

# The Scandal of the Gospel

*Preaching and the Grotesque*

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## Foreword

*H*eavy lifting. That's what preaching is. Those who deny this fact are lying to themselves and everyone else. Teaching preaching is the heaviest lifting in the academy. Almost everyone in the academy denies this, which means almost everyone is lying to themselves and to a watching world. If we take just the sheer volume and density of the work for a preacher—wrestling each week with difficult texts in order to offer a word from God that is bound up with and yet aimed at the cacophony of voices, the myriad of struggles, and the forest of feelings, dreams, and memories that weave together a congregation—it rushes us into exhaustion. If we take just the sheer volume and density of the work for a teacher of preaching—listening to hundreds of sermons over countless hours, reviewing the exegesis and interpretation of each one, cutting through the denials of the complexities of life, of the text, and of the preachers themselves—it pushes exhaustion toward madness.

There are preaching pretenders. There are those who, when faced with the heavy lifting and the exhaustion that awaits, opt out. Like those reluctant souls who go to the gym but spend most of their time walking around talking to people, never breaking a sweat, these pretenders preach lite. Easy does it. Say a few words—sound like a television commercial that glides along our waking consciousness softly touching our attention. This will not do for hard-core instructors in preaching. They war against the pretenders, aiming to kill them in all would-be preachers. “Pick up the damn weight!” This is the unspoken motto of the preaching professor. There is a refined cynicism in every preaching professor I know, honed over years of listening to people avoid the weight or seek to put the weight down as quickly as possible, long before the work is done. Their cynicism is a gift from God to the disciples of Jesus, especially those who are following him at a distance, having allowed too much space between his body and their own.

Charles Campbell (affectionately known as Chuck) allows no distance between Jesus' body and our own, no distance between Jesus' body and the body of the preacher, no distance between Jesus' body and the body of preaching. All of it is captured in the grotesque. Jesus is a shattering, a crumbling, a breaking, and a pulling apart of the building projects that constitute a life, a society, a religion, or even a world. Chuck knows this deeply, powerfully—this knowledge has been a signature of his writing and teaching for decades. So to turn to the grotesque was inevitable for him. What better idea captures what preaching must be in order to be of the shattering life? The idea of the grotesque in his hands is no aesthetic ploy. It is the means through which this seasoned warrior against facile preaching will teach us to see what God's overturning of the given order means for proclamation.

Chuck has always been an intellectual who is honest about what he sees, never allowing the scholarly myopia that often afflicts academics to capture him. He refuses to narrow the frames of intelligibility and legibility down to disciplinary conversations and concerns in what he writes. To see the grotesque as he does in this text is to open up our negotiation with two kinds of contradiction, one an obstacle and the other a necessity. The obstacle is the kind of contradiction that comes from hiding from the grotesque in favor of images, ideas, and narratives that paint Hallmark movie lives of faith. Such imagined dainty lives of faith exhibit a controlled messiness that will resolve itself into a tidy ending very shortly. In contrast, the grotto and the carnival hold truths that are closer to the heart of the gospel where things spill out of their appropriate form—the grotesque is unleashed in the body of Jesus. Porous and leaking, his body's energies and urgencies cover everyone who comes near him, upsetting what and who and how they understood themselves to be in this world and calling them into a new kind of experimentation of living on the edge with the Spirit and with their enemies.

But how do you preach that? Wrong question. What do you understand preaching to be once you grasp the grotesque calling? Instructor Campbell wants to lead us into that calling, which brings me to the necessary kind of contradiction: the contradiction that haunts the preacher who is constantly pulled toward a respectability politics resourced by a respectability preaching. That pull is toward a

silence while speaking and a death while living—a corpse in the pulpit, weekly sanitized so as to never give off the odor of decay. Preaching is in constant struggle against this pull toward respectability and the living death that comes once we go under this current. That pull turns preachers into propagandists for nation-states, and/or plantation capitalism, and/or white supremacy, and/or patriarchy with its gender-binding normativity, and a host of other life designers working toward the pleasures of control. The pleasure of control is the source of the pull’s remarkably tempting power. It moves us in the same direction as gospel light but without the light and without the freedom formed by that gospel.

This current is a riptide—much too strong to swim against. So preachers must, like all good swimmers, allow the current to pull them out into the deep water and then at the right moment cut across the current, slicing into the contradiction and showing the stark difference between following gospel light or grasping for the pleasure of control—of a life, or a relationship, or a community, or a world. It is the quest for control that has brought us to the brink of our ecological apocalypse as Chuck so powerfully articulates in these pages. The necessary contradiction in preaching (and teaching) is to inhabit pulpits and lecterns that are captured in the politics of respectability and yet to constantly disrupt those politics even as one is caught up in their currents. Preaching must do this not in order to be novel or sensational or even provocative but for the sake of the freedom that Jesus made real through his grotesque body. Meditating on the grotesque might keep preachers and preaching from losing this contradiction and then confusing gospel light for the pleasure of control.

The word here is “might” because taking the grotesque seriously requires cultivating a connection to those who have felt and yet feel a grotesquery turned against their bodies and their lives—the many peoples who fail or fall outside a politics of respectability and who could never fully actualize social uplift. Too dark, too queer, too poor, too slow, too criminalized, too unable to be able to mimic the self-sufficient white man, these folk show the body of Jesus calling us to boundary-breaking life together. Thus the meditation on the grotesque that Chuck recommends moves preaching more deeply into the social construction of grace-filled community, places where the shattering life of Jesus forms protocols for gathering and nurturing

and renaming both those who have failed *and* those who have succeeded at a politics of respectability.

What is the new name that floats on respectability—riding out on its currents and then turning quickly and surfing, cutting across its massive waves, claiming the overturning that marks the grotesque, and announcing a freedom with God as the source of building life together?

Christian.

Willie James Jennings  
Hamden, Connecticut

## Preface

*I*t's come to this: I've been teaching preaching for right at thirty years—and I've arrived at the grotesque. The reason may be surprising. I've arrived at this point not because the thousands of sermons I've listened to have *been* grotesque. Rather, I've arrived here because the sermons have usually not taken the grotesque seriously enough. The pulpit, it seems, tends not simply to neglect the grotesque, but actively to resist it. I'm curious about that.

I have done this myself—not only in my preaching, but in my writing. For many years now I have focused on the folly of the gospel. I've spent more hours than I probably should have studying holy fools and jesters and tricksters and carnival. The whole time the language and imagery of the grotesque have been there. Taunting me. Troubling me. But I've avoided the grotesque. Resisted it. It seemed too shocking, too unnerving—not to mention far too huge to tackle, rearing its head as it does in virtually every area of art and life. So I just stuck with foolishness. It was less disturbing and much more fun. But the words of classical pianist Hélène Grimaud have unsettled me. In a magazine article I read awhile back, she said she admired “the more extreme players . . . people who wouldn't be afraid to play their conception to the end.”<sup>1</sup> I have realized that folly is not the end. Indeed, it seems to me now that folly can be a way of sanitizing the grotesque—and the gospel—making them both less scandalous, more palatable. It's time to explore a more extreme homiletic.

My work on foolishness was inspired by Paul's affirmation in 1 Corinthians 1:23, where the apostle affirms that the message of Christ crucified is *both* foolishness and a *scandal* (stumbling block). But just as I resisted the grotesque in my focus on folly, I also neglected the radical scandal of the gospel. So in these chapters I am seeking

1. Quoted in D. T. Max, “Her Way: A Pianist of Strong Opinions,” *New Yorker*, October 31, 2011, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/11/07/her-way-d-t-max>.

to address aspects of the gospel that I have avoided by exploring the scandal of the gospel through the lens of the grotesque. I'm making, in Karl Barth's phrase, a "provisional attempt" to explore the implications for preaching of a scandalously grotesque gospel.<sup>2</sup>

The essays are an exercise in homiletical imagination.<sup>3</sup> I'm simply trying to make some homiletical connections between preaching and the grotesque. To paraphrase from Billy Collins's well-known poem "Introduction to Poetry," I'm wandering around in the dark room of the grotesque feeling the walls for a light switch. I'm placing my ear against the beehive of the grotesque to discover what I hear—or if I get stung. I'm dropping myself into the maze of the grotesque and trying to probe my way out, which, I've discovered, is actually impossible.<sup>4</sup> This is what homileticians do. We wander and explore, trying to make creative connections that help us enter more fully into the impossible practice of preaching.

In each of the chapters I explore a facet of the grotesque and its implications for homiletics. I'm not seeking consistency or system, including in the intentionally diverse array of sources on which I draw. Expect tensions and even contradictions, for that is the character of the grotesque itself. In what follows I'm simply looking this way and that to see what appears. In chapter 1 I explore the unresolved incongruities that characterize a grotesque gospel and the implications for oversimplified homiletical patterns. I examine in chapter 2 the weaponized grotesque—the use of the grotesque to dehumanize individuals and groups of people. I explore the calling of preachers to undertake the challenging and risky task of resisting this kind of dehumanization. Chapter 3 focuses on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque body and the implications for preaching in the Body of Christ. Finally, in chapter 4 I return to each of the preceding facets of the grotesque in relation to the current environmental crisis.

The first three chapters are slightly revised versions of the 2018

2. Karl Barth, *Homiletics*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Donald E. Daniels (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 47–55, 71–75.

3. My colleague Luke Powery drew my attention to this character of the essays after reading one of the original lectures.

4. Billy Collins, "Introduction to Poetry," from *The Apple That Astonished Paris* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1988), 58.

Lyman Beecher Lectures that I delivered at Yale Divinity School. Out of respect for their original context, I have tried to maintain some of the oral character of the lectures even with the editing necessary for publication in print. I hope my journey through these lectures enlivens the imaginations and practices of preachers—and leads to more grotesque sermons.

## Chapter 1

# Jesus in the Grotto

## The Gospel as Grotesque

*Blackwater* is an award-winning Swedish crime novel by Kerstin Ekman.<sup>1</sup> Early in the novel one of the central characters, Annie, endures a chaotic and ultimately horrifying day. Following a lengthy train ride and grueling bus trip, Annie arrives overheated and exhausted with her five-year-old daughter in the small village of Blackwater. She finds herself in a strange place among people she doesn't know. She's an outsider, and folks are suspicious of her. She's ill at ease from the beginning. Her lover was supposed to meet her and take her to their destination—an isolated community deep in the forest. But he never shows up, which sows its own kind of concern and confusion. So all throughout the midsummer night she wanders lost in the shadowy forest through a maze of paths, stinging insects, and tangled marshy undergrowth, always concerned about her anxious and tearful daughter. But she never finds the community. The entire experience is deeply disorienting.

After hours of wandering she suddenly comes upon a grisly murder scene. The sight makes her physically sick, and her knees buckle. As she breaks her fall, her hands land in the blood, which she instinctively wipes all over her skirt before finally washing her hands in a creek. Then she and her daughter continue wandering, lost—now under the gruesome shadow of the murder, not to mention her awareness of a killer in the area, whom she thinks she has actually seen. Her entire experience is described in excruciating detail. Even the reader becomes disoriented.

1. Kerstin Ekman, *Blackwater*, trans. Joan Tate (New York: Picador, 1993).

Later, because she has witnessed the murder scene, Annie is taken to a home, where she is questioned by a detective in the kitchen. Ekman writes this about the interrogation:

For the rest of her life [Annie] was to preserve the memory of that walk. But how much of it would she have remembered if he had not forced her to describe it over and over again in that warm kitchen? There must be tangled events, illogical or utterly insane actions in all lives. To forget. They refused to allow her to forget. They forced her to bind them together into a pattern. But it was a false pattern.<sup>2</sup>

“But it was a false pattern.” This short sentence is extraordinary in a crime novel. For, while good crime fiction may do many different things, crime novels are generally about discerning patterns. They’re about solving mysteries and restoring some order.<sup>3</sup> As novelist Steph Cha notes, crime fiction favors “a return to order from chaos.”<sup>4</sup> Crime novels are narratives in search of some *narrative resolution* to the crime that has disrupted the order of things. But Ekman here ironically complicates the entire genre—not to mention her own novel. The pattern the detective demanded was inadequate to Annie’s experience; it was a *false pattern*. So what does that mean about the solution to the murder at the end of the novel? Is that too a *false pattern*? Is that final pattern also imposed on experiences that are too complex to be captured within a neat narrative?<sup>5</sup>

2. Ekman, *Blackwater*, 70.

3. See John Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, New Critical Idiom (London: Routledge, 2005). As Laura Miller writes, “The mystery genre is a minuet between disruption and order. The murder sets the story in motion by introducing instability: not just the moral wrong of homicide, a horror that remains fairly notional in most crime fiction, but the violation posed by the mystery itself. Far more unbearable than the murder is the fact that we don’t know who did it. . . . At the end of the novel, justice is (usually) served, but, even more satisfying, the truth is made visible and incontrovertible.” See Laura Miller, “Tana French’s Intimate Crime Fiction,” *New Yorker*, October 3, 2016. Miller also rightly notes that French’s complex crime novels often subvert this formula.

4. Quoted in John Fram, “How White Crime Writers Justified Police Brutality,” *New York Times*, June 4, 2020.

5. Ekman is not alone. Another award-winning Swedish crime writer has one of her investigators reflect on the process: “We humans need to simplify things, in order to make reality more manageable. Actually, we do the same thing at the police station. Simplify, try to understand, make connections, and see patterns in the complex materials of the investigation. And maybe we also make the same mistake: attributing characteristics to people and applying models to explain events because it fits our worldview” (Camilla Grebe, *The Ice beneath Her*,

I suspect that many preachers, myself included, frequently function as rather stereotypical crime novelists. We may tolerate disruption in our sermons for a little while, but usually we're after a resolution, a restoration of order—even if that is a word of hope far off in the distance. We seek to discern a pattern, a narrative, a doctrine that will provide some clarity and structure. One of the questions we preaching teachers often ask our students is, “Where is the good news in your sermon?” It’s an important question. But all too often it really means something like, “Where is the resolution?” “Where is the restoration of order?” Indeed, entire homiletical theories have been structured around a move from problem to solution, from disorientation to reorientation—from itch to scratch. And I wonder if this model hasn’t become the homiletical default setting, even for purportedly more open-ended sermons. But I also wonder how often we impose *false* patterns. I wonder if the gospel and life really lend themselves neatly to many of our theological and homiletical patterns.

In her recent memoir about her experience with cancer Kate Bowler challenges the false and inadequate patterns we Christians often impose on those with serious illness. She explores many of these in the book, but the title of her memoir makes the point: *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved*.<sup>6</sup> That’s an important reminder to preachers. Have you ever noticed, for example, how often preachers throw out the “C” word—cancer—whenever we need a seemingly horrible experience to address with the gospel? Just throw out the word, as if the experience of cancer were easily summed up in a single term. But, as Bowler reminds us, there’s no such uniform thing as “cancer.” Every cancer is different, every experience is

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trans. Elizabeth Clark Wessel [New York: Ballantine, 2016], 123–24). Similarly, through her shifting narrators, Tana French repeatedly subverts the simplistic patterns we would impose on the complexities of other human lives. More generally, contemporary crime fiction sometimes moves beyond the “familiar stereotype” of the genre and “preserves the ambiguities and ambivalences of a complex society”; it can “reflect the experience of unresolved lives.” See Brian Cliff, “Why Irish Crime Fiction Is in Murderously Good Health,” *Irish Times*, July 25, 2018, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/why-irish-crime-fiction-is-in-murderously-good-health-1.3569128>; also Brian Cliff, *Irish Crime Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). Contemporary crime writers are complicating the genre and exploring issues similar to those I am raising for preaching.

6. Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved* (New York: Random House, 2018).

different. And it's doubtful that even caring pastors fully understand those experiences. The loved ones and the patients themselves may not even understand. Applying a general pattern to "cancer" from the pulpit probably results in a *false* pattern for most people.

Poet Gregory Orr shares a similar experience. When he was twelve years old he accidentally shot and killed his younger brother, Peter, while they were hunting. In the hours following the incident everyone tried to comfort him by imposing a pattern on what had happened. The Christian pattern was possibly the worst: "You should know that right now Peter is in heaven with Jesus," someone said. "It may not make sense now, but it's all part of God's plan." In response to those comments Orr felt only rage and despair. "I wanted to scream at her," he wrote in his memoir: "What's wrong with you? Didn't you see his body? Don't you know what happened? Don't you know he's dead? . . . This isn't Sunday School! My brother was just killed by a bullet and I fired it. What kind of nonsense are you saying?" And that day Orr rejected conventional religion for the rest of his life. His mother also tried to comfort him by telling him that his father had once killed someone in a hunting accident. And here's what Orr writes reflecting on that: "Certainly that coincidence represented some mysterious, even supernatural pattern, but who could imagine it being a happy pattern, a pattern that showed there was a God and he cared about us humans?"<sup>7</sup>

*False patterns.* That's where the grotesque comes in. For the grotesque fundamentally disrupts our familiar patterns—patterns we often use to make sense of life. As Robert Penn Warren put it, "The grotesque is one of the most obvious forms art may take to pierce the veil of familiarity, to stab us up from the drowse of the accustomed, to make us aware of the perilous paradoxicality of life."<sup>8</sup> Or as Flannery O'Connor has argued, the grotesque takes us through the surface of life and pushes us toward "mystery and the unexpected." It combines wild discrepancies and creates unsettling distortions in

7. Gregory Orr, *The Blessing: A Memoir* (San Francisco: Council Oaks Books, 2002), 15–16.

8. Quoted in James Luther Adams and William Yates, eds., *The Grotesque in Art and Literature: Theological Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), xi.

order to take us to the depths of life where our previous understanding is no longer adequate.<sup>9</sup>

The grotesque, to put it another way, *shocks* us out of our comfortable patterns, including those many of us may rely on in the pulpit. And isn't that what the gospel does as well? Isn't that deep down the "scandal"—the *offense*—of the gospel?<sup>10</sup> Piercing the veil of familiarity. Making us aware of the perilous paradoxicality of life. Taking us through the surface of life toward mystery and the unexpected. Shocking us out of our comfortable—and false—patterns. The scandal of the gospel may simply be that it is grotesque.

### The Gospel as Grotesque

So we need to look for Jesus down in the grotto, where, according to most scholars, the concept of the grotesque actually emerged. Indeed, the term "grotesque" comes from an Italian phrase meaning "work (or painting) found in a grotto" (grotto-esque).<sup>11</sup> The reference is to grottos in ancient Roman buildings that were excavated at the end of the fifteenth century and revealed fanciful, disorienting murals.<sup>12</sup> The art in the grottos was radically at odds with the norms of clarity, balance, and harmony presumed to be features of a classical aesthetic.<sup>13</sup> The murals instead imaged a chaotic combination of incongruous and contradictory elements: beasts were fused with animal bodies, figures like the centaur combined human and non-human elements, human and animal heads grew out of plants—all

9. Flannery O'Connor, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," in *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1961), 40–43.

10. David McCracken uses the terms "scandal" and "offense" interchangeably. The scandal of the gospel is that which gives offense. See *The Scandal of the Gospels: Jesus, Story, and Offense* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

11. Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund, *Grotesque*, New Critical Idiom (London: Routledge, 2013), 5.

12. Edwards and Graulund, *Grotesque*.

13. Ewa Kuryluk, *Salome and Judas in the Cave of Sex: The Grotesque; Origins, Iconography, Techniques* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1987), 12; Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, trans. Ulrich Weisstein (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1963), 19–21.

with a seemingly wild and uncontrolled exuberance.<sup>14</sup> The murals presented unsettling, disorienting *hybrids* that transgressed accepted categories. They distorted what was considered “normal” or “beautiful.” They messed with accepted patterns. They were, as they came to be called, “grotesque.”

Many terms have been used to describe the grotesque. One list includes the following: “peculiar, odd, absurd, bizarre, macabre, depraved, degenerate, perverse.”<sup>15</sup> These descriptions—and many others—all have their place in the rich history of the grotesque. But those original murals in the grotto continue to supply one central aspect that runs throughout understandings of the grotesque in its various forms. The grotesque—in art, literature, photography, architecture, life—embodies contradictions, incongruities. It engages in radical, at times shocking, *hybrid* forms that subvert dominant categories and resist resolution. The grotesque is composed, as someone put it, of “discombobulating juxtapositions” and bizarre combinations that “open up an indeterminate space of conflicting possibilities, images, and figures.”<sup>16</sup> The grotesque trades in paradoxical anomalies that transgress binaries and cross classificatory boundaries. As a result, the grotesque usually involves *both* a subversion of the status quo *and*, in the words of Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, “the potentiality of another world, another order, another way of life.”<sup>17</sup>

As should be evident, the grotesque is inseparable from context. The murals in the grottos were certainly not viewed as grotesque when they were created. The figures in them probably didn’t seem incongruous or contradictory at all; they simply represented a different symbolic or metaphorical system. But in the context of different aesthetic norms, they *became* grotesque. As Polish artist Ewa Kuryluk writes,

The meaning of the grotesque is constituted by the norm which it contradicts: the order it destroys, the values it upsets, the authority and morality it derides, the religion it ridicules, the harmony

14. Kayser, *Grotesque*, 19–21; Adams and Yates, eds., *Grotesque in Art and Literature*, 6.

15. Edwards and Graulund, *Grotesque*, 1.

16. Edwards and Graulund, *Grotesque*, 3.

17. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 230.

it breaks up, the heaven it brings down to earth, the position of classes, races, and sexes it reverses, the beauty and goodness it questions. The word “grotesque” makes sense only if one knows what the “norm” represents—in art and in life.<sup>18</sup>

Not surprisingly, any genre as subversive and unstable as the grotesque will generate a wide range of responses. For some, usually those who benefit from the norms, the grotesque is ominous and threatening; it inspires terror and fear. It opens the space for sinister invaders of the familiar world.<sup>19</sup> Consider some of Edgar Allan Poe’s stories, many of which he called “Tales of the Grotesque.” For others, usually those oppressed or excluded by the norms, the grotesque can be a liberating means of resistance; it can be something joyful and life-giving, something to celebrate.<sup>20</sup> More often than not, however, responses to the grotesque are themselves contradictory and incongruous; they include *both* repulsion *and* attraction, revulsion *and* fascination, horror *and* laughter, anxiety *and* liberation—all at the same time.

Much like the responses elicited by another ancient Roman work of art—the familiar *Alexamenos graffito* (ca. 238–244). It’s a piece of Roman graffiti scratched in the plaster of a wall near the Palatine Hill in Rome. The image shows a figure with an ass’s head and a human body hanging from a cross. In front of the figure stands a young man—presumably Alexamenos—raising his hand as if in prayer. Across the picture is written in broad strokes: *Alexamenos worships his God*.<sup>21</sup>

This graffiti takes Jesus down into the grotto. The image subverts normative categories; it joins elements that simply don’t belong together: the divine, the human, the animal, all hanging together from a cross—a place where God is surely absent. Yet Alexamenos worships this figure as God. Not surprisingly, the graffiti mocks this impossible mixture of categories, revealing just how incongruous and contradictory these dizzying combinations really are. The

18. Kuryluk, *Salome and Judas*, 11.

19. See Kayser, *Grotesque*, e.g., 31–37.

20. See Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, where the grotesque is connected to the joyous and subversive celebration of carnival. Bakhtin’s approach is examined more fully in chapter 3.

21. See Charles L. Campbell and Johan H. Cilliers, *Preaching Fools: The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 2–6.

divine—the human—the nonhuman hanging on a cross. It’s repulsive and fascinating. It’s disgusting and comical. It’s scandalous—offensive. It’s *grotesque*. But in a profound sense, it’s *gospel*.

And therein lies the challenge for preaching—and for theology. The crucifixion is grotesque not simply because it is gruesome and horrifying (though it is). Rather, the crucifixion is grotesque because it is marked by irresolvable contradictions that the church has spent millennia tying itself in knots trying to form into a pattern. The Divine-Human One or the Human-Divine One hanging from a cross.<sup>22</sup> Crucified Messiah. Crucified Lord. Crucified God. These were incommensurable realities. The shocking incongruities exploded the dominant cultural categories; they subverted the familiar patterns of power and wisdom and divinity. We should speak of the perilous paradoxicality of the cross. It was a scandal—an offense. It was grotesque.

New Testament scholars have highlighted this character of crucifixion, even when they haven’t used the term “grotesque.” Alexandra Brown, for example, notes that Paul in First Corinthians preaches a scandalous gospel with unconventional, “destabilizing pairings of opposites.”<sup>23</sup> He seeks to “perceptually unbalance” the church.<sup>24</sup> Weak power, foolish wisdom. Crucified Messiah. Crucified Lord. Paul cannot preach with nice, neat patterns because he’s trying to proclaim a grotesque gospel, which resists normative rhetorical categories.

Paul is actually a homiletics professor’s nightmare (and not just because he needs serious work on issues of gender, sexuality, and slavery). What are you going to say in a sermon conference with the apostle? “Paul, I think you need a little more clarity here. Let’s see if you can come up with a good, sharp focus statement. You can’t preach such an unsettling, contradictory Word. You’re throwing the congregation off balance. After all, look at how the Corinthians are responding. They think you’re nuts!” What the homiletics professor is really saying is something like this: “You need to back off the grotesque gospel, Paul. You need to arrive at some *resolution*. A clear

22. In chapters 2 and 4 I discuss the nonhuman, which is usually ignored.

23. Alexandra R. Brown, *The Cross and Human Transformation: Paul’s Apocalyptic Word in 1 Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 30.

24. Brown, *Cross and Human Transformation*, 158.

doctrine of the atonement would be helpful. Such ‘discombobulating juxtapositions’ just won’t preach.”

Roy Harrisville, another New Testament scholar, counters the homiletics professor with a jarring point: the cross, he says, “fractures” all of our rhetoric and theology. Paul, he writes, “could not master his theology in any ultimate way because it never existed as a system; in fact, it could not, since the event at its core [crucifixion] spelled the *death of system*.”<sup>25</sup> Or, we might say, the death of pattern. And Harrisville makes the same argument for *all* of the New Testament authors. As Richard Lischer put it concisely in his critique of narrative preaching: “The cross is a catastrophe that interrupts all of our neat and settled narratives.”<sup>26</sup>

The responses to crucifixion also have the incongruous, paradoxical character of the grotesque. Terror and horror and revulsion are obvious—aspects that an emphasis on folly alone does not take seriously enough. But these responses merge with curiosity and fascination and even blood-thirst. Crucifixions drew a crowd.

In the face of the grotesque cross, another response is shocking: laughter. Yes, laughter. We see it in the mocking of Jesus present in the Gospel accounts themselves. There were actually many crucifixion jokes, as well as comedies depicting Christ’s passion.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the *Alexamenos graffito* was itself a kind of crucifixion joke. Monty Python’s *Life of Brian* did not originate laughter at the cross.

But this laughter took various forms. For those in power the cross generated a kind of mocking laughter that reinforced the horrific instrument of execution through which the elites maintained their dominance. For the “low and despised,” however, those threatened by crucifixion, there was a kind of gallows humor that may have helped to blunt the horror of the punishment.<sup>28</sup>

25. Roy A. Harrisville, *Fracture: The Cross as Irreconcilable in the Language and Thought of the Biblical Writers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 108. Italics added.

26. Richard Lischer, “The Limits of Story,” *Interpretation* 38 (January 1984): 33.

27. On crucifixion jokes, see Justin Meggit, “Laughing and Dreaming at the Foot of the Cross: Context and Reception of a Religious Symbol?” in *Modern Spiritualities: An Inquiry*, ed. Laurence Brown, Bernard C. Farr, and R. Joseph Hoffmann (Amherst, MA: Prometheus Books, 1997), 63–70. For an example of a comic passion play, see Michael O’Connell, “Mockery, Farce, and *Risus Paschalis* in the York *Christ before Herod*,” in *Farce and Farcical Elements*, ed. Wim Husken, *Ludus: Medieval and Early Renaissance Theatre and Drama* 6 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), 45–58.

28. L. L. Welborn, *Paul, the Fool of Christ: A Study of 1 Corinthians 1–4 in the Comic-Philosophic Tradition* (London: T & T Clark, 2005), 101.

But at the deepest level there was what I would now call *grotesque laughter*. Such laughter expresses the disruptive, inexpressible incongruities at the heart of the gospel. God-cross. Life-death. Repulsion-fascination. Horror-hope. It is laughter that recognizes the impossibility of ever capturing or controlling the cross in human categories or systems or doctrines. It is the kind of laughter that, in the words of D. Diane Davis, “breaks up” our totalities, our patterns, our norms.<sup>29</sup> As theologian Jacqueline Bussie writes, such “laughter functions as an apposite extra-linguistic resource for expression of a theology of the cross because a theology of the cross is inherently paradoxical, resistant to linguistic expressibility, and resultant from a collision of narratives.”<sup>30</sup> It is laughter in response to a gospel that remains “scandalous and inscrutable.”<sup>31</sup> It is laughter in the face of the grotesque.

Destabilizing pairings of opposites. Fractured categories and norms. Horror, revulsion, fascination, laughter. Crucifixion takes us into what historian Geoffrey Harpham has called the “interval” of the grotesque. In the interval of the grotesque, he argues, we recognize a number of different forms in an object. But we have not yet developed a clear sense of how those elements are organized into a whole.<sup>32</sup> The object remains “just out of focus, just beyond the reach of language.”<sup>33</sup> In this interval, as Harpham puts it, “The mind is poised between death and rebirth, insanity and discovery, rubble and revelation.”<sup>34</sup>

That’s the interval created by the gospel. It is the interval in which we now live as Christians—“between death and rebirth, insanity and discovery, rubble and revelation.” It is the interval in which the preacher lives. There is no avoiding it. For the event in which Christ identifies most deeply with humanity is a grotesque event of unresolved contradictions and incongruities; it embodies the perilous paradoxicality of human life; it cannot be forced into a nice, neat pattern.

29. D. Diane Davis, *Breaking Up [at] Totality: A Rhetoric of Laughter* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000).

30. Jacqueline Bussie, *The Laughter of the Oppressed: Ethical and Theological Resistance in Wiesel, Morrison, and Endo* (New York: T & T Clark, 2007), 122.

31. Bussie, *Laughter of the Oppressed*, 120.

32. Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 16.

33. Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, 3.

34. Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, 18.

As a consequence, the Christian life itself is a *hybrid* life—a both-and life—a life in the interval in which the central event of redemption is simultaneously a horrific event of violence and suffering—an event in which God is both scandalous and inscrutable. And that is what makes the Christian life grotesque. It is not just that the evil in the world, lifted up in the crucifixion, is so horrific, though it is. It is that as Christians we live in this deep, unresolved incongruity. The new creation, we proclaim, has interrupted the old age. But everywhere we look we see crucified masses of human beings, suffering beyond what many of us can even comprehend. And now in the face of climate change, all of humanity lives in the shadow of death. We live, as Kenneth Surin notes, simultaneously with a testimony of faithful affirmation *and* a testimony of that faith’s negation.<sup>35</sup> And Jesus embodies all of those contradictions on his grotesque cross.

### Preaching a Grotesque Gospel

A grotesque gospel presents a challenge for theology and preaching. Many of us don’t want to live with the scandalous and inscrutable—even though we know that reality all too well. As a result, many of us try to force the gospel into our doctrines of the atonement, our theological systems, and our homiletical theories; we seek to get control of the contradictions. As Willie Jennings has described “academic theology,” it “flows from an intellectual posture created through the cultivated capacities to clarify, categorize, define, explain.” This posture, he notes, eclipses theology’s “fluid, adaptable, even morphable character.”<sup>36</sup> But the grotesque gospel calls precisely for this fluid, adaptable, morph-able theology.

Like the theologians Jennings describes, too many preachers, myself included, likewise rush too quickly to escape the interval of the grotesque. That’s our purpose, isn’t it? Surely our goal is clarity, security, certainty. Give people a nice, focused nugget to carry

35. Kenneth Surin, “Taking Suffering Seriously,” in *The Problem of Evil: Selected Readings*, ed. Michael Peterson (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1992), 344; cited in Bussie, *Laughter of the Oppressed*, 46.

36. Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 8.

home—not the shocking, unresolved contradictions of a grotesque gospel. We preachers often seem to have a “rage for order,” but, unlike the line in Wallace Stevens’s poem, I’m not so sure it’s *blest*.<sup>37</sup> For when we rush to order, when we avoid the interval of the grotesque, our preaching may become shallow, unreal, clichéd. We don’t go deep enough. We’re not honest enough. And we end up falsifying both the gospel and life itself—we end up imposing false patterns. The grotesque gospel, however, calls preachers to relinquish our familiar patterns.

In his historical novel *Silence*, Shusaku Endo depicts a descent—or is it an *ascent*?—into a grotesque gospel.<sup>38</sup> The novel takes place in seventeenth-century Japan, a time when Christians were undergoing extreme persecution. Father Sebastian Rodrigues travels from Portugal to Japan as a Jesuit missionary. He’s following his mentor, Father Fierrarra, who has himself, to the horror of his students, apparently committed apostasy.

Rodrigues begins his mission as an underground priest with a grand and beautiful ideal both of Christ and of the missionary. He looks down on those who would deny their faith and apostatize. As Jacqueline Bussie notes, Rodrigues starts out with clear, either-or, binary patterns: a person is strong or weak, honored or shamed, righteous or sinner, courageous or fearful, saved or condemned—ultimately either a believer or an apostate.<sup>39</sup> Along the way, however, as he witnesses the torture of Christian peasants and faces the terror of torture himself, Rodrigues enters into a grotesque gospel. His neat categories fall apart. His binaries no longer work. Nothing is as clear as he had thought. The martyrdoms he witnesses are not glorious, but horrifying and humiliating. Courage and strength alone do not define discipleship. Righteousness and sinfulness are not so easily distinguished. As his neat binaries collapse, Rodrigues wonders, “Why is human life so full of grotesque irony?”<sup>40</sup>

Finally, having been captured, Rodrigues is taken to the pit and brought before the *fumie*—the crucifix on which one steps to commit

37. Wallace Stevens, “The Idea of Order at Key West,” in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), 128–30.

38. Shusaku Endo, *Silence*, trans. William Johnston (New York: Taplinger, 1980).

39. My interpretation of Endo’s novel follows that of Bussie, *Laughter of the Oppressed*, 77–124. Bussie does not interpret the gospel as grotesque.

40. Endo, *Silence*, 162.

apostasy. As he stands above the fumie, he can hear the screams of others being tortured. And his captors tell him that if he steps on the fumie, if he commits apostasy, their torture will end, their suffering will cease. It's a lie, of course. But that is what he is told. As he looks at Jesus' face on the fumie, he no longer sees the beautiful face he has imagined, but an ugly, suffering face, worn down and concave from all the feet that have stepped on it. And finally Jesus breaks his silence and speaks to Rodrigues for the first time: "Trample! Trample!" he says. "I more than anyone know of the pain in your foot. It was to be trampled on by men that I was born into this world. It was to share men's pain that I carried my cross."<sup>41</sup> And Rodrigues steps on the fumie.

Confronted with the suffering of the world and the incongruities of the cross, Rodrigues has to give up his old categories, his old patterns, including his understanding of weak and strong, faith and apostasy; he even gives up his vocation. He has apostatized, but he nevertheless affirms that his faith remains. There's an unresolved resolution to the narrative. Rodrigues enters into the perilous paradoxicality of life—and faith. At the moment of his apostasy he may have actually been his most Christ-like, giving himself for the sake of others. Or is he simply justifying his apostasy, as some people claim? Rodrigues enters the interval between a testimony of faithful affirmation and a testimony of that faith's negation. He becomes, in Bussie's phrase, a "believing apostate,"<sup>42</sup> forever to live his life "poised between death and rebirth, insanity and discovery, rubble and revelation." Faced with this scandalous and inscrutable gospel, Rodrigues makes a telling comment about preaching: "I know that my Lord is different from the God that is preached in the churches."<sup>43</sup>

It is important to hear how Endo himself came to his theological insight: he *listened*. Here is what he said: "If [the Christians of that era] were to be divided into the weak and the strong, I would be among the former. . . . History knows their sufferings: I believed it was the task of the novelist to listen to their sufferings."<sup>44</sup> Endo didn't

41. Endo, *Silence*, 259.

42. Bussie, *Laughter of the Oppressed*, 77. Bussie also traces the role that laughter plays in the novel. It is the extralinguistic, grotesque laughter I discussed earlier in this chapter.

43. Endo, *Silence*, 264.

44. Quoted in Bussie, *Laughter of the Oppressed*, 79.

rush to impose his patterns on the apostates. He himself entered into the grotesque gospel. And I believe that's the appropriate stance for preachers as well. We also enter into the grotesque gospel by giving up our familiar patterns and our narrative resolutions—in order to listen. We enter the grotesque gospel by caring more for people than for patterns. Maybe that's the preacher's *kenosis*, the preacher's participation in crucifixion.

Sometimes we have to be shocked by the grotesque gospel in order to start listening. Several years ago I was on the campus of the University of Central America in San Salvador, El Salvador. At the center of that campus is a chapel—some people call it the chapel of the martyrs. It sits next to the site where in 1989 six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her daughter were brutally murdered by commandos of the Salvadoran armed forces. The priests were working for peace in the land and justice for the poor—so they were slaughtered. Next to the chapel there is a memorial museum that tells the story of the martyrs, as well as others who were murdered. A copy of Jürgen Moltmann's book *The Crucified God*, in Spanish, is in the museum. It is stained with blood. It had apparently been knocked off a bookshelf when the martyrs were killed, and it had fallen into a pool of their blood.

When you walk into the chapel you face the chancel, with a series of panels on the wall. Even though the panels show scenes of the civil war in El Salvador, including mass graves and Óscar Romero's martyrdom, the images are bright and colorful. At the center is a large, beautiful cross, painted in celebratory hues. Beside the cross are paintings depicting what appeared to me to be the coming of the Holy Spirit and the resurrection or ascension or transfiguration.<sup>45</sup> Beside those images are two large, colorful angels. The "symmetry of the figures and the brightness of the colors illustrate the power of the Resurrection to bring order and beauty to the darkest places."<sup>46</sup> That's what you see as you face the front—as you are listening to the sermon.

But when you stand in the pulpit and you face the back of the

45. Edgardo Colón-Emeric has recently argued that transfiguration is a central theological emphasis in El Salvador. See *Óscar Romero's Theological Vision: Liberation and the Transfiguration of the Poor* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2018).

46. Colón-Emeric, *Óscar Romero's Theological Vision*, 169.

chapel, you see something very different. All across the back wall are depictions of the stations of the cross. They are large, graphic, black-and-white drawings of tortured human beings. Naked, disfigured bodies. Contorted faces. Gaping mouths. It was shocking to see such figures in a church. I was reminded how such images have almost become taboo in our sanctuaries, even though for centuries churches regularly depicted horrific scenes of demonic activity on sanctuary walls.

The pulpit in that chapel in San Salvador sits in a space of unresolved contradictions. One preaches there standing between the beautiful, colorful cross and the graphic, black-and-white images of torture. One preaches “poised between death and rebirth, insanity and discovery, rubble and revelation.” And in that space none of my neat, familiar patterns would do.

I wonder now if many people aren’t aching for this grotesque gospel—for preaching that moves beyond predictable patterns into the perilous, paradoxical depths of life. I wonder if faithful preaching of a grotesque gospel requires not clarifications and resolutions, but rather careful *descriptions* of our complex and unresolved human lives, into which we believe God has entered, even if those descriptions disturb our familiar homiletical patterns. Indeed, those descriptions may often be more redemptive than our imposed theological patterns.<sup>47</sup>

Not long ago I was leading a class discussion of Claudia Rankine’s collection of poems *Citizen: An American Lyric*.<sup>48</sup> Over and over again the poems describe the dehumanizing realities of racism, particularly the microaggressions or everyday violence African American people endure. Throughout the book Rankine uses the second person—you, you, you—so the reader has to identify with these experiences. In introducing the book I said to the class, “This is a very difficult and painful book to read,” which it was for *me*. Later, however, my teaching assistant was talking to a biracial woman, who was not in the class. The woman had read the book, and *she* commented, “It wasn’t difficult for me to read at all. It was affirming. It confirmed a lifetime of experiences that I’ve had.” Redemptive description. Maybe that is the place to begin.

47. For a discussion of the importance of description in preaching, see Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 143–50.

48. Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014).

Anna Akhmatova was a beloved Russian poet who suffered greatly along with countless others through two world wars, the Russian Revolution, and especially the Stalinist terror. Her husband was executed and her son was imprisoned for many years. She herself was persecuted, condemned by the Central Committee to a civic death. Her poems had to be kept alive by people who memorized them. Someone once described her with words that were spoken about Dante: “That’s the one who was in hell.”<sup>49</sup> Her extraordinary poem-cycle, *Requiem*, which deals with the time of the terror, contains haunting echoes of the crucifixion.

Years ago my former colleague Anna Carter Florence introduced me to the short poem that opens *Requiem*. The poem is titled “Instead of a Preface.” It takes place as Akhmatova stands in line with other women waiting for news of their loved ones, who have been imprisoned during the repression run by Nikolai Yezhov, a Soviet secret-police official. She writes,

In the terrible years of the Yezhov terror, I spent seventeen months in the prison lines of Leningrad. Once, someone “recognized” me. Then a woman with bluish lips standing behind me, who, of course, had never heard me called by name before, woke up from the stupor to which everyone had succumbed and whispered in my ear (everyone spoke in whispers there):

“Can you describe this?”

And I answered: “Yes, I can.”

Then something that looked like a smile passed over what had once been her face.<sup>50</sup>

Maybe that is the place to begin.

49. *A Film about Anna Akhmatova* (New York: Das Films, TurnstyleTV, 2008).

50. Anna Akhmatova, *Requiem*, in *The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova*, trans. Judith Hemschemeyer, ed. Roberta Reeder (Somerville, MA: Zephyr Press, 1990), 95.