

One New Book for the Preacher

Jacob D. Myers

Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia

Brian K. Blount, *Invasion of the Dead: Preaching Resurrection* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 154 pages.

The Easter season is upon us, and with it comes the promise of new life. As the flowers burst forth from their fledgling pods, it is easy for us to speak of resurrection. Resurrection, it seems, is all around us—swaddling us in the sun’s amber glow after a bleak winter, painting our varied landscapes with swaths of marigold, green, and vermilion, bearing witness against death. Though resurrection is central to the Christian narrative, and though this Easter, like so many before, its melodious sounds will emerge from pulpits across the world, does resurrection sufficiently pervade our lives and preaching? Other than this day set aside as the holy day among holy days, do we *preach* resurrection? New Testament scholar Brian Blount dares to venture such penetrating questions in his ground-breaking text, *Invasion of the Dead: Preaching Resurrection*.

Blount serves as the President and Professor of New Testament at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, Virginia. Those familiar with Blount’s earlier works on the Gospel of Mark and Revelation will note similar themes in this work. Emerging from his lectures given for the prestigious Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale Divinity School, this book challenges contemporary Christian faith and practice at its most primitive level. His argument is that many Christians share the same existential reality as the rest of the American populous: we are the living dead. We go about our quotidian tasks as if death has had the last word, as if Good Friday is the best we Christ-followers can hope from this life. With poetic and poignant force, Blount drives a stake into the heart of such a paltry view of life. We are Easter people, and as such, we are vivified to participate in the resurrection of Christ; inasmuch as Christ is risen and in him we are raised to the fullness of life, a half-life will not suffice. We cannot and must not be zombies.

Though he is now an academic administrator and continues to serve as a professor, Blount has never stopped being a pastor. As a pastor he is privy to the realities of contemporary ministry. Blount writes, “Anxiously, desperately, even incredulously, we contemplate and reconsider resurrection. It is as much our destination as it is our destiny. But the rigors of the journey to it divert our attention and shift our focus until what troubles us here overwhelms what promises us there” (xi). As a result, Blount argues, many of us get stuck on Good Friday, never really making it to Easter Sunday in all its socio-political vigor.

As if the turgid waters of pastoral ministry were not enough, our congregants and parishioners are confronted with a cultural tidal wave that is utterly obsessed with death. Death masquerades as revelation; suffering defines our ontological state. The goal of *Invasion of the Dead* is to challenge this logic, to reverse it: death does not define us. Resurrection is the “quintessential apocalyptic moment” (xvii), and Blount seamlessly weaves key New Testament texts with tropes from popular culture to substantiate this claim.

The book is organized around readings from the Book of Revelation, Paul's epistles, and the Gospel of Mark. Each chapter ends with tangible advice for preaching from these texts and includes one of Blount's own sermons. They model his trademark biblical scholarship, cultural acuity, and liberative pronouncements. The sermons alone are worth the price of the book. Throughout, Blount draws our attention to apocalyptic themes contained in each of these parts of Scripture in order to reorient our governing paradigm for interpreting the Christian life. Blount writes, "It is resurrection that puts the enemies down. Resurrection's truth, resurrection's promise, and resurrection's historical reality must therefore be the primary proclamation of the apocalyptic preacher whom God deploys in God's formidable wake" (2).

In his chapter on the Book of Revelation, Blount teaches us all that we could ever want to know about zombies. What is more, he makes the compelling case that we Christians share in the same half-life, quasi-existence as zombies when we fail to live into the fullness of life inaugurated by Christ's resurrection. Dead and alive are both relative terms—both in contemporary nuance and for John of Patmos. Blount calls us to preach to the living dead much as John did, namely, to preach resurrection.

Blount enumerates four levels of creaturely human existence following John's apocalyptic vision: *life*, *type A death*, *type B death*, and *living death*. *Life* is the prize awaiting those who have borne witness to the resurrection of Christ, even to the point of biological death (i.e. martyrdom). *Type A death* is death in a biological sense; it is the cessation of life in the mundane sense of the term. *Type B death* is another matter entirely; it is a permanent cessation of existence beyond biological death. Blount explains, "It is the death that follows a guilty verdict at the final judgment" (20). The existence of the present age Blount labels *living death*—it is not quite death inasmuch as it mimics life, but it does not share in the kind of life of which John writes. Blount explains that it is an "age typified by the characteristics of death" (21).

If the Christian life is a battle against the powers of death, duress, and oppression, then resurrection is God's ultimate weapon (41). Blount argues throughout that resurrection is an invasion; it is a full-blown attack against the forces of death that presently hold the battlefield. This argument has tremendous theological as well as homiletical implications: "Christ does not save because he died; Christ saves because, resurrected, he lives. And in living, he holds the keys that unlock Death" (22). What this means for preachers is that we are summoned to employ and deploy God's weapon against the powers and principalities of this world; in short, we are called to preach resurrection. In God's resurrection of Jesus, we are empowered "to fire resurrection into the midst of living death" (31).

Having walked us through John's apocalypse and convinced us that we are in fact preaching to the living dead, his engagement with Paul's epistles and Mark's Gospel follow the same theological and homiletical thrust, though with different exegetical apparatuses. Of the Apostle Paul, Blount writes, "There is present time and there is future time. There is this age and there is God's age. In this age, it is time for us to wake up to the realization that we are living *dead*. That, in a colloquial nutshell, is Paul's apocalyptic point" (49). Through no small measure of exegetical sophistication, Blount makes the case that Paul's apocalyptic imagination centers on God's resurrection of Jesus. Blount argues that even in texts like Galatians and 2 Corinthians, which are saturated with the language of crucifixion, resurrection is still the governing theological motif. He writes, "Everything literally and figuratively starts with

the resurrection [for Paul]. Resurrection is the apocalyptic revelation that Christ first uncovers and then uses to transform the way the apostle understands everything in his world” (59).

In our preaching, Blount urges us to challenge the hubris that we are actually alive (51). Life, for Paul, is nothing less than direct eschatological relationship with God. This requires us to see beyond death—even Jesus’ death—to catch a vision of the fullness of life awaiting those who embody resurrection amidst the powers of death. The present age—ours as well as Paul’s—is infected with death, to which God’s resurrection of Christ is the vaccine. Blount contends, “Our task is to preach about the siege mentality in a secular world that believes all evils have human causes and can therefore be rectified through human progress and reason” (66). But God calls us to more than merely describing this infected, occupied domain: “The apocalyptic preacher’s goal, then, is not only to preach an invasion, but also to trigger an invasion” (68).

Chapter five draws on Blount’s earlier hermeneutical work on the Gospel of Mark as “a story of apocalyptic incursion, [in which] God’s future invades through Jesus’ present” (84). This chapter provides a Markan twist on a consistent theological and homiletical message that Blount has been preaching all along: in Jesus, God invades the land of the living dead with genuine life. Thus, preachers are called to participate in Mark’s apocalyptic vision by focusing not on Jesus’ death, but on his life (88). He argues convincingly that in Mark’s apocalyptic, invasive schema, Jesus crucifixion is the *result* of the invasion rather than the invasion itself. He contends that Christ’s cross is but one component for Mark—albeit an important component—of the invasive ministry and should be interpreted in light of the ministry and not the other way around. What this means for preachers, Blount argues, is that we too must preach of God’s invasion. The metrics of our preaching ministries will thus be measured according to apocalyptic invasion leading to the empty tomb (97). This must be more than a spiritualized and futurized orientation, but a social and political focus on that future reality invading this present age (99).

This Easter most of us will recite seven sacred words to one another: *Christ is risen; Christ is risen indeed!* Blount has convinced me that the power of that *indeed* cannot be a one day affair. The indeed of Christ’s literal and figurative resurrection from the power of death gives us the freedom—nay, the mandate—to live lives worthy of the resurrection. Such lives have received the power to challenge the powers and principalities that seek to shroud this present age with a pall of death and misery. By raising Christ from the dead, God has charged us to participate in the power of Christ’s resurrection. We are empowered to live as agents of resurrection, bringing new life to those living lives not much better than death.