of the journey to it divert our attention and shift our focus until what troubles us here overwhelms what promises us there.

Like exasperated parents, on a tempestuously long, arduously winding road trip, trapped in a steamy, sweaty car jammed with luggage, snacks, and physically pent-up and emotionally stirred-up children, we dissuade attention on and questions about the destination lest the fervor over being there wrecks the process of getting there. Stop thinking about it. Stop asking about it. Stop obsessing over it. "We'll get there when we get there!" Some time right after Good Friday. So, put your focus on Good Friday. Divert your attention to Good Friday.

After all, we Christians are a people of the cross. The cross marks us. Identifies us. The cross is our brand. Oddly enough, considering what the cross represents, it is our comfortable place of being. We luxuriate in its symbolism of suffering. As surely as the McDonald's arches signal the site of burgers and fries, so the cross signals the location of a Christian community or a Christian believer. As we are what we eat, so we are what we wear. In our case, it is death. We, therefore, whether in our preaching and teaching, our living and learning, our striving and struggling, endeavor to get to Calvary as fast as we can and linger there as long as we are able. With all this dying to be done, heaven can wait.

To be sure, the Christian conception of the cross is the reimagining of death. As the apostle Paul notes, God takes what humans intend to be the definitive act of disfigurement and dishonor and reclaims it as something uniquely revelatory. Capital punishment. Death. On a cross. The end of a life that reveals the meaning of life. In that case, the cross is the consummate act of divine irony. What the Romans believed to be the cessation of life and meaning, God claims as the marker that defines the possibilities of life for all of us, for all of time. The cross, then, becomes the ultimate apocalypse: the revelation of God's intention for humankind. Through struggle and even death, God reveals life.

In my Beecher lectures, I wanted to reveal something clarifying about our death-obsessed, apocalyptic eschatology. Specifically, after explaining apocalyptic eschatology as a key component of first-century popular culture, I aimed to consider how apocalyptic eschatology might be biblically reclaimed and theologically reconfigured for preaching in our contemporary American context. I therefore started with Jesus' trial and execution, added in the Gospel portrayals of Jesus' life and ministry, expanded out to Paul's ruminations about the crucified and risen Christ, drew in John of Patmos's prophetic disclosures about the slaughtered Lamb, and situated all of that within the eschatological environment of the first-century Greco-Roman world that was the New Testament writers' field of operation.

I intended to craft lectures that would help preachers more effectively proclaim apocalyptic eschatology for our time. My focusing question was this: How can we reveal the hope of transcendent life in the midst of ever-present death? There is a supplemental operational question: Is the cross the right revelatory mechanism? It is for Christians. Is it not?

During my research, I slowly and somewhat begrudgingly came to two reorienting conclusions. First, and significantly (at least for me), I did not need to interpret apocalyptic eschatology in a way that made it more accessible to individuals and communities in our time. At least not secular individuals and communities. And I did not need, during the Beecher Lectures on Preaching, to exhort American preachers to so interpret it either. To be sure, several of the scholars whom I admire greatly were, in their writings, doing just that. J. Christiaan Beker, my former teacher, friend, and teaching colleague, makes the powerful case that apocalyptic eschatology is so crucial to the formation of the Jesus movement and the Pauline churches it birthed that if we attempt, existentially or otherwise, to interpret apocalyptic sensibility out of our contemporary Christian proclamation, we are left with nothing like the faith that the biblical writers intended to bequeath us.¹ Even so, he painfully observes, contemporary Christian thinkers and preachers have either mangled (in sectarian views) apocalyptic eschatology or left it for dead (in mainstream views). Beker calls upon biblical interpreters and preachers to reclaim apocalyptic eschatology as a, or perhaps *the*, fundamental predisposition of Christian theology. He demands that we resurrect it. In my Beecher lectures, I was determined to join those scholars who have championed that cause, find a place in the front of the lineup of folks determined to redeem apocalyptic eschatology's place in theological and cultural conversation.

I came to realize that the front was actually rather crowded—not by biblical interpreters, theologians, and preachers, but by the people who drive secular popular culture.

Contemporary artists, writers, directors, and producers of American popular culture are already offering and interpreting

apocalyptic scenarios in vastly entertaining and terrifyingly convincing ways. Like us Christian interpreters, the interpreters of contemporary American popular culture appear obsessed with the ever-present and all-encompassing nature of death. For popular-culture artists, too, death is revelatory. Death reveals the fragility and tenderness of life, but not necessarily its transcendence. In fact, in the imagery of popular culture, it is death that appears transcendent. Life trembles before it and struggles to endure it. All too often, life seems incapable of defeating death. Though there is that hope. Such hope, that what is good about life can overcome what is destructive about death, provides the dramatic lure, the proverbial carrot on a dramatic stick that hooks readers of novels and viewers of film. They keep coming back because they keep believing that sooner or later the death-wielding vampires, werewolves, zombies, aliens, pandemics, environmental disasters, and the horrifying devastation they bring with them—all such will themselves die, and life will win out.

This initial research recognition caused me some concern. If apocalyptic eschatology is already being interpreted in a highly effective manner in the works of popular culture, is it really important that my lectures call preachers to the task of reclaiming and reinterpreting apocalyptic eschatology for our times? Our time seems already focused on my task. And, compared with preachers and their pulpits, the popular-culture interpreters of our time have larger audiences to reach and better communicative tools with which to reach them.

That is when my second reorienting conclusion kicked in. I was caught up with the reflection that popular culture and popular Christianity are both mesmerized by death and dying. Both appear to believe that one can only arrive at life by driving through death, that one can only understand life if one comprehends death, that transcendent life is integrally bound up with the ever-present-ness of death. Just as Jesus' death on that Roman cross clarifies everything about human life and living, so the death of the planet to the living dead or the environmental cataclysm refreshes and refocuses our understanding of

what it means to be alive. My second reorienting conclusion interrupted my thesis thinking at just this point. Even though Jesus' apparent march to the cross and his devastating death on the cross occupy almost all the energy and space of the gospel story, nagging at me was the thought that there was an apocalyptic moment whose revelatory power and promise trumped even that spectacular death. That moment lies on the backside of the cross, way down in the weeds of the postclimactic and perhaps even anticlimactic denouement of the Jesus story.

Resurrection.

Here, it seemed to me, was an apocalyptic eschatological moment of biblical proportions that popular culture does not fully or rightly engage. Even Christianity appears to restrict its engagement with resurrection to the season of Easter, now rationally tricked out with accessible metaphors of life renewed in the vibrant colors, tasteful meal traditions, and acceptable bunny/egg mythology of spring. The shock of the thing is dulled by its trailing position to and its narrative comparison with the traumatic scandal of the cross. Its historical veracity is diminished by its reckless implausibility. And yet, if one is questing for a pure moment of apocalypse, where a divine prerogative wrecks the principles of natural and physical existence, where the intention for life is revealed not by death but by life itself, the answer lies with resurrection. Anyone arbitrarily forced to make a stand on a single piece of revelatory Christian ground that explains the essential purpose of the faith would, it seems to me, have to stake a claim to the property where God staged Jesus' resurrection. Not Golgotha. The graveyard is the place you want to be. The reclaiming of a withering corpse and the reconstituting of a departed spirit is the thing you want to see. If something crazy does not happen in the graveyard, the meaning of whatever happened on Golgotha is diminished. A hero, even a martyr, will have died, but not the agent of God designated to reveal the truth about life. Not unless, no matter the manner of dying, after dying, in spite of dying, *Jesus lives*.

Using life to reveal the meaning of life does not have the dramatic flair (or believable plotting) of working with death.

Perhaps that is why popular culture and Christian tradition focus on death. The more spectacular the death, the better. It is as though the more gruesome dying is, the more clarified our appreciation of life becomes. So the zombies devour, the vampires bite, the werewolves ravage, the floods despoil, the earthquakes crush, the aliens conquer, the crosses crucify—and when the book is finished or the movie is ended, our view of life is refreshed, renewed with a grander sense of appreciation for what we have too often taken for granted. The apocalyptic moment, directed by death, reveals the beauty of a life we had best, sooner than later, cherish and respect. Jesus' death brings a similar sigh of existential relief. The horror he endured was owed to us. The fact that God allows us to escape it by turning it upon Jesus in our stead reveals to us just how special God considers us to be. That substitutionary maneuver calls upon us, sooner rather than later, to cherish and respect this life and those who populate it with us. One can use death like this because it is real, it is tangible. In a world as mangled as ours, death is always believable.

Resurrection, though, requires a spectacular suspension of belief. Even in popular culture, where suspension of belief is commonly requested and regularly conceded, not even the undead (e.g., vampire, zombie) really live again. They are, after all, only undead. Life is not a negative; it is the ultimate positive. Resurrection *is* Life. But once the negation of death sets in, there is no rationally justifiable means of getting back on the credit side of the existential ledger. Not unless you are God and Jesus three days after his agonizing death on that Roman cross. According to all the canonical Gospel sources, the one-time messianic corpse is not undead. *Jesus lives*. He does not live with the restraints that shackle the rest of us to the logic of dying and the reality of death. He lives positively free from every restraint. And he lives forever. His living does not just conquer death in a singularly miraculous moment; his living reconfigures the physics of death and portends death's impending demise. For all of us.

It is Jesus' life, then, that reveals the ultimate meaning of life. Resurrection is the quintessential apocalyptic moment.

And so, my apocalyptic focus turned away from historical cataclysm, destruction, and death, even death on that Roman cross, to the eschatological capitalization of Life. I worked on suspending belief in order to shore up my faith that Mark's empty tomb had opened itself to something stupefyingly irregular. It was that irregularity that captured my attention and thereby became the focus for my Beecher lectures.

These lectures/essays explore the portrait and meaning of resurrection through three canonical New Testament lenses: the book of Revelation, the Letters of Paul, the Gospel of Mark. Because they are the Lyman Beecher Lectures on Preaching, I follow each lecture with a sermon that explores the preceding lecture's thesis. Each sermon has been proclaimed before a live (as opposed to undead) congregation. I enter the context for each sermon in a small paragraph at the opening of each of the three preaching sections.

In the lectures and the sermons, my goal is to reverse the apocalyptic logic that typically regulates our living and reveals the essence of our being. We look through the prism of death and pray that, through all the confusion and clutter, we can find the meaning of life. I start with a clear shot of life, marvel at how that life engages and obliterates death, and in the process of that annihilation, reveals life's essence and purpose. I end up with resurrection.