

# 1 Resurrection

He shows up advertising new life—this guy in sandals and a dust-crusted robe. A mangy crew tags along with him, some of them still smelling of salt water and spoiled fish. *New life*, he says, and in spite of yourself, you're falling for it: fresh starts, second chances, renewal, the dry, brittle bones of your past growing flesh and beginning again, with old hurts shed like a snake's skin on the grass. A little too good to be true, maybe, but awfully appealing, should it turn out to be true.

New life. Leaving the old stuff, the wreckage, the evidence of when you screwed up the last time and the forty-three times before that all strapped to barrels of concrete and dropped off the boat in the deep end of the ocean. Who wouldn't sign on for that?

## 2 *Why Jesus Makes Me Nervous*

So we hear the word *resurrection* in the days and hours before Easter, when the sweet breezes of spring buffet the rational parts of our brains into giddy submission. *Okay, well . . . maybe*, we're ready to say, as we watch the unlikely appearance of green from the brown, peeling bulbs we planted last fall. *Resurrection? Embarrassingly unscientific. Yet here's this warm soil that just last week was frozen to lifeless and now (who knew?) is willing to be worked once again. So what's a little more of the highly unlikely? Resurrection? Why the heck not? Bring it on.*

BUT.

But resurrection begins not with triumphantly toppled stones, empty tombs, and the masses agape in amazement, but before that. With death. With woundedness and mourning and betrayal, things done and undone, with understanding that dust and disaster and deceit are where we've landed.

Unless we're only looking at the final frame, resurrection is not pretty. To pretend otherwise, to make it, in John Updike's words, "less monstrous, / for our own convenience, our own sense of beauty," is to ignore its phenomenal power.

A minister friend of mine, Julie, has in her office a banner of truly remarkable tastelessness. It's enormous, with a garish orange sun whose red rays slide across bilious green hillocks: a toxic waste site with a Bible verse sunk beneath it.

It's hideous.

And I love it.

I love it partly because Julie insists it was made by a sweet, elderly former missionary to India. For all I know the little old saint will turn out to be the bouncer in heaven, ready to card me for heresy and un-Christlike aversion to flannel banners.

But I also love it for its hand-cut block letters that spell out “He Is Not Here. He Is Risen.”

I’ve read those words when I hadn’t eaten for days, when food had turned to dust in my mouth. I’ve read them and realized that perhaps I did not believe them—that I did not have that much hope anymore.

*Risen*. It’s not a word you can play with safely, or the rough crowd it hangs out with: *resurrection*. Now there’s a word you want to understand before you invite it inside. For one thing, it owes its entire existence to the prerequisite that something, or somebody, has died. To talk about resurrection, not just in Hallmark cards with rhyming verse, but on friendly terms, means you’ve already met up with brokenness and darkness, with the rubble of your bombed-out soul.

It turns out that the only people who can speak of resurrection with authenticity are the ones who’ve had a good whiff of the inside of a tomb. Resurrection is not a word you can tease and hold hands with for fun unless you’re informed of the risks. Because to talk about resurrection like a personal friend is to talk first about your close acquaintance with death.

Resurrection, the way Jesus defines it, means you’ve already been visited by some unseemly company—like sin

and those wages sin tries to keep charging. It's not, despite our hopes, the sin of the *Saturday Night Live* routine. Instead, it's flesh-and-blood real: sin showing up at your door demanding ongoing payment, throwing lamps and smashing the furniture, scaring off neighbors and family and friends by bull-horning the truth: that you're not *nearly* so good as you look, and here's why . . .

*Raw and bloody*: that's what Julie calls those places where you find you've shredded someone else's heart, or someone's ripped into yours, those seasons of the poor judgment of words or conduct: a crash you never saw coming—or chose not to. It's in these days and these places we're reminded we've sinned, messed up in high-definition proportions. And like David the Psalmist, the Beloved of God, David the Royal Screw Up, our sin can become an endless replay of regret.

We've been sinned against, too. Those times have left wounds splitting open and oozing again just when we thought they were healed.

At the southern tip of the Appalachians is a pretty little mountain that rings a pretty little city on a river. On the back side of this mountain is a road natives call the "W" road for its doubling back on itself as it ascends two thousand feet. If some thirty years ago you'd happened to be driving up this mountain in the dark and around on its precarious edge with the dawn of Easter Sunday just hours away, here's what you'd have stumbled onto: a small group of people huddled together in the cold. They are standing

about clutching their hot cocoa and gnawing Krispy Kreme doughnuts in silence. Some of them are too cold to speak. Some of them, too sleepy. Some of them wonder *why in the world* they have come. Some of them have only come because of the doughnuts.

None of them look particularly extraordinary—with the possible exception of the little blonde girl with braids and buck teeth over there. She’s quiet, you notice, and she’s watching. You find yourself watching, too.

As they gather themselves into a circle and softly begin to sing, you notice this also: they’re not remotely on key. But still, you can hear . . .

*Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Were you there. . . . Sometimes it causes me to tremble. . . .*

It’s dark and now you’re cold too and the fog mummies around you. You examine these people closely. You suspect it’s a small place, this mountain, where everyone knows most everything about everyone. Even the little blonde girl with the buck teeth could tell you this much: that the lady over there with the round face and red mittens just last fall had her foot on the railing of the Market Street Bridge and was *so ready* to jump. And you might still see flickers of self-loathing and despair on her face.

The man in the lined hunting shirt: people whisper that he’s the head of the local KKK chapter. It may be true. A few months ago, there was a cross burned, a family chased off the mountain.

It’s *revolting*, you’re thinking, that *he* would be here, here with you and the rest of these people waiting for Easter.

They're still singing, this group is, *Were you there. . . . Sometimes it causes me to tremble. . . .*

There's also a man with a tie. Nobody told him you don't have to dress up when it's still dark and still cold and still only the hours *before* Easter. He's in the midst of divorce. Everyone knows he hadn't really intended to end his marriage. For years now, he'd thought somehow that his money and *I'm sorry, honey* would be enough. And then one day, it wasn't. He's quietly crying into his cocoa, and he's squinting out into the dawn, not sure how it all works, this thing they're all singing. Making no sound, his shoulders shake a little. He's mouthing the words:

*Were you there when he rose up from the grave. . . . Sometimes it causes me to tremble. . . .*

Then there's a woman in a soft, elegant coat. She's dark-haired, gorgeous. Her voice soars pure and strong, perfect pitch. Glancing at her, you might decide she's one of those creatures whom life never hurts. Look closer. She'd dreamt of singing at the Met one day. But she married, had three kids. One of them is there right beside her. Watch her run her hand over his hair, and over the thickness at the back of his neck. He is smiling at her, his eyes nearly lost in the swell of his cheeks. He has Down syndrome, you can see for yourself. And you also see this: she loves him fiercely.

You watch as she sings with the others, *Were you there when they laid him in the grave. . . . Sometimes it causes me to tremble. . . .*

And there are more of these people, all gathered at the edge of a mountain, huddled now shoulder to shoulder

against the cold, grasping their doughnuts and singing uncertainly, and peering out past the dogwoods to where, two thousand feet down, a woozy sun may soon be staggering up into the valley.

But right now it's only predawn darkness and doughnuts and raw, bloody pain—ancient rage and mangled hearts and a bunch of sleepy, shivering people trying to sing together on key. All of them privately wondering if they could even begin once more to believe in resurrection.

*Sometimes, they sing, it causes me to tremble. . . . Were you there. . . ?*

There in the fog before dawn, they feel strangely drawn to this idea of death. To death and to life—and to Jesus. That last one in some ways is the strangest of all.

In these days and hours before Easter, days of ashes and dark, we realize that we're sick and we're dying and we're dead, and that finally these can be the beginning of life.

There's a seventeenth-century poet I love, a one-time playboy turned Anglican priest: John Donne first excelled at seduction poems; later, he crafted lines full of a new, violent desire for intimacy and beginning again. "Batter my heart, three-personed God; for You / As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend; / That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend / Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new."

These are the dark days. These are the hours when we can fall at the feet of the one who was lifted up for our sakes: Jesus raw and bloody rising up from the dead.

And if the violence of this process of new life is frightening

for us, then that's as it should be. In the gospel accounts of the empty tomb, fear is the common element—the writers mention trembling and fleeing, tears and bewilderment, mixed in some cases with joy. But fear comes first. In Luke, it's only in their fright that the women remember the words Jesus spoke about his resurrection, not before.

When I worked with friends in New England to begin a clothes closet and food pantry for homeless families, we explained our worthy cause to various Boston-area department stores and asked for clothing racks they could spare. One Cambridge store manager grudgingly told us to stop by. Two fellows, one who owned an ancient but helpfully huge gray station wagon, went with me. They'd both grown up in Cambridge, and had been, by their own accounts, infamous ruffians in that neighborhood. But through a couple of unlikely encounters, including passing by a concert in a VFW hall from which lyrics, painfully authentic, pierced into the night, these two had both, against all odds, passed through death.

The store's salesperson met me at the loading dock and disinterestedly heard me express our undying thanks for the one little rack she donated. Then she caught sight of the two rough characters she remembered from school years. *Terror* took hold of her face.

Pete and Jay R. explained that they'd come to help load the donated rack, and how they'd come to this post-death season of life.

*No*, she said. *No way*.

They spoke of a sunrise that came, unlooked for.

She listened, her eyes shifting back toward the door where she could still make her escape.

But in her bewilderment and her fear, she loaded us with as many clothing racks as the old gray wagon could hold, and might have emptied the store had Pete's car been able to hold more.

As we drove away, waving, she was still pale and clutching the wall to steady herself.

*Sometimes it causes me to tremble. . . .*

My husband and I got word this week that an old friend of ours is in trouble. Our friend had a string of impressive degrees from a series of Ivy League schools, a postcard-perfect family and a fine, gentle, generous heart, one after God's own. But our friend's life now includes a meth addiction. Pornography. Hookers. Arrests. Abuse. Divorce. And restraining orders. A life all come undone.

*Sometimes it causes me to tremble. . . . Were you there when they crucified my Lord . . . ?*

Partly what's so terrifying about our friend's life is that it's mine too—any of ours. It's as my friend Kelly once said: "There's a snake that lies coiled around all our hearts, only we mostly don't know it's there." Maybe, I'd add, because we choose not to know.

This most assuredly describes me and maybe you, too. And it's the impossible that we're there on the mountain waiting for: that whatever we've shredded, made raw and

bloody and way past repair, could maybe one day have life breathed into it again.

“Formation-by-resurrection” is how Eugene Peterson describes what we’re to be about as people of faith. Indeed, it’s in learning to see ourselves as created, or re-created, by the *before* and *after* distinctions, and telling those stories, giving life to those pictures, that we live into the Resurrection.

There is pain in this world, plenty of it—pain that is ancient and still newly ripped open. Tempers that come untethered. Dark, scary places we hope the people in our office can’t see. Words we use as weapons; trust we can batter. There is apathy and alienation, disgust and deceit.

And there is Jesus.

Tombs emptied out.

The raw and bloody rising up from the dead.  
*Resurrection.*

*Were you there when he rose up from the grave. . . . Sometimes it causes me to tremble. . . .*

There are ends, but also beginnings.

I believe in all the cracks in my own plaster and the rotting it hides, all the moldering holes in my heart.

I believe fair-haired saints can become addicted to meth.

But I believe also in gluttonous worms who gorge themselves drunk on my garden’s best leaves, bed themselves down on tree twigs, then wake up in spring with bold, bright-colored wings.

I believe sunrises and new days can happen for eaters of Krispy Kreme doughnuts and off-key singers of hymns and bigoted burners of crosses.

I believe in the gangrenous state of my own spirit, left to itself. And the slow, steady rehab brought on by mercy.

In lives changed against all the odds.

In middle-aged women who don't jump off bridges but live instead to become much-loved grandmothers, and in old men who can weep over where they went wrong.

In a place where our last tears will be caught by God's hand, a time when "death, thou shalt die."

Death, it turns out, has to come first.

It's the one door into the blowout, the jazz band and swing-dancing and toasting, the party that's thrown when the dead live again, and come home.

Someday maybe I'll sneak into Julie's office and spray paint my own little additions to her remarkably tasteless banner:

HE IS NOT HERE.

*And neither am I*

HE IS RISEN.

*Me too*

For in the days and hours before resurrection, there are songs sung weakly and not at all well over the edge of small mountains; there are daffodils sprung out of just-frozen soil. Beauty rising up out of the ashes we make of our lives, the havoc we wreak. There is forgiveness and healing and hope.

12 *Why Jesus Makes Me Nervous*

There is Jesus.

And when we're up on the mountain and waiting for sunrise, if we catch ourselves in a tremble, maybe that means we're being formed. By death. And by resurrection.

# 2 Community

Is it harsh to suggest that they're simply not telling the truth—the whole truth—all those gilt greeting cards, those gentle souls who insist that sharing our burdens leaves us all lighter and brighter?

I don't mean they're *intending* to gloss things over into a lie, these people who are liable to launch into a rousing chorus of “Climb, Climb Up Sunshine Mountain” sung from metal folding chairs in basement *fellowship* halls. These sweet-spirited saints should be loved. But not trusted.

Real Christian community has little to do with Sunshine Mountain.

Real community is more like my friend Janet watching me sob into my rosemary bread at a Quizno's in Texas.

Janet and I had become friends when we'd moved to Texas at about the same time and discovered we shared a peculiar disorder: finding comfort in the heady aromas of equine sweet feed and leather and aging manure.

She'd invited me one August day on a trail ride through brittle sage and sun-stroked mesquite, and she'd shown herself to be the far better horsewoman. As we pulled the tack from our mounts, Janet told how she'd met her husband, Bob, working in the kitchen of a camp in the Rockies, the same camp where their daughter, Joanna, would work that next summer.

That day at Quizno's, in fact, we spoke of Janet's daughter. Joanna was a young beauty of still more beautiful spiritual depth. Authentic. Vivacious. A leader of her high school's Young Life Chapter. When she'd spoken of her journey of faith at a recent fund-raising event, she'd glowed. Flushed cheeks, bright eyes, a spill of long, yellow hair, and a laugh that kept fizzing up into her words.

But then here we were, these many months later, in Quizno's, nearby diners turning to stare as I blew my nose in a napkin.

Janet was speaking of Joanna.

The day after her eighteenth birthday, Joanna and two friends had driven the ninety miles south to Austin for lunch. They were celebrating their upcoming graduations from high school, her birthday, their recent prom, the gleam of their futures before them. They'd laughed 'til they hurt. They'd been girlfriends out together, young and carefree.

On the way home, they'd pulled off for soft drinks, and

in pulling back onto the access road, failed to yield to another driver. The two girls in the front seat, one of them Joanna, were killed.

The call had come to my house late that night, my husband out of town, my infant son cocooned in his crib, my older daughter asleep in my bed, my younger daughter still only a dream and a prayer. I lay awake all that night, stunned beyond all reaches of sleep, and stroked my own daughter's long hair. I tried to form prayers, but mostly let the hole blasted through my insides do the speaking to God. If I slept at all, it was as monks do between Divine Offices of the night, my words going forth in choked gutters: *oh God, dear God, oh God, God, Jesus, dear God, oh God, God, GOD. . . .*

The next day I'd gone to Janet's house, where family and nearly the entirety of their old church in Ohio were beginning to gather. My '96 Taurus began wheezing just as I pulled onto their street, and actually cut off its own motor just outside their door. So I arrived to be of assistance with a platter of sandwiches, a potted plant, and a broken-down car.

Not being one of the innermost circle of friends, and never one to find the right words in a crisis, I mourned alongside the others, like me nearly silent, all of us washing dishes and replenishing platters and fielding phone calls. Then, whispering into a corner, I phoned AAA to come tow my car.

But tipped off by someone, Janet stopped me. "Bob's already out there looking at it."

“*What!*”

“He loves working on cars.”

Her husband, Bob, was a dean at the university where we all worked. He wore suits to work and was known for innovations in public education. His daughter had just been killed the night before.

And he was working on my car.

“But he . . . I can’t—!”

“Let him,” she said.

I ran out to the car, its hood still steaming.

Bob was indeed bending over my engine, two men flanking him.

I opened my mouth to beg Bob to stop.

One of the men laid a hand on my arm. “Let him. You need to let him.”

Back inside, Janet nodded. “At least for these moments, he can focus on something that isn’t this. For these moments at least, it’s a gift.”

Four months later, my friend Janet sat square shouldered and without tears, but with grief in her eyes that suggested she was still hemorrhaging on the inside, telling me of her prayer life from deep down in the Valley of the Shadow, while I wept. For us, there was no mercy of a conked-out car engine to focus on and, for a moment at least, pretend that’s why we were there.

Up to that point, it had been a nice day. The lecture on Walt Whitman had gone well, though I’ve never much

cared for Whitman. Several students had lagged after class to talk—a good sign.

Having lunch with Janet had ruined all that. Just by her being honest and real, not pretending that things were happier, sweeter, more easy to bear than back in May, she'd drawn me into her valley of empty-armed darkness. Here she soldiered on, dressing and driving and breathing, just as if the world were still a blue-skies kind of place and not what she knew it to be. Praying and believing in hope, against all the evidence.

We were community that day at Quizno's. And it wasn't pretty.

I have no illusions that people outside Christian faith don't share grief and delight with their friends, that they aren't drawn into the same harbors of sorrow and celebration. Or that people who've at least commenced some kind of conversation with Jesus become automatically, *presto*, somehow superior at creating communities of the real and the free and the brave.

It's just that Christ, on the night he was betrayed, made it nonnegotiable, this community thing. For the crowd who shows up with Jesus, it's part of the deal, part of what you signed on for. *Community*. Sometimes fuzzy and pink and straight out of the hospital gift shop. Sometimes raw and mind-numbingly painful. It's learning to peel back the husks of I'M NICE AND IN NO NEED OF HELP on ourselves and the person beside us, and not passing out when we see what's inside.

In the 1980s, my husband worked with the Peace Corps in Paraguay, where he learned the native, pre-Spanish language, Guaraní. I speak an impressive word total of two Guaraní words: *nande* and *ore* (pronounced yan-day and ore-ay). Both mean “we” or “our,” but the latter excludes the person you’re speaking to, while the former, *nande*, includes that person. It’s always struck me as a helpful communications fine point we should require in English. It would clear up so many awkward social situations if one could state from the beginning that *only ORE were invited, in other words, not you, and please don’t press me for why.*

But the kind of community Jesus creates that last, rented-room night hanging out with the boys from the ’hood starts out with “I” and “you,” and ends up, by the breaking of a body and the shedding of blood, creating a “we” that draws everyone—those who want to be drawn—in for the grim days ahead, a *nande* kind of “we.” Whether you like it or not, you’re included. If you’re noshing the bread and downing the wine, you’re along for the ride. For the good, bad, and ugly, you’re part of the team.

It struck me a number of years ago when I was helping to serve communion in New England what a strange and radical practice it was.

Take the word we use for it: *communion*. Do we really mean that?

We’re tough, self-reliant. We can do it all on our own. Communion, indeed. With God, maybe—but *only* God, and only as I conceive of God, and only while the music

plays softly and the light streams through the hues of century-old stained glass.

You know how it goes. The movement is no longer connected in any meaningful way to the conscious mind.

But now and then the whole thing takes you by surprise, the words *This is my body, This is my blood* seep quietly into and fill the hole inside you'd forgotten was even there. It's only for that moment, only as you reach for the bread, the body given for you, and accept the cup, the blood shed for you, that you feel somehow linked with the divine, certain for that fleeting moment that you are looked upon with mercy and love. You are still marveling at the part about you—given for *you*, shed for *you*—when the person behind you steps up to your place to receive the words *This is my body, given for . . .*

And it's not just that one person. There are two long lines of people staggering out of their pews, going through the motions whether they believe it or not just now. And over and over again the words *This is my body, given for . . . This is my blood, shed for . . .* meet them as they come, building face upon face and life upon life until the words mean something more than just you.

Before you and behind you and to your side these others reach for the bread and drink from the cup, having lugged well-disguised fears, ravenous greeds, secret selves, dearest dreams. As they come and come and come, again and again and again, those words come too, as if they had not been whispered to the person before him or the person after her,

but spoken as if they mean something very different and very much the same each time.

There's the one whose future looks murky. The present is polluted, mostly by his own decisions. He knows that, and treading water is no longer an option.

*This is my body, he hears. And my blood, shed for you.*

There's another coming forward, who feels within her another life, carving out spacious new caverns for itself beneath her ribs. Sometimes she finds herself startled by a kind of joy that tumbles from somewhere deep within her.

She too hears, *This is my body. This is my blood, for you. For us. Nande.*

There are others, though, who let their eyes wander discreetly around the room, and feel oddly cramped and crowded—and alone. Tired of being alone. Tired of concocting ecstatic remarks about other people's engagement rings and mustering up little cooing sounds for other people's babies. So tired of being cramped and crowded and all alone.

*This is my body. This is my blood.*

Others come not allowing themselves to think out loud about the little pulses of doubt in the goodness or the justice of God that throb inside their heads. And some of them spend a good portion of their days punching on a difficult past, beating it back into its flimsy box where it does not stay for long. Still others coming now have watched sickness come stalking, watched mighty medical weapons crumple like cardboard swords and somehow still