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Easter Day proves to be the hardest day of the year for many a preacher. For never is it more the case than on Easter Day that the church’s *text* is so completely swamped by the church’s *context*. The preacher prepares to preach on a text from a Gospel in which there is great confusion, a tomb is inexplicably empty, people are running in fear, God plans to open a tomb and Pilate orders soldiers to “make it as secure as you can,” and there is eventually worship but there is also doubt.

The Gospel texts for Easter do not suggest the church’s high-noon, full-throated certainty; but the *context* of Easter all but demands such certainty. People come in their new outfits and their best pastel colors expecting brass and lilies and triumphant proclamations, and they will settle for nothing less. So it is that context almost inevitably overthrows text; not to mention that somewhere in this mix is the preacher herself—a mixed-bag, after all, on Easter Day and on any day, of worship and doubt, faith and fear. It takes courage, therefore, to approach Easter not in a decorator-perfect way but with the serious and probing exegetical and homiletical preparations that it deserves.

It is our hope that this issue of *Insights* will companion you in this liturgical year in an honest and fearless look at the texts of Easter. Help comes your way from our own John Alsup’s thoughtful take on the “Easter egg” that God is “hatching.” Steven Kraftchick of Emory’s Candler School of Theology offers an intriguing meditation on the demands and courage required to live into a resurrection ethos. Colleen Shantz, of St. Michael’s and the Toronto School of Theology, invites us to be challenged by the message of resurrection; to participate in the transformation of the world. Rhashell Hunter, a pastor working in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) offices in Louisville, offers practical advice for preaching resurrection, and Jon Walton, pastor of First Presbyterian Church in New York City, lets us in on some of the piercing questions he struggles with even after thirty-five years of preaching on Easter—questions which finally yield to a satisfying and powerful affirmation. Not to be missed near the end of this issue are the pastoral reflections on Easter preaching offered by Karen Jamison, Brent Hampton, and Timothy Smith. Other treasures are included in this issue, including some great book reviews and a thoughtful piece by our Comparative Religions authority, Professor Whit Bodman.

May it be that, come Easter, you will be prepared to be a witness to the authority of text over context. May you lift up the resurrection mystery that binds us all to our risen Christ, and to one another!

Theodore J. Wardlaw
President, Austin Seminary
So there you sit at your desk, trying not to bemoan the fact that March 23, 2008, is the earliest date for Easter in something like thirty years. Perhaps you feel overwhelmed as you review the lectionary gospel readings from John 20:1-18 or Matthew 28:1-10—or some other gospel Easter text—contemplating your task, as a pastor or layleader, to say something responsible and inspiring about what happened at the resurrection of Jesus. You’ve probably been here before (haven’t we all?): wanting the Easter egg of your devotion to hatch into something that is, well … clarifying and hopeful.

Two voices from the history of interpretation advise seekers to change venues at this point from the Gospels to 1 Corinthians 15 because the former do more to becloud than to clarify what happened at Easter and, after all, 1 Corinthians predates the “legends” of the gospels anyway.¹ In previous studies,² I have found this radical

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John Alsup is the First Presbyterian Church Shreveport, D. Thomason Professor of New Testament Studies at Austin Seminary. He is currently working on a commentary on the Gospel of Mark and maintains a website (www.encounterscripture.net) that promotes dialogue about sermon preparation and shares responses to the common lectionary. A rancher and writer of fiction from a theological perspective, Alsup is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) who, along with his students, has pastored the Sunrise Beach Federated Church for nearly thirty years.
skepticism to be misplaced. The desire to discover and to pass on something clarifying and hopeful about what happened at the resurrection of Jesus as witnessed by that gospel text before you is legitimate; your text deserves a careful second look. Maybe the hatching of the Easter egg is about to happen.3

On our gate out at the road there hangs a spring wreath of artificial flowers placed by my wife, Carole, to welcome the change of season. In time, cradled in the lower part of that wreath, there began to appear the construction of a delicate nest followed by two beautiful little blue-green eggs with dots on them. To this day we still have not seen the mother bird herself. It is so mysterious. Are the eggs going to hatch without the mother bird sitting on them? They look so fragile; we are expectant, but the resolution of the life or death mystery will happen by another’s hand. We wait. The hour to hatch comes—simply put—at hatching time.

Interpretations of Easter are so much like these fragile eggs. They remind me somewhat of Jurassic Park, of all things! You’ll recall Spielberg’s cinematic version of the Michael Crichton novel: the imaginative application of science has produced eggs that—following incubation in sacredly white sterile-rooms—hatch forth a rather impressive, though troubling, spectacle! Similarly, the assessments of the traditions giving witness to Jesus’ resurrection in the Gospels and elsewhere in the New Testament make up a basket of eggs, as it were, which create a bewildering spectacle. While it is tempting to grasp for what appears to be the most innovative egg in the basket, caution is in order. The eggs in this basket have been hatching for some time now; in fact, since the Easter story’s inception. And the current eggs of choice often have a strong resemblance to earlier counterparts that have proven problematic. Caveat Emptor … let the buyer beware!

For instance, the most popular “egg” of Easter interpretation today also happens to be one of the oldest eggs in the basket of options. Born in the incubation rooms of our collective behavioral science psyches, this option simply declares that Jesus’ resurrection was a psychological phenomenon: he rose of necessity in the hearts and minds of his disciples. The beat went—and had to go—on! As Willi Marxsen, a well-known member of the Bultmann school, once put it, the resurrection of Jesus can be summed up as follows: “the thing/matter (Ger. = Sache)” of Jesus goes on [after his death].4 Or as earlier representatives of this view had said: Jesus had made such an impression on his disciples that its power simply could not be extinguished by his dying! The explanatory observation of the second century Platonist, Celsus, locates itself as a kind of progenitor of this perspective and bears quoting here:

While he was alive he did not help himself, but after death he rose again and showed the marks of his punishment and how his hands had been pierced. But who saw this? A hysterical female, as you say, and perhaps some other one of those who were deluded by the same sorcery, who either dreamt in a certain state of mind and through wishful thinking had a hallucination due to some mistaken notion—an experience which has happened to thousands—or, which is more likely, wanted to impress the others by telling this fantastic tale, and so by this cock-and-bull story to provide a chance for other beggars.5

For a culture like ours that is shaped to the core by the disciplines of the social sci-
ences and psychology, the explanations of faith in Jesus’ resurrection from the dead which are embedded in the psychological crises of the first disciples (and not coincidently of modern-day ones too) are very appealing. Spanning the more than one hundred year rise and dominance of rationalism in the Renaissance—from Reimarus, to Lessing, to Strauss, to Bousset and Weiss—this “egg” was hatching forth its view of Easter. We are its enthusiastic heirs. Resonating with many, a contemporary version of this interpretation of Easter origins has been argued of late by Gert Luedemann. For him, the definitive psycho-drama of faith played itself out in the inner-self struggles with guilt of Peter and Paul. The one had betrayed Jesus at his trial with a pronouncement of “I never knew the man”; the other had persecuted Jesus’ followers until the rupture of confrontation with his own injustice befell him on the road to Damascus! In a kind of “I’m OK, you’re OK” resolution of forgiveness, Easter faith was born. This hatchling among the Easter eggs is so alluring in our time because it appears to be so eminently practical, so consistent with the psychological starting point for almost every analysis, so relevant to all who have ever confessed to feeling the weight of guilt pangs, and because it promotes a view of history’s privatization—in the spirit of existentialism—that focuses on one’s own personal history.

Similar to this path, yet nuanced in a variety of ways, are those views which choose to massage the issues of Easter by recourse to the use of metaphor and symbol in contexts both ancient and modern. Resurrection, in popularized thinking, is by and large a cipher of the human spirit for the principles of life’s triumph over death or the supremacy of the good and the beautiful vis-à-vis all that is wrong and ugly in the world. As much as one might wish for these principles to be true, they live only as long as the subjectively isolated optimism sustaining them lives. The genre of obituary often lauds such optimistic longing … a first cousin to the well-meaning platitude at the grave: “he/she is in a better place now.”

As an alternative both to the much-cultivated assessments of the imaginative inner life and to the baggage of guilt most must bear, discussions in the church and in the academy seem to return of necessity and with regularity to a way of promise for hatching the egg of Easter. Simply put, these discussions return again and again to the matter of historical location—to the “Did it happen in history?” issue. This article seeks to find some fresh way to talk about Easter and God’s relationship to history. Of all the eggs in the Easter basket of options, this one presses relentlessly for the hatching.

Sometimes a casual remark in a conversation or a vexing statement in a book or article can stay with you seemingly forever as you mull its implications for the truly large questions of life. Just such an insightful remark came from the pen of Leonhard Goppelt in his 1 Peter Commentary: “Living out of the resurrection of Jesus within the institutions of society means eschatological existence in history.” Vexing, here, is the notion that the resurrection of Jesus is not simply some datum of history to argue about, but rather the definitive paradigm for life. It is the dawn of God’s new creation; eschatological existence located not exclusively in a post-historical eternity, but lived in this historical reality. Expounding on this matter once in conversation, Goppelt commented that Christians have nothing more or essentially different to expect in the eschaton than that which encounters them now within history.
For Goppelt, the “new” at work within the “old” was the best way to talk about God’s relationship to history. He believed it was fruitful, therefore, to cultivate dialogue between the Testaments. He did this in a purposeful, long-lasting conversation with Gerhard von Rad, an Old Testament scholar. The two deliberated about the nature and purpose of prophecy as well as the interpretive angle of vision provided by typology, a way of looking at prophetic promise and redemptive fulfillment that depends on a triangular, rather than a linear, schematic. As Goppelt often put it: “God’s connection to history is revealed ‘von oben her’ (from above)” and not from below. The fact that history is en route toward a redemptive goal is, therefore, not an interpretive claim of immanence based on reasoned deduction derived from the phenomena of particular events themselves. Rather, the interpretation of events is revealed to faith “from above” via an encounter with scripture. Hence, typology is not a linear road map connecting the dots from Old Testament promise to New Testament fulfillment; after all, the phenomena of history, minus the triangular apex, are always subject to multiple interpretations. Fulfillment arrives, God’s new thing dawns, only when it is declared to be so by God!

A key component to this line of thought was its interest in the theophany stories of the Old Testament, particularly the anthropomorphic ones where God appeared of old to human beings in disguise, as it were, in human form. Goppelt saw in these stories the profound faith memory of the people of God that the Creator/Covenant Maker had been connected from the beginning to the creatures of the created order, to history, in a relationship of faithful self-offering (Ger. “Selbstdarbietung Gottes”). What was not otherwise self-evident became clear through God’s self-disclosure; through it both God’s person (as subject) and God’s will (as the fashioning of redemption) were revealed. Goppelt saw this scriptural (apocalyptic) vision for history in accord with the declaration of Rev. 21:5 (“behold, I am making all things new”). It was, moreover, a vision of covenant restoration toward redeemed householding in table fellowship (Psa. 23) and reconciliation under the exclusive sovereignty of God’s Lordship (1 Cor. 15:23-28).

These anthropomorphic theophany stories of the Old Testament emerge, upon a closer look, as extremely relevant for the hatching of the Easter egg in that gospel text for March 23. Often what you have said or written is so bound up with how you say it or write it that the two cannot—and should not—be separated. Poets and other artists of voice, brush, and pen know this dictum all too well. And it was as true for the ancients as it is for us today. Is it better, more accurate, more compelling, or more real to relate the events of history—especially when there is little or no precedent for them in comparative moments of life or death—through the accounts of eye-witnesses, through the assessments of scientific “history detectives,” or through the selective memory of obituary writers? Or is such history better relayed through the songs of the poet, the stories of the novelist, or the images of the painter? For the recounting of history, this question is worth weighing carefully. There is a construction in Greek accidence called a “partitive genitive” which says, in effect, that certain verbs (for example, the verb “to hear”) take a genitive rather than a normal accusative object because we never get the whole story when we see or hear something; we only receive a “part” of it! There
is a lot of truth to this phenomenon for historical reconstruction as well: when all seems to have been said and done, we still await Paul Harvey’s “the rest of the story.”

Who is in a position to tell—or hear for that matter—the whole story when it comes to historical reconstruction, to telling the whole story of what really happened? For the people of God this has always been a theological question of the first magnitude. And the reply of faith has always been: “God alone” (see 1 Cor. 13:12: “I see in part and know in part, but then one day.”). The theophany stories of the Old Testament are good examples of how ancient Israel spoke of and saw the relationship of God to history (incidentally, the gospel post-resurrection appearance texts are close family relatives!).

The mystery of the true identity of the God of theophany is like the mystery of Jesus’ true identity in the gospels: “who is this One that even the wind and the seas obey him?” (Mark 4:41). The theophany story backgrounds to the resurrection appearance accounts speak an eloquent witness to the post-resurrection re-assembling of the “followers of the way.” Here as there, we behold a mysterious hearing/seeing only in part by (befuddled) disciples that draws the hearer/reader into a “you are there” mode of engagement, into the story of God’s redeeming work in history. It is here, at this very juncture, that the Easter egg is about to hatch! The mystery of the divine disclosure of God’s relationship to history and God’s “disguised” visitation among mortals in the theophany genre was created, it would appear, by the tension between God’s determination to be revealed/recognized and the fundamental impossibility of a face-to-face encounter between divine holiness and the sinfulness of mortal flesh. The dictum of Exodus 33:20, “you cannot see my face, for the mortal shall not see me and live,” found accommodation in the deceptive yet saving motif of the genre’s featured disguise. The re-telling of memory also deemed the form of re-telling to be requisite because of this essential theological accommodation. It was—is—after all, history of a special kind: it is both evident and hidden; there is more in the “hidden” here than meets that eye which sees without faith!

So, what is clarifying and hopeful, responsible and inspiring about what happened at the resurrection of Jesus as witnessed by our gospel Easter texts? To be sure, the texts affirm the foundational confessions of the (ancillary) kerygma tradition (1 Cor. 15:1-7 and the pauline redactional appropriation in vv. 8-58) and the apostolic sermons tradition of Acts (chs. 2, 3, 5, 10, and 13) that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God’s new creation of the end time has dawned. At this intersection of history, chronological time has been for all time encountered and altered by “kairos,” destiny’s hour. The answer to the question “what time is it?” or “how late is it?” has become “nuni de,” the “but now” of “old things have passed away, behold, all things have become new” … empirical, evidential stock-taking notwithstanding! As a parallel but independent voice alongside these ancillary traditions, the gospel story genre in Matthew 28 and John 20 is rich in content and exceeds even these powerful affirmations. Here are a few of the Easter eggs being hatched in each of these texts:

(1) In Matthew 28 we discover a double yoke: (a) the first is the non sequitur created by the emptiness of the tomb (the historicity of which no one ever doubted) and the earth-shaking arrival of the glory-clad heavenly messenger (a kind of heavenly glory
The Hatchering of the Easter Egg

angelic version of a theophany genre). The messenger announces to the two women what was not readily apparent at first glance, namely, that the crucified One has been raised from the dead by God. The women are instructed to pass this announcement on to the other disciples with the addition of an impending appearance encounter with the resurrected One who goes before them to Galilee. (b) The second part of the double yoke is expanded redactionally by Matthew to form the shape and content of an appearance of Jesus to the fleeing women: the fear motif and the commanded prohibition thereto from the tomb story are repeated, as is the command to pass on the announcement of a projected sighting in Galilee. The scene is, thereby, set for the (for Matthew all important) group appearance there in vv. 16-20, which does not allow the planned deception, alluded to in vv. 11-15, to be the final word of this gospel. Instead, the theophanic features of the appearance genre (see (3), below)—translated into the specialized commissioning vocabulary of Matthew—give apostolic witness to the new day dawning for God’s world.

(2) In John 20 the double-yoked Easter egg is also apparent: the (historically undisputed) empty tomb is enabled, through its redactional connection to the theophanic-appearance genre, to become a witness to the resurrection. As in Matthew 28, so too here, the interpretive theological redaction of the Evangelist is much in evidence. For example, the women (plural) coming to the tomb in the first part of the double-yoked egg (see the first person plural “we” in v. 2) have now become Mary Magdalene (singular) alone; the apostolic visual confirmation, secured by the presence of Peter and the Beloved Disciple’s footrace to the tomb, supplements the veracity of the story. This alteration is generated, apparently, by the Evangelist’s desire to incorporate from his special source material the appearance story account, which, among all the Easter appearance stories, bears, in some ways, the closest marks of an eye-witness report.10 And yet, even here, the disciplined insistence on allowing the statement capacity of the theophanic genre in all of its theological precision to elucidate historical meaning prevailed! Just as in Matthew, the group appearance in vv. 19-31 pulls together the summary features of the new day dawning.

(3) The motifs of the theophanic genre represent, for all the gospel resurrection appearance stories, points of contact with lived-life moments the likes of which we have already met in the episodes and paradigmatic moments of the historical Jesus gospel genre. To wit: (a) when eyesight failed, when faith succumbed to doubt, when hunger prevailed, when God’s vision of purpose and meaning for God’s people became obscured by compromise,11 when crises overwhelmed, and finally, when hopes and dreams were dashed at Jesus’ death … to the surprise of all the bereft, their crises did not do them in. (b) Jesus remained steadfast and came to them when they were so absorbed in their crises that they weren’t even able to ask for help and they were taken aback by the unexpected encounter. (c) Blinded by pain or doubt or even by divine intervention prompting non-recognition, they cannot see what they are looking at or—better—the One who is looking at them. Even when clues suggest a cracking through the shell, the bereaved followers of Jesus doubt, choosing the path of obscurity and skepticism. (d) Persistent, this Jesus of their current or former experience speaks to them through a mixture of direct discourse, through the remembered voice of scripture,
or through his familiar sayings ringing in their ears. He now assures them that he is near, with them. God is with them. And then, (e) they do finally recognize him as the Lord and therein find the slow but consequential resolution to their doubts, doubts which—oddly enough—continue to flourish and multiply, nonetheless, in the context of a living faith.

These motifs describe poignantly the living history of the people of God sent and commissioned by that same Lord. What has happened at the resurrection of Jesus can and must be restated through countless testimonies of Christian people in all parts of the earth and in all generations. In them we hear about the hatching of the Easter egg within the context of a history that is capable, no doubt, of multiple interpretations, but whose hidden component declares the theophanic character of Easter egg reality hatched by God on “the first of the Sabbaths.”

NOTES
3. Seeking a breakthrough toward meaning but with less than satisfactory results was the recent symposium under the direction of Robert B. Stewart, published under the title: The Resurrection of Jesus: John Dominic Crossan and N.T. Wright in Dialogue (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006).
8. For example, see Genesis 18 and Judges 6 and 13.
10. See my Post-Resurrection Appearance Stories, 206-213. Commenting, with a Dan-Brown-like flare, in a similar judgment to that of Celsus noted above, p. 3, was Ernest Renan, “Divine power of love! Sacred moments in which the passion of one possessed gave to the world a resuscitated God!” (The Life of Jesus [Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, n.d.], 302).
11. This morass prompts the prophetic word spoken by the Lord in Isaiah 55:8: “my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord.”
12. Likely a Greek expression derived from a Hebrew idiom at Mark 16:2. It probably connects the first day of the week with the Sabbath days of God’s resting, marking the culmination of rest in new creation peace.
In your essay you mention that some biblical scholars recommend looking at 1 Corinthians, rather than at the Gospels, when reflecting on what really happened on Easter. Why do they believe consideration of the Gospels “beclouds” our understanding? And why do you disagree?

To answer this I need go back to the work of German theologian Hans Grass, who in 1956 published an important book, never translated into English. Grass argues that each Gospel reflects a “take” on the Easter story that is legendary, but in no way historical. The Gospels actually tell us very little, then, about what happened on Easter morning. His advice to preachers is that, if you really want to preach a good Easter sermon and understand what happened at Easter, the best thing for you to do is to stay away from the Gospels, instead studying 1 Corinthians 15. My dissertation advisor, Leonhard Goppelt, pointed out to me that there were two generations of pastors who were avoiding the Gospels when it came to exploring the questions of Easter. I agreed with him that the time had come to do a history-of-tradition analysis of these stories, and I went to work.

Would it be fair to say that at least a part of what you’re arguing in your essay is that what the Gospels are contributing to the historicity question is testimony to “theophany,” God’s self-revelation, and that’s what’s most important about them?

Yes. For awhile pastors, influenced by this discussion, felt as if they had to choose between the extremes of accepting the Gospels either as “eye-witness accounts” or rejecting them as just legends. In my work I explored a history-of-tradition analysis of these texts, concluding that these extremes are not the only two options we have. I make the point that, if historicity is connected to a form and genre, then it’s not only what happened, it’s how one talks about it that’s essential. The Germans use the term Gattung for naming the wedding of form and meaning. We don’t have an equivalent term in English. We use the approximate French term “genre.” When something is recognizable in a literary form, it is so married to the essence of what’s being said that the form and the substance of the matter cannot be separated. Poets know, for example, that even the smallest child will expect a fairy tale if you begin your story with: “Once upon a time in a castle on a mountain …”

My little granddaughter Anna ran up to me the other day and said, “Have you seen the funny papers today?” She’s only six, but she already knows that the funny paper is supposed to be funny. And she read it to me. She had this little example she liked and she read it and she said, “Isn’t that funny?” And I was reminded of how the thing she was regarding as funny was actually more than funny. But she’s too young, yet, to have
discovered the truth that lies underneath the funniness of the genre. It reminded me of a time, when her father, my son Dan, was little. He came running up to me singing a line from Travolta’s “Saturday Night Fever.” The Bee Gees had done the soundtrack for that movie, and had adapted the opening to Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony: “Da Da Da D-a-a,” Dan sang. “You gotta hear this,” he told me. “This is the coolest song.” And so I put the original Beethoven on, and asked him which of the two renditions he liked better. “The Bee Gees!” he proclaimed. And I thought to myself: “Now, that’s how Gattung works. It’s so married to the essence of the thing that Beethoven, through that signature, enabled it to have its journey forward. The Bee Gees grabbed it and placed it in Dan’s heart and it continues to live on, in him, to this very day. So you see how Gattung is so critical for creative essence and memory.

And when we encounter the resurrected One, we ask the core questions that are the crisis of our real need: Who are we, anyway? Where do we come from? Where are we going? The confrontation with the empty tomb prompts the crisis marked by questions such as, Where are you, God? Why is this tomb empty? Aren’t we supposed to have memorial places where we can go and celebrate all the wonders of our past? And we hear the risen One asking us why we are looking for the living among the dead…

Let me just say this to make sure I’ve got it: are you saying that the gospels couldn’t say it any other way? That the story itself is the “da-da-da-daa”? Yes. What worked for the Gospel writers—just as for the oral tellers pre-dating them—was to relate the resurrection appearance stories in a way that remembered the theophany stories of the Old Testament as accommodation to the theological nature of their witness.
So what does this mean for all of us when we wake up on Easter morning, ready to proclaim the good news? What is the Gattung for the preacher? How do theophanies come into play for Christian believers who claim that “Jesus Christ is risen today?”

The first thing I like to remember is that the disciples found themselves in a crisis situation. I think that’s a very good starting point for the preacher, because it is our common experience. You don’t know crisis at all until you realize that you actually are the new in the midst of the old. Paul talks in Romans about how the spirit and the flesh are hunkered down in the trenches doing battle and heaving salvos at one another, and this crisis goes on in an ever-deepening way. The more God’s Spirit re-creates us, the more sensitive we are to this crisis that is more than being bad occasionally. You know what I mean? It’s this really deep thing that you don’t understand—you can’t fix the deep crisis by saying, “This is behavioral science stuff; we need to become more functional as families.” I’m all for functionality (don’t get me wrong!). But when it comes to the real core of our problem, it’s a theological issue. The awful side is really awful, and the really good is better than good. It’s better than you can possibly imagine. Hovering within earshot is something like “Eye has not seen and ear has not heard what wonderful things God is preparing for those that love God” (1 Cor. 2:9), or “Behold, I am making all things new things” (Rev. 21:5).

So it is recognizing the new in the midst of the old that precipitates the crisis you are talking about?

Goppelt was always reminding us that the resurrection is not something we are still awaiting, something that will somehow dawn after history is finally over. The resurrection is about, rather, God’s new work in history and creation. This is the reality we embrace by faith, and with profound gratitude. We receive this gift on our knees, our hands empty and open. This new thing is strictly God’s gift. When we experience it, we usually want to bottle it and market it. But the moment we start to grab at it, saying, “Here it is, this is the essence,” it evaporates. Goppelt reminds us that we cannot grab or hold God—the gift, rather, ever-remains with the Giver. And when we encounter the resurrected One, we ask the core questions that are the crisis of our real need: Who are we, anyway? Where do we come from? Where are we going? The confrontation with the empty tomb, all the consternation it brings out, prompts the crisis marked by questions such as, Where are you, God? Why is this tomb empty? Aren’t we supposed to have memorial places where we can go and celebrate all the wonders of our past? And we hear the risen One asking us why we are looking for the living among the dead, clearly delivering a “no” from God regarding the matter of this being the final resting place.

If you go through the other motifs of the core Gattung, you can see the ones that various evangelists developed further for the importance of the believing community they were addressing. You take, for instance, the meal motif—the Emmaus story from Luke. The way Luke incorporates that motif is in a sacramental direction; we’ve picked that up in the Presbyterian Church with the telling of the Emmaus story at the communion table like we do. But the original form of that motif was not sacramental. Rather, it was the resurrected One being able to provide the nourishment we need to carry on. It probably came out of the feeding accounts—the feeding of the four thousand and the five thousand. And here were these people who were starving, they were
in a crisis situation, and Jesus comes and provides for their needs so that they don't die on the spot. Now, if you are a preacher mulling over the fact that the original scope of the feeding has to do with provision for need, you may wind up at the communion table and you may not. You might wind up at Meals on Wheels or somewhere else—it's hard to say!

Let me switch gears for just a little bit. It seems to me that many of us feel compelled to try and clarify what happened on Easter. And I sense you believe that this is problematic. Why is it, in your view, that people consistently ask their pastors to clarify what happened? Is a person like Marcus Borg popular because he is giving folks a way to escape worrying about historical details?

We still don't know for sure who was involved in the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, but this doesn't seem to stop us from believing that modern-day forensics, police reporting, and other technologies will eventually enable us to do so. We want to believe everything in history can be clarified in one way or another because we embrace a certain view of history. As you know, the Germans have two words for history, “Geschichte” and “Historie,” and Historie is this kind of pure history we usually have in mind—history as we see it, without all the complexities that come when multiple persons are involved in the telling of it. Borg is interesting because he isn't involved in this kind of historical nit-picking. He visits people where they really are, exploring what for him is the symbolic power of the resurrection in ways that give people hope and interest for a better, deeper, more realistic kind life.

But does Borg’s approach precipitate crisis?

Not necessarily, though for some it does. Borg wants to help; he wants to solve some things. But if you say that the resurrection life that marks Christian community is this new thing where everything is different—where there is neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, slave nor free—then nothing is easily solved. Instead, everything you have counted on as being the distinctive qualities of lived life is pulled out from under you. And suddenly the crisis is there, and your sense of clarity has a new dimension to it. And I think that’s where we talk about faith. Not about my faith, but the gift of faith that is fundamentally about giving praise to God in every situation, whether in season and out of season. In season is good. But out of season—when things are going really bad—is where we know the distinction between joy and happiness. Happiness is good, but joy is a whole lot better. Happiness is basically an emotion, but joy is a gift from God. And when you get to the grave at a funeral service, anyone acting happy around there is going to be asked to leave. But joy is a whole different thing; it is a celebration of something greater than our ability to overcome things on our own. It is cognizance of the resurrection.
I confess that I am a little leery of conversations about resurrection—not the experience of resurrection (which I hope for) but our talk and thinking about resurrection. I worry largely because of the particular moment in which we are living and the way it is stressing Christian theological formulations. Christian ideas and identity are newly pressured on two sides: on the one hand, religious pluralism and extremism of all kinds pose very great and momentous challenges; on the other hand, some scientists and philosophers have begun directly to attack all religion as false and destructive. For example, this week (mid-August) in my country (Canada) the list of best-selling books of nonfiction is headed by: 1) *God is not Great* by Christopher Hitchens; and 2) *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins. The first volume argues that religion produces violence and intolerance and is based on misrepresentations of reality. The second argues that religion is delusional, in direct conflict with science, and harmful to children. Rounding out the top three bestsellers in non-fiction, Alan Weisman’s *The World Without Us* projects what the earth will be like after we humans render ourselves extinct. That’s quite a summer reading list.

And this is why I’m wary. Faced with the combination of significant, provocative, and complex challenges to religious identity, it is hard not to be reactionary. It is hard to be at our best. The temptation is to respond defensively, to cease introspection, to avoid the difficult questions, and to use theology as a shield. In such circumstances, an idea like resurrection is especially vulnerable—both because it is a distinctive part of Christian belief and because it offers a possible end to all debate. Sometimes in Christian thought, the idea of resurrection serves as a premature way out of the difficulties. It can become the equivalent of a finish line after which all the exertions of the race no longer matter. It can, to borrow Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s phrase, function as cheap grace.

Colleen Shantz is assistant professor of New Testament at St. Michael’s College in Toronto and in the Toronto School of Theology. She specializes in Pauline studies and her research is focused primarily on issues of emotion and cognition in earliest Christianity. Her book, *Paul in Ecstasy* is forthcoming from Cambridge University Press. A secondary and abiding interest of hers is the rich theological reflection that sometimes takes place in fine art, film, and literature. In that area, she teaches a course on the passion narratives in art and regularly lectures on the topic outside of academic settings.
I have been thinking about how it is that we avoid reactionary or cheap stances. Apart from sheer exercise of good character and self-awareness, what habits of thinking and questioning are more likely to bring out our best, even when we are pressed by significant stressors? My beginnings of an answer come by way of a digression. So, if you’ll follow me for a moment, we go by way of Stanley Spencer’s painting, “Cookham Resurrection.”

Spencer painted this large canvas (2.7m x 5.5m) through the years 1924-26. Viewing the scene, it takes a second or two to realize that you are, indeed, looking at a depiction of resurrection. Of course, the graveyard is a dead giveaway (if you’ll pardon the pun), but for those who are conditioned by other resurrection art, there is little familiar resurrection iconography. The viewer is as bemused as the figures in the painting who stand blinking and turning their heads to one side or the other as if they are trying to verify their new reality. The figures, for the most part, seem unable to move too far beyond their open graves. As if waking from a deep sleep, they are rising to consciousness only slowly. What is the world to which they are awakening?

The painting holds some clues that could help to orient its characters, but not unambiguously. First, several of the figures represent real people. For instance, we see Spencer himself, leaning back against a grave stone, and Richard Carline, his friend and brother-in-law, kneeling in front and to the right of Spencer. Still, strangely, they are the only two nudes amid the otherwise clothed figures. Second, this resurrection is placed in the churchyard of Cookham, the artist’s own town, and even though art critics wonder whether the river in the upper left corner is the Styx or the River of Life, no one questions that it is also the Thames. Likewise, there is clearly a Christ figure here, centered in the scene, seated in the porch entrance to the church. But apart from the central placement and the suggestions of a throne, there is little other traditional chris-
tological iconography. Instead, Christ is feminized, tenderly cradling three infants, and just as tenderly being caressed by God who stands behind. In any other resurrection scene, an enthroned Christ would suggest the final judgement; yet in Spencer’s scene, Christ presides not as judge of the past but as a nurturer of new life.

If we could think like a painting we would avoid the worst of the temptations of challenging times like this. It is precisely this flow of mixed signals that gives “Cookham Resurrection” its power. Spencer’s painting is ineluctably tied to this life; yet, at the same time it is not this life at all. Redemption stretches in both directions in time. Has the earth been transformed, or does heaven resemble the familiar? Is Christ judge or mother, or is something new created in the combination of images? This “Cookham” lies waiting for its characters to figure it out. In art, such tensions can exist unresolved and in continued “conversation.” Art is often dialectical.

In fact, much scriptural thinking about resurrection is also dialectical. For Paul, who expresses resurrection hopes as strongly as any New Testament author, the circumstances of his own time are not transcended by resurrection, but transformed by it. For example, in his letter to the Philippians, Paul comes close to imagining resurrection as escape. He writes from prison (not his first imprisonment either) as he is waiting for judgement on his case and the possibility of death. “My desire,” says Paul, “is to depart and be with Christ.” He is “hard pressed” between the work of this life and his hopes for the next. In the end, what seems to settle the anguish for Paul is his reawakening awareness of the relationship between the two options, leading him to conclude that “for me to live is Christ.” Resurrection is not simply the better choice in an either-or context, but a possibility that is in dialogue with the most problematic challenges of his circumstances.

The Gospel of Mark (in its original ending at 16:8) barely hints at resurrection with the promise “you will see him.” Go back to Galilee, says the messenger at the tomb. Galilee, of course, is where this Gospel begins and it is also where Jesus’ work of healing and feeding and proclaiming the nearness of God’s reign took place. So, with that message, the women at the tomb and all the disciples are directed back into Jesus’ life. Likewise, we, the readers, are given not a conclusion to the story, but a re-entry into it.

All of which brings me around to my original wariness. Neither in Paul nor Mark do we find a doctrine abstracted from historical contingencies. Instead, resurrection interprets and is interpreted by the most significant, provocative, and complex challenges of their situations. What would that dialectic look like for us, standing as we do between secular critique and religious extremism? How might scientific challenges enrich our thinking? How might our hopes for resurrection deepen our engagement in this life? What does Christianity look like in the fruitful flow of the unresolved tensions?
No one offering reflections on the resurrection should do so without at least one self-critical demurral. This is true even for the most ambitious of works, but it is especially so for one this short. So, to begin, I admit to a struggle to maintain resurrection belief. This is not simply a function of modernity or Cartesian thought, though these complicate matters somewhat. It is that resurrection challenges all constructions of thought, even those that would grant the existence of the transcendent.

The Gospels’ accounts of the different encounters between the risen Jesus and his followers confirm this. The depictions in Matthew, Luke, and John (technically there are none in Mark) agree about almost nothing except that, when human beings experience the risen Christ, they typically express fear, confusion, and doubt as much as they do belief (see Matt. 28:17; Luke 24:16, 37; John 20:14; 21:4). In fact, it seems that the Gospel writers are at pains to tell us that, when it comes to the matter of resurrection, bewilderment rather than comprehension is our most likely experience.

Even those who grant the possibility of resurrection from the dead do not seem to have understood its radical nature, as Paul’s letter to the Corinthians makes clear (1 Cor. 15). Thus, the New Testament suggests that when one attempts to speak of resurrection, one should expect as many questions as answers to occur. Clearly belief in the resurrection does not come easily, even to those who are open to it as a possibility. It did not when first preached and it does not now, twenty centuries later.

By its nature then, the resurrection of Jesus remains beyond human comprehension. We understand the words “raised from the dead,” but the possibility to which the words point exceeds the capacities of reason. The cognitive challenge of resurrection is imposing, but if belief in resurrection is difficult, then maintaining the ethic it implies is even

Steven Kraftchick is director of General and Advanced Programs and associate professor of the Practice of New Testament Interpretation at Candler School of Theology, Emory University. He earned an MDiv from Abilene Christian University and the PhD from Emory University. Kraftchick’s research and writings focus on Pauline thought and language theory, particularly metaphor theory and its role in theological thinking. He is the author of *Jude / 2 Peter* (Abingdon New Testament Commentaries, 2002) and co-editor of *Biblical Theology: Problems and Prospects* (1995).
more so. When rightly understood, to confess belief in resurrection is to adopt an ethic which requires much more than mental assent; it is to reorient one's mode of life.

Discussions about the resurrection often tend toward the idea that, if only one could supply an ample amount of historical evidence, one could demonstrate its reality. Even the best of these demonstrations will fall short of its goals, however, because resurrection belief is first and foremost a claim about history and not a claim established by it. Such proofs can only establish that someone once known to be dead subsequently has been seen and experienced as alive. But this is not proof of resurrection. It is only proof of resuscitation, and this is not what the claim that Jesus rose from the dead entails.

Christian belief in the resurrection maintains that Jesus has been raised from the dead and that he will not die again (Rom. 6:4). More importantly it claims something new about our understanding of life and the very nature of existence. Because the risen Christ is not simply alive again, because he will not die again, he possesses the power of life and he is the source and goal of all living things (Col. 1:15-16). Thus, when we express belief in the resurrection, we are acknowledging that we recognize this power and that our own existence is utterly dependent on it. More fully, we are confessing that our lives will only find their full significance when we live in accord with the forms and essence of that power. No historical evidence can substantiate such claims; they stand beyond the field and efforts of historical truth.

Further, when the New Testament witnesses to the raised Christ it is not simply announcing his new life, it is also asserting that Christ is the Lord of all creation, the one to whom all powers, forces, and authority must eventually yield (Col. 1:16; Phil. 2:9-11). This, too, is a claim that cannot be proven by the mechanisms of logic or history, for—like the claim of Christ's "new life"—it is a claim of faith. Such claims have historical consequences, but ultimately they speak of matters beyond history. Thus, the attempts to "prove" or demonstrate the truth of the resurrection as a historical event will founder on their own suppositions because they misconceive the nature of the resurrection claims themselves. To claim that the resurrection is real is to make a statement that stands in judgment of our historical and logical capacities; it cannot therefore be exhausted by them.

But if this is true with respect to matters of reason, it is even more so when we take the verb "to believe" in its more fundamental sense of trust in or reliance upon something or someone. It is then that we move from matters of assent to matters of disposition. We move from the consideration of possibilities to the demands of faithfulness, from the workings of the mind to the designs of the heart.

This is the real reason we must admit that resurrection belief is difficult. Leaving the discussion at the level of history misses this more fundamental demand. As significant as the questions of history might be, the more challenging issues are encountered at the level of disposition, i.e., the stances we take toward reality and the construction of our lives. To believe in the resurrection means that we are accepting Christ's life as the norm by which we define our present existence.

Resurrection belief is not belief in an isolated event, nor is it understood in isolation from the other events in our lives. It is a new evaluation of human existence and
it is a commitment to a life constructed on the paradigm of Christ’s own pattern of existence. Paul captures this when he declares that every means by which we measure social stature and success is rendered null and void in comparison to the “surpassing knowledge of Christ” (Phil. 3:8) by which he means, the knowledge of “the power of his resurrection and the sharing in his sufferings” (Phil. 3:10-11).

That is to say, belief in resurrection entails not only re-conception of what we understand to be real, but also re-conception of our valuations of that reality. Resurrection belief is thus not simply a matter of cognition, it is a matter of how one’s life is understood and structured. In raising Christ from the dead, God vindicated the obedience of Christ as a pattern of reality, establishing the giving of the self for others as the means by which relationships and communities may thrive. To express resurrection belief thus requires a similar response on our own part, a willingness to release our own claims to privilege for the sake of someone else. One leans into this life not by seizing power, but by releasing it, trusting that the fidelity of God will be displayed in our willing vulnerability. Resurrection belief is thus an existence that is open to risk; it is a commitment to seek God’s ultimate goals of righteousness and peace while at the same time relying on God to achieve them.

I wish to highlight four aspects of this resurrection ethic. My remarks will not be exhaustive, but intended as representative of the actions and thought such an ethic requires.

First, resurrection belief is fundamentally the full recognition of God’s identity as Creator. The power that raised Jesus from the dead is the same power that speaks the universe into existence and that continues to sustain it. It is the power that “makes alive the dead and calls the ‘things not being’ into existence” (Rom. 4:17). Resurrection belief is therefore a specific acknowledgement of God’s power over the created world and a confession of his or her utter dependence on God, even now.

Because as its Creator, God is committed to the world’s redemption, to believe in the resurrection is, also, to commit oneself to the expectation of transformation and renewal, or as Paul phrases it “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17-19). Existentially speaking, this is a new creation of human existence. But the resurrection of human beings cannot be separated from the created world’s own release from its “subjection to futility.” Human disobedience of God means not only separation from God, but also the rupture of creation’s own harmony. If resurrection signals the hope of humanity’s redemption, it is simultaneously an expectation “that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of glory along with the children of God” (Rom. 8:21).

This solidarity of the human and the creation has obvious implications for our relationship to the creation. Because resurrection is a sign of the redemption of the created order, it signals that the creation has worth in its own right. If that is true, then we cannot conceive of the creation as a commodity to be used, but as an entity of which we are a part and to which we grant respect and care. Resurrection belief, far from removing us for the concerns of the creation, serves to integrate us even more with the created world.

Second, to believe in the resurrection is to believe in the resurrection of the body,
not the release of a disembodied spirit. Resurrection is “the redemption of our bodies” (Rom. 8:2); the transformation of the finite body into the body of Christ’s limitless glory (Phil. 3:21), and the re-creation of our perishable bodies into “inspired” immortal ones. The resurrection therefore challenges the mind/body split, insisting that we are human beings because we are corporeal beings.

The resurrection of the body confirms the persistence of my particular identity. We are raised not into anonymity but as distinct individuals transformed yet recognizable. This aspect of resurrection suggests another way in which the disharmony of primal disobedience is overcome. The ever-existing tension that exists between our individual identities and our need for social integration is resolved in the resurrection. Raised by God, in Christ, as one, we are still known in our particularity. However, sanctioned in our particularity, we no longer must assert it at the expense of others. We exist in relationship with each other unconstrained by the limits of finality. Thus, individuation continues but it is not in conflict with participation. However, if one holds to this eschatological belief, than one also must seek to develop and dwell in communities that strive for this same balance of individuality and communal intimacy now. When this occurs, the church is fulfilling its role as Christ’s raised body.

Third, belief in the resurrection is to hope in the completion of God’s purposes for the universe. It maintains that, in the end, life prevails over death, well-being eliminates suffering, and glory replaces shame. Because of this, those who trust in the resurrection must expect and work for the day when justice replaces inequality and good is not shadowed by the specter of evil. This is not something done lightly. Because the Christ who was raised from the dead is still the crucified Christ, the church that believes in resurrection must accept that it, too, is the crucified body in this world and that it will experience deep and continued resistance to its claims and efforts.

This gives rise to the fourth aspect of a resurrection ethos; namely that by raising Jesus from the dead God indicts the social and political systems that executed him. The resurrection is therefore a direct challenge of every political, religious, and civic reality that ignores or eliminates those it sees only as different. With the resurrection of one considered as cursed (Gal. 3:13), God exposes the hubris of every human system of belief and politics that presumes to dictate how and by whom God can act. Thus, resurrection belief calls us to protest against every state and religious body that confuses its own desires for the will of God and its own reasoning for God’s wisdom. When this occurs, those committed to resurrection belief must raise voices of resistance to the expressions of power that do not reveal the pattern of God’s Christ in death and resurrection.

I return to my opening caveat and the struggle to maintain resurrection belief. I hope that these few reflections reveal why I believe that belief in the resurrection is not easy to hold. It is difficult not simply because it challenges our mind, but because it demands a transformation of our will and our heart. When we believe in the resurrection, we are adopting a hope that compels us to work for a communal intimacy that both challenges society’s marks of power and success and resists all apparent realities that would extinguish this hope. This requires more than mental assent; it demands moral courage and the willingness to admit that our lives belong to someone other than ourselves.
Easter Sunday has always been a glorious day for me from the time I was a little child. It is an extraordinary day, even for the most sleep-deprived, over-prepared (or under-prepared) pastor. The church is filled with people. The choir and musicians are at their best. There are children and grandmothers, daughters and sons, friends and strangers all gathered around the Word. The regulars are there, and so are those whom we affectionately call the C. & E. crowd (those in the congregation whom we see twice a year at Christmas and Easter). We are all together, expectantly waiting to re-live, once again, the resurrection story. But, how will we preach the story this Easter? How will we embody the text and give it life? How will we communicate the tenants of our faith: “the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting”? What images will we use to illuminate the concepts of new life and resurrection?

One approach is to just tell the story. The theory behind this approach is that the text lives on its own without our need to heavily explain what, quite frankly, is unexplainable. Our attempts at analysis and justification of the truth of the doctrine of resurrection often come up short. “So, just tell the story,” some homileticians urge. Paint the images in the story, and then move to what homileticians Henry Mitchell and Frank Thomas call the celebration: “Jesus has risen. Jesus has risen, indeed! Alleluia. Amen.” Any effective preacher learns early on when to sit down. The story has been told. The hymns reinforce the message. Take up the offering, so we can participate in God’s reign on earth, and let’s go forth to Easter dinner and Easter baskets!

Another approach to preaching the Easter story is to speak to the skeptics in the Easter Sunday crowd, those who come to church with the question, “Is it true?” Last
summer, I read a book called *The Resurrection File* by Craig Parshall. It is about a trial lawyer who defends a minister in a case of liable. The minister published some things in a rag-tag newspaper and offended a biblical scholar. It is a fun piece of fiction. Actually, it is what booksellers call “inspirational suspense,” because the case centers around the resurrection of Jesus Christ. As I read this book I thought: Parshall presents the resurrection in a way that may appeal to the logical, no-nonsense people among us. So one approach for the preacher on Easter Sunday is to admit that many who are not Christian, and even some of us who are, find the accounts of Jesus’ resurrection too incredible to believe. While this may be so, Parshall suggests that if you take away the angels and the spiritual aspects of the story and if you imagine the gospel accounts as an ancient transcript of a court preceding, you will see that the scriptures are the testimony of witnesses in court.

Imagine that you have a legal pad and on it you write Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Take note of the similarities and differences in the resurrection stories in these four gospels. The first thing you may notice, Parshall writes, is what is called the “factor of consistency and individuality.” If we are to believe witnesses to an event who later describe the event, their stories have to possess consistency on the one hand and individuality on the other. Though differences are always present when multiple witnesses give accounts of the same event, the basic facts must remain the same. Parshall’s observation is that in all four of the gospel accounts, there are basic factual patterns, with more than a dozen factual components in common. The way you can tell that multiple-witness testimony is true is not only that all agree to the central facts, but that each also differs slightly in the details—details that one witness saw but that another may not have noticed. The stories in each gospel present individual and unique facts, but not in a way that logically contradicts the other gospels. If you think of the Gospels as accounts from eyewitnesses, you can preach the Easter story from this point of view. There are many ways to share the resurrection story on Easter, so that our worshipping participants will go away satisfied that the Easter story was re-told for their hearing and for their experiencing.

Easter Sunday is a glorious and an appropriate time to focus on the resurrection. But, as a pastor, I have discovered that the time when the resurrection story has the most meaning is not on Easter Sunday. Resurrection matters most to us when a dear, loved one has died. That is when the resurrection becomes not just an academic question, but is, literally, a matter of life and death. “Will I see my loved one again? Where will (s)he go? Is there really a heaven? Is there really a God? Is there life after death? Tell me the truth about eternal life?!” When I sit with members of a family after their loved one has died, they are often distraught and confused. In these instances, preaching the resurrection is an imperative. The preacher’s words offer assurance and hope to those who are nearly driven to despair. One thing that the preacher can reassure them of is that God is with them and that God is with their loved one.

It is hard to understand how important preaching the resurrection is at times of death until you have experienced the death of a loved one. I myself preach better funerals since my mother died five years ago, because death, new life, and resurrection are
now real to me. I am comforted by the fact that my mother put her faith completely in
God, whom she knew would be with her in life and in death. She put her trust in Jesus,
who became one of us, sharing in our sufferings and giving himself for the life of the
world. In the life of Jesus, we see God’s commitment to be with us, to share our human-
ness, and to live our lives with us. In Christ’s death, we see the mystery that there is
nowhere that we can go where our faithful protector has not preceded us. And in
Christ’s resurrection, we experience the power of God to overcome even our death. This
is the good news that we proclaim at funerals, on Easter, and every Sunday—that not
even death separates us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

It is out of the deep reservoir of our faith that we are offered hope in Jesus Christ.
The effective proclaimers of the Word would therefore do well to dig down deep and
share her/his faith this Easter. Why does it matter? It matters because we need to hear
the promise, God’s promise of an inheritance in the reign of God. And we need to expe-
rience God’s love, a love that never ends. With God’s help, we will celebrate another
glorious Easter Sunday, and through the re-living of God’s Word, we will be offered a
foretaste of the feast to come!

NOTES

1. See Eugene Lowry’s sermonic plot form in his *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Nar-
the Edge of Mystery* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997).

2. Henry H. Mitchell, *Celebration and Experience in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press,
1990). Also see Frank A. Thomas, *They Like To Never Quit Praisin’ God* (Cleveland: United
Church Press, 1997). Henry Mitchell coined the phrase “celebration in preaching” as a descrip-
tive element of some preaching in the African-American tradition, and Frank Thomas shows how
the preacher designs for celebration. The term “celebration” has to do with holistic preaching to
the intellect, emotions, and intuitive spirit of the gathered people. Eugene Lowry suggests in his
plot form that the end of the sermon is the “conclusion.” Mitchell and Thomas contend that the
sermon should not merely conclude, but that the good news of Jesus Christ should be “celebrat-
ed.”
Every year, the first week in January, I attend a lectionary study group that does some reflective exegetical study and sermon planning for the upcoming year. Each of the twenty members of the group prepares two papers and we engage a biblical or homiletical scholar to be our mentor. My colleagues tell me that the lectionary assignments are randomly appointed or, as one says, “the lots are taken from a mayonnaise jar” while he draws them blindfolded. Yet for some inexplicable reason, the mayonnaise jar yielded my name for the Easter Sunday lections six years in a row! It was, aside from the questionable randomness of the matter, an honor that I would have liked others to share. The resurrection is, after all, an event about which endless amounts can be said but which finally eludes all attempts to explain. Every preacher who has tried to impart the power and meaning of the thing has known the awkwardness faced by those first women who ran from the tomb that first Easter morning announcing breathlessly that “the Lord is risen, risen indeed!” Is it any wonder that the men laughed at the witness of the women, not only because of the unreliability of their testimony (as was the law of the day upheld), but in light of the sheer impossibility of it? How do you express convincingly the truth of an event that large, that unexpected?

After thirty-five years of preaching not only Christ crucified but also Christ risen from the grave, I am still looking for new insight, some fresh thought or expression of this proclamation on which I have staked my life and my faith. I have asked every one of the scholars who have led our lectionary group to give account of the resurrection hope that is within them. “What really happened that day?” I ask, openheartedly, as if I were sitting as a sixteen-year-old once again at a church campfire listening to the
recently minted youth minister explain the mysteries of faith to receptive minds. “What convinces you of its truth?” I wonder out loud among the most learned scholars I can find. And every year each one offers an earnest, reasoned, and thoughtful response, always articulate, impeccably wise, and ultimately not enough. It’s not that these able thinkers are unable to give an account of their faith; it’s that somehow the truth of what they are saying is greater than any human words can bear. They are proximate expressions of an immense mystery. Nevertheless, each year I feel driven to probe with these articulate teachers the deepest of all the truths and the greatest of all the mysteries we Christians hold dear.

My question is, on the one hand, experiential in nature: What in your experience convinces you that the resurrection is true? On the other hand, it is also theological: What is the meaning of the resurrection, in your own words? I should probably confess that, if the truth were told, my secret agenda is to hear some authoritative voice offer, in calm and convincing terms, a full empirical explanation of the miracle itself. I would like someone to show me the videos and replay the surveillance tapes. Never mind the non-existence of the media I want in the first century; I am in search of conviction and only “hard facts” will do. Yet even so, in my heart of hearts I know that any attempt to provide this evidence would render any explanation bogus on the sheer face of its audacity. There is no scientific explanation of the resurrection, and perhaps more importantly, I must ask, Who made science the arbiter of ultimate truth, a truth that only faith can comprehend? Faith and knowledge are distinctly different comprehensions after all. And as Calvin described it so well, mysteries such as the resurrection and the presence of Christ at the Lord’s Supper are apprehended only through faith, apart from which there is no believable explanation.

Perhaps we know more of what the resurrection is not than we know of what it is. Surely Frederick Buechner’s suggestion that—like the setting sun—the intensity of the resurrection is such that we cannot look directly at it. We must look instead at the horizon, to the left and to the right, to see what is illuminated by its light. To stare at it directly is to risk being blinded; there is just too much to see.

One thing is for sure, the resurrection is not proven by the faith of the disciples. If that were the case, all resurrection faith would be founded on the slippery slope of the response and reckoning of the disciples and not on God’s decisive and ultimately startling action in time and history. I do take heart in the fact that the disciples—who had scattered on the night of Jesus’ arrest in the garden and went into hiding in the wake of the dangers that haunted them—nonetheless experienced something so profound and so life-altering that they left their fears behind and organized a missionary effort that would reach the expanses of the Roman Empire, spread throughout the Mediterranean basin, and then spread throughout the world. This is an accomplishment of no small significance. Surely the experience of that powerful something which we call the resurrection, and its measurable after-effects in their lives, is proof positive of the faith that the resurrection rekindled in them. But it is only that much, an after effect, a response to the event, and not the event itself; more like the ripples that witness to the fact that a stone has entered the lake.

The bottom line is that we cannot explain the resurrection in the kind of empiri-
cal terms that the world accepts as probative. We cannot do that any more than the women at the tomb and eventually Peter and John and Thomas, and then Paul, and all the others did who heard and believed what had been delivered to them either by their encounter with the risen Christ or by the witness of others. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe,” the risen Jesus said to Thomas. And so we are.

In the final analysis, there is no carbon dating of the shroud that will provide convincing evidence for the resurrection. No grainy surveillance tapes, even if any existed, that could pass the skeptical eye of forensic investigators who can tell a doctored tape in an instant’s glance. Instead, we have the witness of the Gospels, we have the encouragement of St. Paul, the centuries of faith and inspired works of the faithful who through the ages have given account of the hope that is in them, and we have the countless times we ourselves have stood at the cemetery and faithfully entrusted to God’s care the ones who have most lightened our lives and touched our hearts.

It all boils down to one thing, really. One lingering question that, if you can answer it, will settle all questions about the resurrection, and almost any other question of faith for that matter. And the question is, “Just how good do you think God is? Just how gracious, kind, loving, forgiving, and powerful do you think God is?” The question posed in light of Sarah’s remarkable pregnancy, late in time (Gen. 18:14), and the promise spoken to Mary, the mother of Jesus, by an angel bearing good news (Luke 1:37) are the tick and the tock of this query. When confronted with the power and impossibility of God’s intervention in their lives, and so in history, the question associated with Sarah, “Is anything too wonderful for our God?” is answered with the response of the angel who speaks to Mary, “Nothing will be impossible with God.” This question and this answer prompt us in our response to the good news of Jesus’ resurrection. They focus the question the resurrection begs of all of us, “Is anything too wonderful for our God? No, nothing will be impossible with God.”

If nothing is too wonderful for our God, if God is finally good beyond imagining, gracious beyond understanding, kind beyond expressing, and powerful beyond describing, then the resurrection is simply the most likely thing God could do, evidence of a power that is greater than anything we might otherwise have imagined, and proof of God’s willingness to go to any length to express to us the love that God has for us. In the resurrection, we affirm the answer to the most important question in life, in death, and in life beyond death. Nothing is too wonderful for our God.
Pastors’ Panel

We asked church leaders to reflect on the resurrection and its implications for church and world. Here is what they told us:

What are the challenges of preaching on Easter?
Karen M. Jamison, Pastor, St. Paul A.M.E. Church, Skidmore, Texas
One of the largest challenges of preaching on Easter is preaching to “un-churched” persons who often do not have the same background and motivation for attending on Easter Sunday that the active and faithful community of believers has. I work at making the Word relevant, rather than fixating on the fact that it is Easter Sunday. I try not to pressure myself by thinking that this is my one shot for the year to get those who do not come on a regular basis to see the error of their ways.

W. Brent Hampton, Pastor, St. Andrew Presbyterian Church, Marble Falls, Texas
Many in the congregation come on Easter Sunday to feel good about God’s gift of victory over death, but have not, for whatever reason, participated in Holy Week worship services or meditations. Thus I feel as if I am reading the last ten pages of the final Harry Potter novel from the pulpit to many who know, vaguely, the story outline, but are now hearing the finale in all of its passion without the benefit of the pain and sacrifice that brought the characters to resolution. The ending of our Easter stories are powerful, but without the “back story” of the entry into Jerusalem, the accusations before Pilate, the conspiracy, the betrayals, lamentations, the journey to the cross, etc. many hearers of an Easter sermon walk away feeling good, but do not know why, really. They know that “Christ is risen,” but the significance of the human and divine mystery of his sacrifice is lost upon them. They might as well be reading Harry Potter, and as moving as the metaphors in those books are, the human reality of the divine victory over death and sin from the Easter texts becomes no more than a “metaphor of the moment.”

What texts related to resurrection are most significant to you?
Timothy M. Smith, Pastor, Grace Lutheran Church, Boone, North Carolina
John 14:1-6 is the single text on which I have preached most often in my ministry because it is the most often-requested text for the over 250 funerals over which I have presided. This text is so very comforting because it acknowledges grief (“let not your hearts be troubled”) and fear (“neither let them be afraid”) as very real, and yet Jesus’ own assurance is that there is a place for us that is more relational than it is spatial (“that where I am you may be also”). Being “in Christ” is the key, and the connection for us always.
W. Brent Hampton
While I love all the Easter texts in the New Testament, I am partial to Mark 16:1-8. Here we encounter the implied resolution to Mark’s booming voice from the sky; a secret as to who and what the messiah is; and the constant question “Who is this guy?” The Son of God? A son of a god? The resurrection is both the question and the implied answer. However, fear and amazement are still attendants to this event, and still mark our lives as well.

What are some implications of resurrection for church and society?
Karen M. Jamison
We need constantly to affirm the resurrection because if Christ had not risen from the grave, he would just be another dead man and we would be lost. Constant affirmation of the resurrection is needed to counter the contentions of “so-called Christians” who say that the resurrection was symbolic, and that the resurrection did not happen. If it did not happen it makes the entire concept of a creative God with a redemptive heart null and void. It takes away the power of proceeding in faith at all. Why would you believe in a God who would not resurrect or redeem you? That would mean that there would be no hope for an afterlife. There would be no need for resurrection if there is no death. Salvation is free, but it is not cheap.

Timothy M. Smith
Hope! If Christ is raised and I, through baptism, am to be raised with Christ as the last word, then our culture’s idea that I spend my life trying to become something that I’m not is totally a lie. Instead, I spend my life becoming who I already am—a precious child of God and servant of Christ. Another implication, for me, is the universality of resurrection if it exists at all. If God is love, and if God loves all of God’s children, then there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. If even one is lost eternally, free will and predestination and purgatory notwithstanding, then God, if God loves and desires that all would be raised to eternal life, loses in the final analysis. And that is not possible. Christ’s resurrection is more powerful than anything, including my inability to attain a share in it.

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Peter L. Steinke enrolled in Rabbi Edwin Friedman's second clergy consultation group back in 1989 and remained in the group until Friedman died in 1996. This work completes a trilogy of books that apply Murray Bowen's family systems theory to leadership in congregations, and is available with a companion video. Steinke's two previous works, *How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems* (Alban, 1993) and *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach* (Alban, 1996), are chiefly for pastors. This newest work is directed as much, if not more, to lay leaders. All three books are required reading in Austin Seminary's Doctor of Ministry Doctoral Seminar.

Steinke's newest work, which made the Academy of Parish Clergy's 2006 Top Ten List, could not be more germane to our current "anxious" ecclesiastical climate. Steinke has conducted over 150 interventions in conflicted American churches of various sizes and denominations and has led numerous family systems training seminars around the country for pastors and lay leaders. He aptly quips: "Church conflict is a growth industry."

The book is divided into three parts: "The Leader's Presence," "The Leader's Functioning," and "The Leader's Challenges." Each part includes three chapters. The book begins with a general description of anxiety in its varied forms, both "chronic" and "acute," and illustrates how "contagious" anxiety is in congregations. The book logically moves next to a brief but thorough discussion of Bowen's concept of "differentiation." Steinke asserts that, properly understood, "differentiation," always includes four core components: a clear statement of self, coupled with a commitment to remain connected to the entire system while simultaneously remaining non-reactive and basing all decisions on principle.

This discussion on differentiation flows nicely into how being a "non-anxious presence" offers both practical application and authentic hope for becoming a more effective church leader. Steinke rightly notes that many people who have only a cursory understanding of Bowen's theory often misunderstand and misuse it. This happens because they do not understand that differentiation includes not just clearly defining oneself, but always involves remaining connected to other members of the larger system—in this case, the congregation. Merely taking a stand without remaining connected usually deteriorates into "cutoff." This only serves to heighten a congregation's anxiety and add to its dysfunction.

Next, Steinke discusses how the human brain functions and how "holy tissue" enables human beings to be introspective, imaginative, competent, observational, intentional, relational, thoughtful, self-regulating, disciplined, reflective, and critically self-aware persons created in the image of God. This discussion serves as the basis for addressing one of the theoretical components that makes systems theory so helpful and hopeful, namely, that even small changes in a system will affect the whole. Steinke asserts: "A positive outcome will emerge if the leader's presence and functioning is centered in principle, based on self-regulation, and anchored by taking thoughtful positions. Principle provides clarity; self-regulation helps to avoid extremes; thoughtful positions lead to necessary action" (65).

Steinke also discusses the leader's role and responsibility in maintaining healthy boundaries by examining Bowen's assertion that studies in the fields of microbiology reveal
that cells and souls behave in similar ways. The metaphor of “immunity,” when applied to emotional systems, is particularly prophetic for churches, lay leaders, and pastors because they are constantly negotiating and struggling with boundaries—and often not very effectively.

Particularly helpful is Steinke’s attention to both the nature and potential outcomes of congregational conflict. He rightly asserts that congregational leaders need to embrace a particular position, namely, one that regards conflict as inevitable, essential, and a predictable part of life. As he notes: “Nowhere in the Bible is tranquility preferred to truth or harmony to justice” (108). He nicely re-frames conflict from something which must be eradicated or avoided at all costs to a wonderful opportunity to learn and grow. Referring to how motivating conflict can be for positive change, Steinke exhorts churches: “It would be a shame for you to waste your suffering.”

Steinke discusses what happens when church leaders decide to challenge or upset the congregation’s balance and homeostatic forces by reflecting on Heifertz and Linsky’s distinction of “technical” and “adaptive” problems—each of which demands different responses. “Technical problems” are those which are best addressed by know how and techniques, whereas “adaptive problems” demand changes in values, attitudes, and behaviors—and consequently new ways of learning. Steinke reminds us how delicate leadership is because the human brain processes both information and experience through the right and left hemispheres. Steinke argues that because of the complexities of how human beings receive and process information, an effective leader must take the challenge, question, speak courageously, risk speaking the truth in love, and consciously resist capriciousness and indecisiveness by taking mature stands based on principle.

Also helpful is how Steinke compares and contrasts two opposing leadership styles. The first seeks to provide security and comfort by “not rocking the boat.” The second, conversely, takes controversial stands and substantive risks. Steinke illustrates the differences in these approaches by assessing the leadership styles of two famous brothers—Moses and Aaron—through family systems lenses. One brother takes a stand while the other acquiesces to mob pressure. One takes responsibility for his leadership, the other does not. One “pushes back,” even against God, while the other melts in the cauldron of peer pressure. One maintains a non-anxious presence while the other reacts whimsically.

Also very helpful are his “Personal Notes” and “The Leader’s Notebook” sections that appear at the end of each chapter, and his “Thirteen Congregational Anxiety Triggers” listed in the first chapter. Aside from arguing that the application of systems theory is the crucible that best forges differentiated congregational leaders, maybe this book’s greatest gift is Steinke’s deep and abiding theological reflection. This book is a must-read for all who seek to be effective church leaders.


Eat this Book is the second of a projected five-volume series on spirituality by Eugene Peterson. The focus here is on “spiritual,” that is, biblical reading, which is much more than simply reading. Peterson states his premise early in the book: “the Bible, all of it, is livable; it is the text for living our lives (18).”
Living the Bible, however, is much more than living in accordance to the commandments and ethical precepts found in the Bible, or living according to a philosophy derived from the Bible, or even doing what Jesus would do. Hence the governing metaphor of Peterson's presentation, derived from Revelation 10: 9-10, is "Eat this book." Living the Bible requires dedicated, persistent attendance to the text in order not just to understand, but to obey. But what we are to obey is primarily a story. How is it, then, that one can obey a story? This volume explores that very question.

The book is arranged in three parts. In the first, also titled "Eat this Book," the author confronts a certain style of contemporary spirituality. Peterson is one of the foremost writers on spirituality, but he is also one of this genre's most severe critics. Modern spirituality, he argues, has all too often replaced the Holy Trinity of Father, Son, and Spirit with a different, self-centered trinity comprised of "... my Holy Wants, My Holy Needs, and My Holy Feelings" (31). This new trinity does not dispense with the Bible, nor the God of the Bible, but it does reduce these to vehicles of satisfying my wants, meeting my needs, and engendering my (desired) feelings. The result, Peterson maintains, is a refusal to be formed by an obedient reading of scripture. Instead, we re-form scripture according to this substitute trinity of self-absorption.

What, then, does an obedient reading of scripture require? This is the subject of the second section of the book, "Lectio Divina." Lectio Divina, or "sacred reading," is the reading of scripture according to the four-fold pattern of lectio (reading), meditatio (meditation), oratio (prayer), and contemplatio (contemplation—which, in Peterson's understanding, means "we live the text") (91). This ancient pattern provides a way for reading the scriptures to issue a living of scripture. To read the scriptures in this fashion is to read scripture as the church has throughout most of its history, namely, in the context of the community of the followers of Jesus, with acknowledgment of the metaphorical and narrative character of scriptural language. The result of this approach is, "a cultivated, developed, habit of living the text in Jesus' name" (116).

The third section, "The Company of Translators," further develops Peterson's exploration of the nature of scriptural language. Much of this section entails reflection on his own work of translating the Bible into a contemporary idiom. He gives a brief account of the highlights of biblical translation, and recounts the way that his own translation, *The Message*, emerged from his work as a pastor. His emphasis is on realizing that the language of the Bible is the ordinary language of ordinary people, and that translations that render the Bible into a patrician idiom—making it sound "holy"—do a disservice to the true nature of the text. Translations cannot be simply literal word-for-word renderings because there are few word-for-word equivalents in different languages. Accuracy requires paraphrase. Nor can translations be esoteric or aristocratic. Still less should they be religious. Translations must stay close to the everyday world if the Bible is truly to be lived.

What we have in this book, then, is a sort of hermeneutics of spirituality—or at least an exploration of the common territory between hermeneutics and spirituality. As such, the book occasionally becomes rather abstract, especially in the "Lectio Divina" section. I can imagine a reader saying, "Tell me how to do it!" But Peterson resolutely refuses to turn his book into a how-to manual. He is suspicious of an emphasis on technique. There is, however, a separate Study Guide available with summaries, quotations, questions for discussion, and suggested activities for those wanting to use this book for group study or individual reflection. There is also no shortage of instruction manuals on Lectio Divina. I suspect that Peterson's treatment of Lectio Divina would be most helpful for those who have been following this discipline already, and seek further insight into what it is and how it works. Or, one could turn to Peterson's numerous works on various biblical books, which demonstrate the results of his many years of reading Scripture in this manner.

*Eat this Book* can be read without reference to the other works in Peterson's series on spirituality. It is perfectly understandable on its own, as a treatment for what it means to
approach scripture as the way in which Christian disciples are formed. In the context of the series, *Eat this Book* joins *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Eerdmans: 2005) and *The Jesus Way: A Conversation on the Ways that Jesus is the Way* (Eerdmans: 2007) as part of a comprehensive exposition of what living as a Christian entails. There are two volumes yet to come, and I await them eagerly. The three that have appeared so far are approachable (but never simplistic), profound (but never obscure), and genuinely helpful conversations on what following Jesus throughout one’s life really means.

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“Healing and Wholeness,” Spring 1999, Ralph Underwood
“Human Dignity,” Fall 1998, Ismael García
America is a culture of dialogue, especially religious dialogue. Religion is a hot topic. The New York Times best-seller list usually has at least one book on religion (or irreligion) in its top ten. This week (July 18) the list has two—*God Is Not Great*, by Christopher Hitchens, and *Eat, Pray, Love*, by Elizabeth Gilbert.

As both of these books illustrate, religion in America is somewhat chaotic. One reason for this is that religion reflects an individualism that must seek or invent religious companionship. Long gone is the comfort of stable denominational loyalty (if it ever was that stable). Perhaps the anarchic state of religion in America is what makes

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**Whitney Bodman** is associate professor of comparative religion at Austin Seminary. He earned the MDiv from Duke Divinity School and the ThD from Harvard Divinity School. Ordained in the United Church of Christ, Bodman has pastored several churches in the northeastern United States and has long been involved in interfaith organizations. His current research focuses on the Qur’an, modern Islam in the Middle East, and rituals of sacred space and pilgrimage. He is chair of the Texas Conference of Churches Muslim-Christian Forum and meets with the TCC Jewish-Christian Forum. He also serves on the Executive Committee of the Board of Texas Impact.
dialogue so important.

Although America remains a Christian-majority country, we Christians often feel like minorities. Why? Because we do not identify ourselves primarily as Christians, but rather as Baptists, Presbyterians, Mormons, Episcopalians, and so forth, each, in itself, a religious minority. Many of these established denominations are further riven by disputes reflective of the pelvic politics of the nation. With no established church and a burgeoning diversity of communions, we act more in competition with each other than in concert. The “Christian Church” is a theological abstraction. We do not commune much, but we do dialogue.

When we speak of dialogue, what usually comes first to mind is not ecumenical dialogue, but interfaith or inter-religious (the second is better) dialogue. This nation is both the best and the worst of places for interfaith dialogue. It is true that every religion is here. As Diana Eck has chronicled, America is not only Christian but Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Yoruba, Voodoo, Wiccan—and the list goes on and on. Consider that more Americans than Japanese are ordained as Zen monks. Wicca, though originating in England, has its greatest growth in the U.S. Although the actual number of adherents is debated, Wicca has widespread membership. Consider, too, the new African church in Irving, Texas. The Redeemed Christian Church of God is African (Nigerian), not African-American.

America has not simply inherited religious diversity, we have produced it. At least five major world religious movements were born here: the Mormon Church, Seventh-Day Adventists, Pentecostalism, Scientology, and Jehovah's Witnesses (for statistics, see www.adherents.com). Why is this? America excels at spawning religious movements because, again, of the individualism that encourages personal search and creativity more than durable affiliation.

The oldest religious dialogue in the U.S. is Christian-Jewish dialogue. Jews have been in this country since the mid-1600s and, given their small numbers, have contributed monumentally to American life. Yet Jewish-Christian dialogue is not flourishing. Gary Bretton-Granatoor, education director of the Anti-Defamation League, noted at a forum held in the Austin Seminary chapel that the Jewish-Christian dialogue is still in its infancy. Why is this? Given that the subject of the forum was the Presbyterian proposal on divestment, it is clear that a large part of the reason is political.

We disagree about Israel. Divestment is just one issue, but symptomatic of the others. For Jews, divestment poses a threat to a core issue, namely, solidarity with Israel for American Jews and derivatively, Jewish survival. Israel is the only place where it is normative to be Jewish, though it is not necessarily the most comfortable place to be Jewish. Many Jews have said that America is the best place to be Jewish, not so much because of the violence in Israel, but because Israel does not fully recognize Reform or Conservative Judaism, the largest Jewish denominations (31% and 30%, respectively) in America.

For many Christians, divestment is a moral issue, a matter of integrity. Ironically, multitudes of mainline Christians and Jews have marched together for a host of moral missions—civil rights, women’s rights, economic rights, and sexual ethics. Yet when it comes to the issue of Israel, where the same Christians understand themselves to be act-
ing out of the same principles as before, Jews seem to have abandoned the Christians and turned on them with tart charges of infamy, double-standards, and anti-Semitism. Christians have been rightly challenged to respond to centuries of anti-Semitism. This has resulted in significant changes in liturgy, teaching, and theology. There is still a long way to go. Jewish evolution in the dialogue has been considerably more anemic. In the year 2000, a small independent group of scholars published *Dabru Emet* (see Zech. 8:16), an acknowledgement of significant progress in Christian theology and practice, but little else has been forthcoming. Other developments are encouraging. For example, Christian spouses of Jews are increasingly accepted in Jewish congregations. Jewish scholars are teaching at Christian seminaries, sometimes in the area of New Testament studies.

There are many institutes for Christian-Jewish relations doing creative work in theology, history, and communal relations. Scholarship on the New Testament, rabbinic texts, and the “parting of the ways” has been exceptional. However, these institutes generally work in total isolation from the larger world of interfaith relations, and often it seems that the theology emerging from these institutes is warped by a singular focus on issues specific to the Jewish-Christian relationship. Middle Eastern Christians are seldom included or even acknowledged.

There are some similar themes in the Muslim-Christian dialogue. Here, too, Christians are largely in the position of apologizing for history—the Crusades in this case. The real issue there is not the Crusades (about which most Muslims know next to nothing, other than the conquest of Jerusalem, one of a handful of despicable events in perhaps 300 years of dissimilar crusades), but colonialism and contemporary Western dominance—military, economic, political, and cultural. For Muslims, dialogue with Christians provides an opportunity to help Westerners understand Islam, but there is little interest in understanding Christianity. For Christians, it is both neighborly in principle to dialogue and it is an opportunity to learn about a religion that is in the news every day, but conversation seldom dips below the surface. Many years ago an observer quipped that Muslim-Christian dialogue has become a conversation between Christianity—a history without faith, and Islam—a faith without history.

The Muslim-Christian dialogue is also in its infancy. There is no national organization dedicated to this relationship, though there are plenty of Muslims here. They are a diverse assemblage—30% South Asian, 25% Arab, 17% African-American. A large number are first-generation immigrants (68% from perhaps eighty countries), many with American-born children. For the most part, they are well-educated, white-collar professionals, eager to establish themselves as American and Muslim and raise their children likewise. Particularly in the current political and social environment, they are anxious to have their Islam accepted by the larger population as a moral tradition, supportive of American values and contributing positively to American culture. They are building stable institutions—mosques, community centers, and schools, and they are integrating the multiple cultures and nationalities that constitute their congregations.

Perhaps the most theologically sophisticated relationship is the Buddhist-Christian dialogue. The Buddhist communities are small and new, so local dialogues are few, but the Buddhist-Christian dialogue is truly international in scope. There exists a signifi-
cant and growing body of literature. The popularity of Buddhism rests in part on being a non-religious religion, more of a psychology or a philosophy in some of its forms, which allows some Christians to consider themselves to be at once Christian and Buddhist.

It is often difficult to discern whether popular meditation practices and other spiritual disciplines that derive from Buddhism and Hinduism should still be considered Buddhist or Hindu. (A Zen koan: what is the religion of one Christian meditating?) Figures such as the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh have made a significant impact in America, speaking to sold-out audiences. In Austin alone there are at least twenty-three centers that identify themselves as Buddhist, or Buddh-ish.

There are innumerable other religious communities in America. Their presence is not often felt in the context of formal dialogues but more through individual relationships, neighbor-to-neighbor, classmate-to-classmate, or colleague-to-colleague. Religious literature proliferates, especially literature that comes under the hazy category of “spirituality” or “new religions.”

It is symptomatic of American religion that boundaries are indistinct. We might be Presbyterian, but practice yoga (Hindu) and read the Zen of Golf with no more discomfort than an agnostic wearing a cross (now popular secular jewelry). We are increasingly likely to have relatives married to someone from another religious tradition. Most pastors have been asked to do a funeral or a wedding in which two or more religions are in some way involved. That’s America.

For the most part it is comfortable simply living together and acknowledging the diversity in the neighborhood. But shouldn’t people of faith want more? Most current dialogue centers on maintaining or establishing relationship. This is profitable, but limited. Religious dialogue ought to be religious—searching, disturbing, visionary, scandalous, and redemptive.

Max Müller once said, “To know one religion is to know none.” Encountering the Other tests the boundaries of our own religious identity. We are faced with questions we have never thought to ask, which inevitably lead us to new insights into our own tradition. It is pilgrimage, not residency. We approach the presence of God by a road less traveled and see some pearl of great price we have never seen before in our Bible, our liturgy, our creeds, or the practices of our faith.

My plaint here is intended to be frank, a bit provocative, but not insulting or disparaging. It is mostly a plea for discourse worthy of the kerygma that claims us. It is good that our dialogues are happening. It is disappointing not to have advanced further. (All exceptions to this sweeping characterization are welcome). Isn’t it time to expect more from ourselves? And more from each other?
Theodore J. Wardlaw, President

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Fall 2007