



It Had Better Be True

It was fun, as a child, to bound
down the stairs to find seasonal
sweet-treats under each plate,
but again, with the passing of time,
and the shadow of death over our
broken family circle, I've seen
Easter as highest necessity. If hope
is to flourish, **it had better be true!**¹

However earnestly we seek to exclude its reminders, death is an enemy that will not be put off. Its specter is present in the unexpected catastrophe of an earthquake or school bus accident, in the numbing fears of war that accompany the troop buildup in the Middle East, or when we stand at the graveside of a close family member or friend. As shocking as death is—whether untimely soon or after a full life—we need few reminders that death is for real. And none of us needs to work long and hard to say about death “It had better be true!”

But what of resurrection? In Christian circles this question has challenged a two-fold confession—of Jesus’ resurrection, and of our own! The Thessalonian Christians surely sensed keenly the connection (1 Thess 4:13-18). Their loved ones had died; that was clear. Also clear was that the promised Lord had not yet returned. In Paul’s compassionate announcement of the resurrection, we can almost feel the agony and grief in their plea, “It had better be true!”

Death and Resurrection are topics which press ultimate questions of truth and meaning. We have learned by design or default that one way or another we will talk about death. It is all around us—in our individual deaths which we know will come; in the collective death that threatens our world, brought on ourselves by our technology and social decay. But how do we speak and live with the hope of resurrection?² If we are to speak the gospel truth in clear and helpful ways, then, with the Thessalonians, we need to reflect on the implications of that same hope: “It had better be true!”

Two perspective essays introduce our theme. *Eberhard Jüngel* highlights the reminders of death and finitude that surround us in nature and society. He then ponders the “awkward silence” about eternal life in the church’s proclamation and theology and calls for renewed thought about “life over there” and what it means for Christians to live daily as “ones going to depart.”

Leo Tolstoy had become convinced that there was not an “over there,” that the meaning of religion had to do rather with the practical ordering of life in this world. In a letter to Tolstoy, introduced and newly translated by *James G. Walker*,

¹From a poem “It Had Better Be True” by Gerhard E. Frost in *It Had Better Be True: Reflections on Death and Resurrection*, Visitation Pamphlet Series (Logos Art Productions, 1986) 3.

²See Ned Wisnefske, “Living and Dying with Christ: Do We Mean What We Say?” *Word & World* 10/3 (1990) 255-56.

Vladimir Solovyov, Tolstoy's younger contemporary, presents a fascinating example of the traditional rational arguments for the truth of the resurrection.

The biblical witness has been for Christians the origin and center for theology and proclamation about death and resurrection. In introductory companion pieces, *Wendell Frerichs* surveys the character and implications of the diverse Old Testament views of death, the dead, and afterlife, while *Arland Hultgren*, noting the plurality of traditions represented in the New Testament, argues for the proclamation of Jesus as crucified and risen as the essential unifying center of the gospel. Next, *Robert Hawkins* traces how music and liturgy through the centuries have given verbal and artistic shape to two important expressions for Christians—the good news of the resurrection hope, and personal and communal responses to the reality of death.

Not only adults plead “It had better be true!” In an anecdotal style, *Patricia Lull* brings a parish pastor's perspective to the opportunities and challenges of “telling the truth” about death and resurrection to children and teenagers.

What difference does it make for Christians to talk about “reincarnation” or “resurrection”? *Patrick Keifert* examines important issues for Christian theology and ministry arising from the growing popularity in our culture of “New Age” religious movements and their association with reincarnation themes.

In the final essay in this section, *G. Edward Schuh*, an economist with the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, considers the economic and moral issues facing concerned Christians in the “death and resurrection” balancing of human and technological resources reflected in the changing structures of rural society.

Our regular Texts in Context feature also fittingly addresses our theme. *Craig Koester*, following the narrative of the passion and resurrection in John's Gospel, so prominent in the Series B lectionary, provides helpful insights for interpretation and preaching on death and resurrection themes.

The Resources section begins with a Face to Face discussion by *Lowell Almen*, secretary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and *Carl Braaten*, professor at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, on the issue of inclusive language as it relates to speaking about God in the church. In so doing they explore a crucial contemporary theological and practical issue raised by the traditional trinitarian language of “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

The concern for inclusive language is also indirectly present in the occasion for *Walter Brueggemann*'s interpretive biblical essay on how old text becomes new text in the ongoing haunting experience of hearing a Word from the Lord. His essay was originally presented at the dedication of the New Revised Standard Version translation of the Bible, a translation occasioned in part by concerns for inclusive language biblical texts for worship, proclamation and teaching.

Two other essays round out the Resources section. *David Monge* outlines the theological anthropology in the writings of Douglas John Hall. Hall argues for a metaphor of receptivity based in Martin Luther's theology of the cross in place of the metaphor of mastery and power operative in post-Enlightenment anthropologies. Finally, *Frederick Sontag* explores the exhilaration and dangers for “spiritual athletes” in the search for mountaintop experiences of God. His extended metaphor invites contemplation of how a “program” of spiritual mountain climbing squares with the story of a God who presumes to stoop low and come down to us.