

Preaching Easter at Old First Gnostic

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“As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him.”

Mark 16:5-6

“I do not think that anyone, anywhere, at any time brings dead people back to life.” John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*

Old First Gnostic Church stands in a prominent place in town – actually in every town. Among its members are the “best and the brightest” – attorneys, physicians, teachers, thoughtful and open-minded people of every stripe. Old First Gnostic is Presbyterian, or perhaps it’s Methodist or Baptist or Lutheran or U.C.C. or Disciples. Stewardship at Old First Gnostic is always a challenge, especially in these economic times, but the money seems to come in eventually, and, of course, there is always the endowment. Parents at Old First Gnostic hope their children will grow up to make wise choices about their religion, but the main desire is for their children to be happy in life and to be good people. Old First Gnostic has a handsome and historic building and is holding its own in terms of membership, but worship attendance is a constant concern. The church has a professional (and expensive) music program and a fine choir, which provides inspiring and quality music in the Sunday services. The leadership of Old First Gnostic is well aware of the wildfire growth of the so-called “mega churches” in town, the ones with the energetic, digital-fueled worship services and sermons on topics like “Tweeting Jesus,” but their heads are not turned. In fact, Old First Gnostic sniffs at pop Christianity and understands itself as the alternative to such flashy and superficial churches. At Old First Gnostic, there are challenging adult forums on “ecology,” “understanding Islam,” and “What does the Bible *really* say about sex?” Old First Gnostic is progressive, inclusive, committed to education, and the pews are populated by smart, probing, intellectually honest people who prize thought-provoking and spiritually challenging sermons. It is the kind of church many astute clergy yearn to serve.

Easter, however, is a problem at Old First Gnostic.

Gnosticism Redux

It has been twenty years since cultural and literary critic Harold Bloom declared that American religion is “irretrievably Gnostic.” By this bold claim, made in *The American Religion: the Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation*,¹ Bloom was arguing that, despite what denominations and congregations may say officially about their creeds and convictions, their true religion is Gnosticism. American religion, claimed Bloom, rests its faith not on revelation, but instead on *gnosis*, “a knowing, by and of an uncreated self, or self-within-the-self.” This *gnosis*, which is at one and the same

time divine inner illumination and self-knowledge, is seen as a knowledge that leads to freedom, but it is “a dangerous and doom-eager freedom: from nature, time, history, community, and other selves.”²

At first, Bloom’s book was poorly received, to say the least. Suspicions were already loose that Bloom was a quirky and unreliable interpreter of religion because of the publication two years earlier of *The Book of J*, a runaway bestseller with the headline-grabbing claim that the Yahwist strand of the Torah was written by a woman in the Solomonic court, perhaps even a daughter of King Solomon himself. When *The American Religion* appeared, then, Bloom’s readers already had an eyebrow arched over his amateur forays into religion. This new book, with its rash and sometimes sloppy claims about American Gnosticism, was seen by critics as overblown and uninformed, “a trifle eccentric”³ and as “suffering from Bloom’s usual vices – arrogance and melodramatic exaggeration – to mention a tin ear to some aspects of the faith....”⁴ It didn’t help that, a few years later, Bloom trumped himself in *Omens of Millennium: The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams, and Resurrection*, where he gleefully hinted that Jesus himself was probably a Gnostic, whose subtle wisdom was misunderstood and mangled by an irascible and authoritarian apostle Paul.⁵

In retrospect, though, Bloom had a better critical eye than it first seemed. For all of his brashness and blather, he nevertheless managed to detect an authentic impulse in the American soul, to name the Gnostic spirit that animates much of our homegrown religion, especially American Protestantism. For Bloom, Gnosticism was a broad and pervasive theme, and he saw it everywhere – especially among the indigenous American religious “brands,” such as Mormons, Southern Baptists, and Christian Scientists. But what is far more interesting is what Bloom largely overlooked, the more focused and well-defined sort of Gnosticism that lately has begun to appeal to some of the most thoughtful and progressive people in the old mainline churches, the faith of those gathered, in my imagination, at Old First Gnostic.

For a variety of complicated reasons, reasons that have been well explored elsewhere,⁶ what might be called historic or apostolic Christianity, with its ancient creeds, truth claims, and churchly embodiments, seems less and less plausible to many people today. Some, feeling the burden of creeds they can no longer honestly recite and churchly institutions they no longer find life-giving, have wandered away from church altogether into private spirituality, or into nothing. But others have remained on the rolls and in the pews, loyal but restless pilgrims wandering through the ruins of their ancestors’ faith.

For some of the most discerning of these pilgrims, even as traditional talk of miracles or the saving power of Jesus or the second coming of Christ seems increasingly detached from reality, an alternative language of faith, constructed out of strands of spirituality and pragmatism already present in the American experience, has grown up to rival the older formulae. And Bloom is right. This alternative expression bears a striking family resemblance to an old nemesis that has dogged Christian faith virtually from the beginning, namely Gnosticism. Many of these “spiritual but hesitantly religious” pilgrims have become the congregants in Old First Gnostic.

In the early church, Gnosticism was the minority report, a threat to orthodoxy perhaps, but a conviction voiced mainly by a few marginalized elites. But now, argues Bloom, it has become a mass phenomenon. “There are tens of millions of Americans,” he says, “whose obsessive idea of spiritual freedom violates the normative basis of

historical Christianity, although they are incapable of realizing how little they share of what was considered Christian doctrine.”⁷

Irenaeus, the second-century bishop of Lyons, furiously battled the Gnosticism infecting the churches in Gaul. His famous treatise on the subject is usually referred to as *Against Heresies*, but the proper title is *The Detection and Overthrow of the Pretended but False Gnosis*. Today, Gnosticism is best considered not as a heresy and certainly not as something to be sniffed out, detected, and overthrown, but instead as a certain impulse that often rises in Christianity whenever the claims of the faith and the structures of the church are perceived as implausible, or perhaps worse, as rigid, intellectually dishonest, confining, violent and oppressive.

In contemporary Gnosticism, we see not some kind of counterinsurgency to orthodoxy, but instead as a place of spiritual refuge, a place where thinking Christians often go when they can no longer make sense of the creeds and can no longer abide what they perceive as mindless and dogmatic authoritarianism and institutional failure in the churches. Today’s Gnostics do not stand in direct historical continuity with the folk who beleaguered Irenaeus. Gnosticism is not like Anglicanism or Lutheranism, a historically continuous movement with a chain of leaders, a literary heritage, and a set of institutions to preserve its memory. To the contrary, Gnosticism is a kind of escape from historical continuity and institutional embodiment. It erupts when history seems contaminated and institutions are broken. It is more akin to a motif like “the spirit of rebellion,” a phenomenon that recurs in history whenever historical circumstances breed its appearance.

The rising quotient of Gnosticism among many of the most alert and intelligent Christians should command our attention, not because it needs to be rooted out, but because it needs to be challenged afresh by the gospel it never fully grasped and, therefore, felt it must leave behind. Contemporary Gnostic Christianity presents itself as bold, mature, and intellectually honest, but it is actually a pale, thinned-out, basically *bourgeois*, and finally lonely version of the faith. We should pay attention to those in the pews at Old First Gnostic, not because they have dangerous ideas to be feared, but because of what Gnostic Christianity misses about the fullness of the gospel and the richness of the Easter faith.

Seekers Enlightened vs. Sinners Saved

What is contemporary American Gnosticism? What do Gnostics believe? There are many places we could look for answers (and there is far more to say than can be said here), but we could hardly do better than to explore the pages of Robin Myers’ *Saving Jesus from the Church: How to Stop Worshipping Christ and Start Following Jesus*. This engaging book with the sensationalist title is delightfully written, witty, aptly illustrated, and winsomely addressed to intelligent lay and clergy readers. It is also a pitch-perfect expression of a Gnosticized Christianity. It could well sit on the book table at Old First Gnostic.

If one of the basic quests of faith is to draw closer to God, to be at one with God, then many traditional Christians would point to the work of Jesus Christ and to the cross and say with Paul, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.” They would sing, “Amazing grace, how sweet that sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found....” Myers, however, points to a different center of the faith: obviously, no matter how much preaching we hear to the contrary, fewer

and fewer of us actually order our lives around the axis of sin and salvation. Rather, we order it around a search for meaning in a world that often seems meaningless. We are looking for a teacher, not a savior.⁸

At root, Christian Gnosticism is a search for meaning, and it vibrates to the conviction that human beings are transformed by special spiritual knowledge (*gnosis*), rather than being saved by the power of the cross and grace. In the ancient Gnostic texts, Elaine Pagels observes, Jesus “speaks of illusion and enlightenment, not of sin and repentance. Instead of coming to save us from sin, he comes as a guide to open access to spiritual understanding.”⁹ In short, Gnosticism celebrates the Jesus Myers desires, a teacher, not a savior.

In the *Book of Common Prayer*, this traditional confession appears:

Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep, we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts, we have offended against thy holy laws, we have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done.

But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, spare thou those who confess their faults, restore thou those who are penitent, according to thy promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesus our Lord; and grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake, that we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, to the glory of thy holy Name. Amen.

Virtually every phrase of this prayer rubs the folk at Old First Gnostic the wrong way. The prayer depicts human beings who have thought and desired and loved their way into tragic consequences. Strikingly, it is not humanity at its worst that has become lost sheep; it is humanity aspiring to be its best whose “devices and desires of our own hearts” have contradicted what is wise and holy. Humanity cannot find its own way to life and, therefore, must stand in humble penitence pleading with God for mercy, restoration, and guidance.

For John Calvin, human beings are magnificent creatures, capable of artistic beauty, noble philosophies, and powerful works of charity, but always prone, even in our highest achievements, to self-deception and destruction. Like Amish quilters who intentionally drop a stitch as a testimony to the imperfection of even our most beautiful efforts, Calvin saw moral ambiguity even in the purest human intent and action. Thus, the rhythm of penitence and restoration is a lifelong process, a kind of holy and merciful warfare the end of which is divine redemption:

This restoration does not take place in one moment or one day or one year; but through continual and sometimes even slow advances God wipes out in his elect the corruptions of the flesh, cleanses them of guilt, consecrates them to himself as temples, renewing all their minds to true purity that they may practice repentance throughout their lives as and know that this warfare will end only in death.¹⁰

To the folk at Old First Gnostic, all of this breast-beating over sinfulness is seen as weak, passive, and misguided, a kind of groveling, unbecoming to our status as

rational creatures with a free will and made in the image of God. The members of Old First Gnostic are thoughtful people, most of them responsible members of society, and they cannot imagine themselves as inherently self-deceptive or destructive. They're not perfect, of course. Maybe they are not fully informed, and, therefore, need to be educated, or perhaps they have not arrived at full maturity, and are, thus, in need of growth, but, with proper guidance, they can think and feel their way toward the good. To know God is to know oneself, and truly to know oneself is to know God. As Pagels says of Gnostics, "[S]elf-knowledge is knowledge of God, the self and the divine are identical."¹¹ The favorite text at Old First Gnostic could well be what Jesus says in the Gospel of Thomas: "If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you."

We see here a collision of theological anthropologies. Is the human condition one of captivity to sin? Then we need a God who comes as liberator and savior. Or is it basically one of lack of true wisdom? Then we need a God who comes to illumine the wise path so that we can choose it. Gnosticism puts its dime on *gnosis* – illumination and wisdom; Gnosticism is a religion of enlightenment. As Myers puts it,

[The] two roads that "diverged in a yellow wood" so long ago looked equally fair, but now one is well worn. It is the road of the Fall and redemption, original sin, and the Savior. The other is the road of enlightenment, wisdom, creation-centered spirituality, and a nearly forgotten object of discipleship: transformation. This is the road less traveled. It seeks not to save our souls but to restore them.¹²

For Myers, Jesus is not a savior, but a sage, and the church, he thinks, is confused because it wants to "believe in" Jesus instead of simply learning from him and following him:

This difference, between following and worshiping, is not insignificant. Worshiping is an inherently passive activity, since it involves the adoration of that to which the worshiper cannot aspire. It takes the form of praise, which can be both sentimental and self-satisfying, without any call to changed behavior or self-sacrifice. In fact, Christianity as a belief system requires nothing but acquiescence. Christianity as a way of life, as a path to follow, requires a second birth, the conquest of ego, and new eyes with which to see the world. It is no wonder that we have preferred to be saved.¹³

So for Myers (and for the flock at Old First Gnostic), traditional worship runs the danger of passivity because it involves bowing down before a so-called divine Jesus we cannot ourselves become or even imitate. The sage Jesus, however, doesn't save us, because we don't need to be saved, and he doesn't ask us to bow before him in worship, because he is simply a more spiritually mature version of ourselves. Rather he enlightens our souls through wisdom and helps us grow beyond our egos, even to the point that, by learning and following, we can ourselves become Jesus-like.

This reflects, of course, an extraordinarily low Christology. It also reflects an optimism about humanity that is not only thoroughly Gnostic but also – and here

again Bloom is right – as American as apple pie. It is a view that found powerful voice in Emerson, who believed that we should call Jesus a great man because he, alone in all history, saw how great we are. For Emerson, the incarnation was not the Word become flesh in Jesus of Nazareth; it was the divine infused in all flesh, the holy merged with all humanity. Jesus' message was, "I am divine. Through me, God acts; through me, speaks. Would you see God, see me; or, see thee, when thou also thinkest as I now think."¹⁴

In other words, if you want to see God today, look at me when I am thinking right, when I am thinking like Jesus. American spirituality loves this theme. It was heard in the nineteenth century in Emerson, in the twentieth century in the "power of positive thinking" of Norman Vincent Peale and the "possibility thinking" of Robert Schuller, and in the twenty-first century in the Gnostic self-help preaching of Joel Osteen, who says, "Remember, you have the DNA of Almighty God. He has equipped you with everything you need to fulfill your destiny."¹⁵ In a more liberal form, this same message is softly proclaimed from the pulpit of Old First Gnostic.

When Dietrich Bonhoeffer reflected on his experience at Union Seminary in New York in the early 1930s and his exposure to American Christianity, he was alarmed to find even then the reduction of the gospel to religion (what we would today call "spirituality") and ethics (doing good in the name of Jesus) that we find in full flower at Old First Gnostic. American theology, he discovered, was essentially natural theology, devoid of Christology, lacking any notion that God is in Christ redeeming the world, including the church. He said,

God has granted American Christianity no Reformation. ...American theology and the American church as a whole have never been able to understand the meaning of "criticism" by the Word of God and all that signifies. Right to the last they do not understand that God's "criticism" touches even religion, the Christianity of the churches and the sanctification of Christians, and that God has founded his church beyond religion and beyond ethics. A symptom of this is the general adherence to natural theology. In American theology, Christianity is still essentially religion and ethics. But because of this, the person and work of Jesus Christ must, for theology, sink into the background and in the long run remain misunderstood, because it is not recognized as the sole ground of radical judgment and radical forgiveness.¹⁶

Being Enlightened vs. Being Credulous

Because Gnosticism is all about personal illumination, it inevitably implies two classes of Christians: the enlightened and the unenlightened. Some early Gnostics, in fact, practiced two forms of baptism: a first, cruder, water baptism, and a second, higher, more spiritual baptism. In the first, converts promised to serve and obey God the creator, lawgiver, and judge. In the second, the faithful, having progressed beyond all such primitive images of God, were welcomed into a more elevated and enlightened understanding of God as the source of all wisdom and being. The second baptism was a sign of maturity, evidence of moving from being God's servant to being God's offspring.¹⁷

Old First Gnostic likewise defines itself over against less enlightened forms of

Christianity, and its members have chosen this church precisely because it does not participate in the Bible-thumping, judgmental dogmatism they see in so many other churches. In Myers' book, too, there lurks the specter of unenlightened American Christianity. He consistently contrasts his views of Christianity with a naive and credulous literalism that sees the faith as acquiescence to fictions such as the virgin birth and the divinity of Christ. At one point, he dreams of dumping out the garbage of typical churchly Christianity: "Just imagine that we could take an industrial-size garbage bag and fill it with every discredited myth in the church—the inerrancy of scripture, the virgin birth, the miracles as suspension of natural law, the blood atonement, the bodily resurrection, and the second coming. Twist it, tie it up, and carry it out to the curb. It will be gone in the morning."¹⁸ With the garbage disposed of, what remains is Jesus the ethicist, the Jesus who teaches the Beatitudes. The creeds are all gone, the demands for belief in unscientific claims tossed into the dumpster. "The questions are all ethical," says Myers. "None are theological. How can we do the will of God? No one thinks to write a creed."¹⁹

On the Maginot Line between enlightened and unenlightened Christianity, Myers and at least two other popular contemporary Gnostic writers, Marcus Borg and John Shelby Spong, constantly wage war with conservative, literalistic, near fundamentalist Christianity. Why? They would claim that this malformation of the faith must be battled because it is the default drive understanding in popular Christianity and, consequently, very powerful and destructive. But I suspect that two other reasons also motivate their combat. First, all three of them grew up in rigid, conservative religious environments, and they seem compelled to do battle with the demons of their past. Second – and they would all vehemently protest this analysis – they are engaged in pitched battle with literalistic Christianity because they're actually fighting for the same turf.

Despite the claims of these writers to read the Bible poetically and metaphorically, they actually tend toward the same kind of literalism found in conservative circles. Spong, for example, who once wrote a book called *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism* (Jesus may not be a savior, but Spong surely is), wrote another book, this one about the Resurrection, in which he surveys the Bible's multiple accounts of Easter and finds them collectively to be "an inconsistent, contradictory, mutually exclusive witness,"²⁰ which, of course, they are when read with the eyes of wooden literalism. Myers thinks that the New Testament writers took the simple story of an ethical sage named Jesus and, in the name of "marketing," "propaganda," and the accumulation of power, transformed it into a supernatural fable about the Son of God that no reasonable, thinking person could swallow, which of course it is if the reductionist enlightenment definition of "supernatural" is allowed to deal the cards.

Myers thinks that scholarly methods, such as those employed by the Jesus Seminar, allow us to reverse the damage and the mangling done by the New Testament writers and to return to an Ur-Jesus, the Galilean sage and his unvarnished ethical wisdom. (Myers, like most of the contemporary Gnostics, is enamored of the Jesus Seminar and its new quest for the historical Jesus, but for all of this supposed interest in "history," in true Gnostic fashion history ends up – like creeds, institutions, and all other humanly constructed realities – being a vulgar, embodied, contaminant. The pure Jesus was defaced by the "fingerprints" of the Gospel writers and the political manipulations of the historical process.) When Myers demythologizes

the New Testament accounts of Jesus, he actually stands on the same scientifically governed playing field as fundamentalists. Fundamentalists read the biblical myths and say they are scientifically and historically true. Myers reads them and says they are scientifically and historically bogus. The literalists say Jesus walked on water; Myers says, "No, he didn't." They say, "It's a fact;" he replies, "No, it's not a fact," but both are working with the same flat, fact-based understanding of truth. Myers scoffs at uncritical believers who slap, "The Bible says it; I believe it; and that settles it" bumper stickers on their cars by essentially slapping a bumper sticker on his car that reads, "The Bible says it; I don't believe it; and that settles it."

For Gnostics, spiritual wisdom is not exactly the equivalent of rationalism, but it must pass the test of scientific rationality. Charles Taylor describes the intellectual plight of thoughtful contemporary people who want to have faith but who have to pass all the claims of faith through the truth filter of modern science, that is to say, the very people who sit in the pews at Old First Gnostic:

But today, when a naturalistic materialism is not only an offer, but presents itself as the only view compatible with the most prestigious institution of the modern world, viz., science; it is quite conceivable that one's doubts about one's own faith, about one's ability to be transformed, or one's sense of how one's own faith is childish and inadequate, could mesh with this powerful ideology, and send one off along the path of unbelief, even though with regret and nostalgia.²¹

Taylor's account allows us to see why writers like Myers, Spong, and Borg have such an enthusiastic audience at Old First Gnostic. Like all Gnostics, they provide a definition of an "adult" and "mature" faith that transcends childish belief, one that does "mesh with this powerful ideology" of the contemporary *gnosis* called science. They enable people to be loyal citizens of the world carved out by post-enlightenment scientific rationality while at the same time holding onto a vestige of faith. They accomplish this by turning the wine into water, by transforming the Jesus who healed the sick and fed the multitudes into a sage who utters Gnostic illumination, ethical wisdom, to our souls.

The Crisis of Easter

So now it is Easter at Old First Gnostic, and we have a problem. The members are persuaded that traditional Christianity expects them to believe an Easter claim they find impossible to affirm, that Jesus was killed on a Roman cross on Friday afternoon, but on Sunday morning he was resuscitated, alive again, embodied, and was walking around on the earth, the recipient of a science-defying, supernatural miracle. Only those who believe this, goes the party line, are saved and will go to heaven. The congregation at Old First Gnostic resists these claims, and Myers speaks for them:

Sadly, the church has been declaring all those who do not believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus to be heretics.... This includes thoughtful, committed Christians who do not believe that Easter has anything to do with the resuscitation of a corpse or believing things you know are not true in order to get rewards you secretly doubt are available. We don't live in a

three-story universe anymore, and the disappearance and reappearance of corpses should be left behind with the ideas of demon possession, slavery, and the subordination of women.

Myers, operating within the framework of scientific *gnosis*, describes the plight of Easter worshippers at Old First Gnostic: "They come to Easter service believing that they must believe the impossible in order to feel the implausible. Before they can sing the 'Hallelujah Chorus,' they must check their brain at the door. God's 'yes' to Jesus is assumed to be a 'no' to the laws of the physical universe."²²

So what is Easter to these Gnostics, to these scientific rationalists? To begin with, it's not about a bodily resurrection; it's about a spiritual resurrection. "Some gnostics," writes Elaine Pagels, "called the literal view of the resurrection the 'faith of fools.' The resurrection, they insisted, was not a unique event of the past: instead, it symbolized how Christ's presence could be experienced in the present. What mattered was not literal seeing, but spiritual vision."²³

Myers agrees. Easter is not about something that happened to Jesus; it is about spirituality, something happening now in the hearts and souls of the followers of Jesus. The reason the New Testament presents the resurrection as an embodied reality is because of a limitation in ancient Judaism. For "Jews, there could be no resurrection without a resurrection of the body. How could one 'rise' without a body to rise in?"²⁴ But, of course, for more enlightened (non-Jewish?) moderns, we know that events can happen in our psyches without the need for crude notions of embodiment. "The nonspatial 'interior life,'" says Myers, "is a modern, psychological concept."²⁵ At Easter, the disciples had their hearts transformed by the reassurance that the enlightened teachings of Jesus were existentially true and imperishable.

Myers, citing John Dominic Crossan, states, "Easter is not about the start of a new faith but about the continuation of an old one. That is the only miracle and the only mystery, and it is more than enough of both."²⁶ Jesus did not rise to new and embodied life, but instead, as Bultmann claimed, "Jesus rose into the kerygma" — that is, into the faith of the first believers."²⁷ To insist on a bodily resurrection, argues Myers, becoming explicit about his Gnosticism, "cuts us off from all those generous and compassionate latter-day gnostics for whom Easter is a spiritual, not a molecular, event."²⁸ Leaning again on the creed of scientific rationality, Myers insists, "To ask the question of whether the resurrection is true, and to mean by this that only a resuscitated corpse constitutes such proof, is to impose the standards of the modern mind upon a prescientific culture of myth and magic."²⁹

Bishop Spong is even more fulsome about how Easter is an event of the interior life of disciples. Here, according to Spong, is what happened:

One night in the early fall, Simon and his mates had a particularly good catch. They were happy as they dragged the fish ashore. They built a fire, placed some of their catch on the grill, brought out the bread from the boat, and prepared to feast. As was his custom, Simon took the bread, said the ceremonial blessing, broke and distributed it. In his blessing, he likened the bread to Jesus' broken body. Both, he said, were meant to give life.

Then it happened. A light went on in Simon's head. It was as if the heavens opened and so did Simon's eyes, and Simon stared into the realm

of God. There he saw Jesus as part of God's being and God's meaning. It was not delusional. Death could not destroy the one who made God known. "Death cannot contain him. I have seen the Lord!" was Simon's ecstatic exclamation. Then Simon opened the eyes of the others to what he saw. Each of them grasped this vision, experienced Jesus alive, and were themselves resurrected. That was Easter. It was both objective and subjective, but above all it was real.³⁰

So, what's the problem here? This spiritualized understanding of Easter allows thoughtful people to hold onto their faith while not relinquishing a scientific worldview. What is more, the members at Old First Gnostic can become ethical followers of Sage Jesus. They may not be able to recite the Apostles' Creed without crossing their fingers behind their backs, but they do take up the cause of the poor, the outcast, and the marginalized. By their fruits you shall know them. No harm; no foul.

But, there is, in fact, a foul. Gnostic faith finally shipwrecks on the shoals of its own rationality and ends up impoverishing the Christian life. To begin with, it is self-contradictory. Like Bultmann, it wants to view the mythological claims of scripture as the outdated vestiges of an obsolete worldview. It wishes to affirm in the Bible only what can be affirmed within the constraints of modern science. As Myers says, "We don't live in a three-story universe anymore," and no one wants to have beliefs that violate the laws of the physical universe.

However, in a world of physical laws, a world largely bereft of divine agency, contemporary Gnostics nevertheless affirm that there is still one tiny space where God still reigns, namely, the faith experience of believers. But they are playing poker with the house. If God performs no mighty works externally, what reason do we have for affirming them internally, in our souls? We see here Bultmann's (and the contemporary Gnostics') failure of nerve. They are eager to accept a world of natural laws and rationality and bold to reject any idea of God operating outside those constraints, but that have no issue with a God who operates inside the tiny tableau of our psyches. "God acts on me, speaks to me, here and now," says Bultmann.³¹ Paul Ricoeur names the inconsistency: "It is striking that Bultmann makes hardly any demands on this language of faith, whereas he was so suspicious about the language of myth." As Kevin J. Vanhoozer puts it, "Bultmann is critical of the *mythos*...employed by the biblical authors for speaking of God's acts but uncritical of his own."³²

The deepest sadness about Gnostic Christianity, though, is not in its internal inconsistencies, but instead in what it misses about the Easter gospel. The resurrection of Jesus, indeed the resurrection of Jesus' body, is not a magic trick or a supernatural violation of the so-called laws of nature. The New Testament depiction of the risen Christ is not, as Myers would name it, a "resuscitated corpse." The risen Christ is a glorified body, one that is both continuous and radically discontinuous with the body of the historical Jesus. The followers of Jesus recognize him, and they don't. The risen Jesus is not a ghost and invites his disciples to touch him, but the risen Jesus walks through locked doors and disappears from their sight. The risen Christ is embodied in history but transcends it. The affirmation that God raised Jesus from the dead, says New Testament scholar Steven Kraftchick,

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.³³

The resurrection of Jesus’ body is unbounded good news, and the good folk at Old First Gnostic need to hear it proclaimed. The resurrection of Jesus’ body is, first, an affirmation of creation. The God who raised Jesus – not just in spirit, but in body – is a God of embodiment, the God whose Word became flesh and dwelled among us, the God who took formless dust and shaped it into a sacrament, a gift of embodied grace, a creation that was and remains “very good.”

Wendell Berry’s moving novel *Jayber Crow* is titled after the name of the barber in the small village of Port William, Kentucky. At one point, Jayber expresses bafflement over the preachers in their local church who preach sermons about the evils of the world and the flesh:

[T]his religion that scorned the beauty and goodness of this world was a puzzle to me. ... While the wickedness of the flesh was preached from the pulpit, the young husbands and wives and young courting couples sat thigh to thigh, full of yearning and joy, and the old people thought of the beauty of the children. And when church was over they’d go home to Heavenly dinners of fried chicken, it might be, and creamed new peas and hot biscuits and butter and cherry pie and sweet milk and buttermilk. ... [A]nd the preacher, having just foresworn on behalf of everybody the joys of the flesh, would eat with unconsecrated relish.

The resurrection of Jesus’ body is not only an affirmation of the goodness of the creation, it is also a validation of the ministry of Jesus. Jesus was not simply a sage who left behind some inspiring thoughts; he embodied the presence of the reign of God. He touched lepers with healing, he put his hands on the eyes of the blind, he overturned the tables in the Temple, he opened his mouth to speak parables, he broke bread and fed the hungry crowds, he raised a twelve-year-old girl to new life, and he set his face to go to Jerusalem where he offered his body and his life, even to death on a cross. Easter’s good news is not that a mystical light goes on in our heads, but that the mercy and grace, embodied in what Jesus did with his hands, what he spoke with his mouth, and where his feet took him, is now validated as eternal truth. He performed acts of liberation and spoke words of wisdom. With his body, he was *both* savior and teacher. He put his body in harm’s way for the sake of others, and the body of the risen Lord still bears the wounds of what the world did to him. The memory of his life, the memory of his self-giving love even to death, is held and preserved in his risen body.

The resurrection of Jesus’ body is also a call both to repentance and hope. Repentance, because the resurrection is God’s validation of the way of life embodied in Jesus; all other ways are exposed and judged as the ways of death. Hope, because

Jesus' way of life is now glorified in the risen body; it is this way of life that will endure, and all others will pass away. The resurrection of Jesus' body summons us to trust no other truth than what we have seen and heard in him and to find our hope in his body, that is, in living in our own lives the pattern of embodied faithfulness we saw in him. As John Howard Yoder has said,

[T]he cross and not the sword, suffering and not brute power determines the meaning of history. The key to the obedience of God's people is not their effectiveness but their patience. The triumph of the right is assured not by the might that comes to the aid of the right, which is of course the justification of the use of violence and other kinds of power in every human conflict. The triumph of the right, although it is assured, is sure because of the power of the resurrection and not because of any calculation of causes and effects, nor because of the inherently greater strength of the good guys. The relationship between the obedience of God's people and the triumph of God's cause is not a relationship of cause and effect but one of cross and resurrection.³⁴

The resurrection of Jesus' body discloses the difference between what counts and what doesn't count in life. Some people seek spiritual renewal in the "thin places," such as Iona or mountaintop retreats, and these are worthy sanctuaries, perhaps, but the resurrection of Jesus' body reveals that true depth is found in those places where people, often unnoticed by others, are placing their own bodies in the shape of Jesus' life. The mother who is up all night with a sick child, the husband who cares tenderly for his wife whose Alzheimer's is so advanced she no longer knows his name, the sister who prays for and seeks to help her alcoholic brother, the office worker who risks her job by speaking out against racial injustice in her company, the father who proudly takes the hand of his autistic son and walks with him to the first, and frightening, day of school — these are the places, the embodiments, of real holiness.

The resurrection of Jesus' body affirms that these quiet places of service and sacrifice are eternally valid, forever remembered in the life of God. As John Ames, the old minister in Marilyn Robinson's novel *Gilead*, says,

I know this [world] is all mere apparition compared to what awaits us, but it is only lovelier for that. There is a human beauty in it. And I can't believe that, when we have all been changed and put on incorruptibility, we will forget our fantastic condition of mortality and impermanence, the great bright dream of procreating and perishing that meant the whole world to us. In eternity this world will be Troy, I believe, and all that has passed here will be the epic of the universe, the ballad they sing in the streets. Because I don't imagine any reality putting this one in the shade entirely, and I think piety forbids me to try.³⁵

The gospel, said Yoder, discloses "that people who bear crosses are working with the grain of the universe. ...One comes to [that belief] by sharing the life of those who sing about the Resurrection of the slain Lamb."

On Easter, brave and faithful preachers will stand up, even at Old First Gnostic,

and proclaim with joy, "He is risen! He is risen indeed!"

Notes

- 1 Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992).
- 2 *The American Religion*, 49.
- 3 John J. Reilly, "Getting Over the End of the World," *First Things* (February, 1997), 44.
- 4 Jeremy Lott, "American Gnostic: Harold Bloom's 'Post-Christian Nation' Ten Years On," *Books and Culture* 8/6 (Nov-Dec, 2002), 36.
- 5 Reilly, "Getting Over the End of the World," 46.
- 6 For a superb treatment of these trends, see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007).
- 7 Bloom, *The American Religion*, 263.
- 8 Robin R. Meyers, *Saving Jesus from the Church: How to Stop Worshiping Christ and Start Following Jesus* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 7.
- 9 Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), xx.
- 10 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I/III.
- 11 Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, xx.
- 12 Meyers, *Saving Jesus*, 10.
- 13 Myers, *Saving Jesus*, 15.
- 14 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Divinity School Address," delivered in the Divinity College at Harvard, July 15, 1838. Accessed at <http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/emerson/essays/dsahyp.html>.
- 15 Joel Osteen, *It's Your Time: Activate Your Faith, Achieve Your Dreams, and Increase in God's Favor* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009), 303.
- 16 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords, Vol. I* (London: Collins, 1965), 112-113.
- 17 Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 136-139.
- 18 Myers, *Saving Jesus*, 33.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 34.
- 20 John Shelby Spong, *Resurrection: Myth or Reality?* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994), 105.
- 21 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 28.
- 22 Myers, *Saving Jesus*, 77.
- 23 Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, 11.
- 24 Myers, *Saving Jesus*, 76.
- 25 Myers, *Saving Jesus*, 77.
- 26 Myers, *Saving Jesus*, 90.
- 27 Myers, *Saving Jesus*, 76.
- 28 Myers, *Saving Jesus*, 93.
- 29 Myers, *Saving Jesus*, 76.
- 30 John Shelby Spong, "The Easter Moment: Drawing Conclusions," Beliefnet, accessed as <http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Christianity/2001/04/The-Easter-Moment-Drawing-Conclusions.aspx>
- 31 Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 64.
- 32 Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 17.
- 33 Steven Kraftchick, "The Demands of Resurrection," *Insights: the Faculty Journal of Austin Seminary* 123/1 (Fall, 2007), 18.
- 34 John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 232.
- 35 Marilyn Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2004), 52.