



Telling the Truth: Introducing Death and Resurrection to the Young

PATRICIA J. LULL

Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church, Athens, Ohio

I was summoned by her mother. Sandy was my neighbor and her daughter, Lisa, was dying. At age ten the child had been diagnosed with a cancer so rare that she was rivaled only by a teenager from Saudi Arabia for the peculiarity of her tumor. Lisa had turned eleven and the gravity of her disease had become more obvious to her family, to her nurses, and to me. I was summoned that day because her dying had also become apparent to Lisa.

“She insists on seeing her pastor,” Sandy said to me over the phone. “I’m sorry. I told her you were probably busy today. But she won’t talk to me. She says she will only talk to you.”

I remember so well walking into that bedroom off the kitchen where Lisa spent most of her days. I strolled in casually, as though I had only happened to stop by. Lisa saw right through that facade. “Come in,” she said, “and close the door.”

With the door shut behind us I sat down on the bed, close to my young friend. “This morning I asked my mother if I was going to die, and she said yes. That was a first for her.” Lisa said all this to me in a matter-of-fact tone of voice that was one of her remarkable characteristics. “Oh Pastor, there’s something else I need to know. That’s why I had to talk to you. I want you to tell me about heaven—and you had better be telling me the truth.”

With that conversation I joined countless others who have been asked to introduce death and resurrection to the young. My conversation with Lisa was remarkable only with regard to the blunt eloquence of this young person. For like her contemporaries, Lisa at age eleven insisted that she be told the truth. She was not looking for a textbook answer. She didn’t want to hear any fancy theology or be distracted by a psychological analysis of her fear. She wanted what we will all

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want on that day when our dying becomes apparent to us. She wanted to know the truth by which we live and die in the community which gathers in the name of the risen Christ.

I. THE GRAMMAR OF FAITH: SPEAKING ABOUT DEATH

Death and resurrection define the very grammar by which we are to live as Christians. The deep truth of our faith is that it is the presence of the risen Christ, the presence of a living God, which makes faith possible. It is God who turns our sadness into rejoicing and our grief into the first tentative steps of new life. As we read in the First Letter of Peter: “By God’s great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Pet 1:3).

But looking back over a decade of experience in parish ministry, I wonder how many of

the young are still waiting to hear what truth we live and die by in the church. How many of the children in our parishes know that the marvel of Easter is that a living God—not a dead God—makes faith come alive in us? And what exactly do the young have to say for themselves about death and resurrection?

I asked the confirmands in the parish I serve to tell me about their own experience with grief. In particular, I asked these thirteen- and fourteen-year-old Christians to think back to when they were young children. What had people said or done that had been helpful or unhelpful to them when they were grieving? By no means was my inquiry meant to be a scientific survey, and yet the answers from this particular group of teenagers match well the advice given by their scholarly elders.

1. Taking Children's Grief Seriously

The first response was a plea to be told what is actually happening when someone is dying. "No one paid any attention to me," one of the young people recalled, "And yet I knew that something was up when one of my relatives died." We do a disservice to the young if we do not let them know we are grieving ourselves. Young and old together are called to share what they feel even if that includes deep sadness, or anger, or anxiety about the days ahead.

It's commonplace now in our culture to advise parents to include young children in the family gatherings, the funeral service, and the public times of grief that surround a death. Yet the cry not to be ignored, voiced by this one teenager, echoes the often unvoiced plea for pastoral care by many of the young.

My own father died when I was in seventh grade. Family friends, neighbors, and relatives gathered in large number, but twenty-five years later I can still name the two peers and the four school teachers who came to the funeral home particularly to see me. The power of that memory has shaped my care for children in the midst of grief.

We help introduce death and resurrection to the young by first taking seriously the grief of children as well as adults. Their questions, their responses, and their needs may be expressed differently than those of older siblings or their parents, but I have yet to meet even a pre-schooler who did not know that something was happening when a relative or friend died.

The particular pastoral role we play for children will be determined in great measure by the closeness of our relationship with a child long before there is an occasion for grieving. The young know less about death and resurrection not only

because of more limited human experience, but also, I suspect, because of pastoral neglect.¹ It takes different skills to talk to a seven-year-old than it takes to talk to the parents of that same child. How many of us, entrusted with the care of a congregation, count it sufficient to know well the adults and teenagers, assuming that we will come to know the very young in due time? Was it by chance that Lisa's mother apologized for interrupting my day, or had I and others helped to give her the impression that those of us responsible for pastoral care are usually busy all day long with adult concerns? The first plea of the young is a plea to be noticed and taken seriously.

2. Being Honest about Death

That suggests the second insight to which those confirmands gave voice. One of the

teenagers put it simply when she said: “Be honest about death. About what it is and about what it is not. It’s not sleep. It’s not like a vacation where a person goes away for a long time, but eventually returns.”

As Christians we confess that death is not the last word, but it is a powerful word. As age and circumstance make appropriate, we need to level with our children about how fragile life is.² We need to say that all our bodies eventually do wear out, and that while the young can recover from most any illness or injury, sometimes people are so sick they cannot get well again.

How that truth gets spoken will depend a great deal on the age of the child. The teenager who insisted that death is not like an extended vacation may well have thought in just such terms when she was a preschooler. At an early age children have not yet developed the conceptual framework that allows them to put experiences into categories as firmly fixed as life and death, past and future. What the preschooler will note is a change from how things were before. For a young child, being included in the activities of a family’s grief, the maintaining of familiar routines, and sensing the continuity of those relationships which have not changed, all speak their own message of God’s love in the midst of loss and sadness.

As children enter elementary school they not only acquire more skills for working with words and numbers, but they also develop new conceptual skills. That same teenager by age seven may have been quick to question what kind of life the person who has died now lives, understanding death to be as much a beginning as an ending. She quite likely also struggled at that age to understand the universality of death.

Children of elementary school age are likely to be ready to talk about death and resurrection in simple, straightforward terms. While St. Paul was able to write to the church at Corinth: “Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but shall be changed” (1 Cor 15:51),³ children of this age would not have great skills for sorting through the figurative language of such a passage. How they express their feelings may be far more muted than teenagers or adults.

In fact, it may look to one offering pastoral care as though children of this age

¹Andrew D. Lester, *Pastoral Care with Children in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985) 23-35.

²David Elkind, “Life and Death: Concepts and Feelings in Children,” *Day Care and Early Education* (January/February 1977).

³The *New Revised Standard Version* translates this verse: “Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed.” That certainly represents a gain for the young who will hear this text.

are a bit callous. Recently, the mother of a ten-year-old boy told me that her son’s reaction to the news of his grandfather’s death was to say: “That’s okay. I didn’t really know him very well.” The immediacy of that afternoon’s ball game loomed with far greater importance to that child than the death of an aged grandparent. Children at this age may be better at “overhearing” the consolation we offer to their elders than in posing their own questions.

By the time children move into adolescence they acquire the skills for more abstract reasoning, for discussing values and ideals, and for understanding the many dimensions of time and space. There is a stark realism to their conversations about death. Who hasn’t encountered teenagers who seemed overly zealous in their interest in describing the physical aspects of a particular death? The confirmand’s plea for honesty likely meant also a concern to know the details of a terminal illness or a suicide.

For every ounce of realism and sophistication that begins to surface as teenagers talk about death there is an equal measure of naiveté about their personal vulnerability. The young develop the skills for talking about death and resurrection with a complexity of language and meaning at the very time when death seems most remote. That's why it is so imperative and so frustrating to talk with teenagers in the church about issues like drinking and driving or AIDS. They seem to be experts about everything except drawing the connection between universal truth and personal implications. The example of our own way of living and the explanation of how we make sense of life and death as adults will be important models for those young people who have nearly grown into adulthood.

3. Being Sad, Not Sorry

It is important, however, to remember that some of the concerns and conceptualities of childhood linger on as we grow older. The third plea voiced by the confirmands in the parish I serve offers one example. Remembering the days following the death of a relative, one teenager advised: "I hated it when people said 'I'm sorry.' It made it seem like they were apologizing, that they were personally responsible."

Many adults would be quick to vouch that they meant no such thing by the ordinary comment: "I'm sorry." Yet, to the ears of the young that comment sounds more apologetic than consoling. Can we do better? Saying "I'm sad, too" would likely be a better way to greet someone who is grieving. In a world where the young in particular worry about things being their fault, death is not ordinarily under our human control.

Or better than words, one of the other confirmands suggested that we simply give one another a hug. Not every truth needs to be a spoken truth. Our concrete actions and our sheer availability speak bushels about the care and concern we have for young and old parishioners alike.

4. Speaking about Death and God

At the same time how we speak about death does reveal the truth that is in us, the truth by which we live and die. It was in regard to language about God that the confirmands expressed their final concern. When a beloved pet or a relative dies children are sometimes told: "Jesus wanted him," or "Jesus took her away to live with him." The confirmands insisted that, while such words were probably well intended, they actually made our Lord Jesus sound like the biggest creep of all.

One young woman talked about an incident when she was younger in this way. "I was in kindergarten or first grade when my puppy died. Someone told me that Jesus had taken him. I knew all about Jesus from Sunday School. So every time I saw a bearded man on the street I went up to him and told him to give my puppy back."

The truth we celebrate as Christians is that God receives us when we die, for the life of each of us is infinitely precious. But our God is no body snatcher. It is not God's will that death come too soon, and Jesus doesn't take away those we love. We need to tell the young, in language they can understand, about our God, who was so put off by death that it was God who came and fought against this age-old tyrant. God isn't any more pleased with death than we are.

With these four examples, the anecdotal insights of a particular group of confirmands seem to parallel the kind of suggestions made by those who have given scholarly attention to the issues of life and death in the world of the young. Yet I was struck that these teenagers had more to say about what had been unhelpful than what had been helpful, and that they spoke more easily of death than of resurrection. The challenge in the church is not simply to tend to the grieving of the young but to give witness to the resurrection hope that is in us. How do we tell the truth about this God who is more powerful than death?

II. THE GRAMMAR OF FAITH: WITNESS TO THE RESURRECTION

Certainly, I am not the first to note that the way we preach about the resurrection and the way the young understand such messages often leave much to be desired. A friend of mine drives the bus that carries persons with mental retardation to their work at the sheltered workshop. She tells the story of the day following Easter break when one of her passengers, a particularly outgoing man, given to offering bear hugs and frequent laughter, began to wail as he rode along on the bus. "He's gone," the man said between gasps. "He's gone. He's dead." The driver knew that the man's father had died some years before, and that he now lived with his mother and older brother. She was so puzzled by his distress that finally she stopped the bus, turned around, and questioned: "Who's dead?" The man answered, "It's Jesus. He's dead." Immediately, a voice from the back of the bus cried out: "It's okay. He does that every year."

1. Hearing the Historicity of God's Action

This story illustrates the first challenge encountered in introducing the theme of resurrection to the young. For all the emphasis given to the passion narratives in much contemporary liturgy and preaching, the young need to hear not only the reality of Jesus' death for us but the historicity of God's action.

The model for doing that is to learn from how we have introduced the Christmas story to children. I haven't seen an Easter pageant since the 1950s, but a return to the narrative of Easter in our teaching of children and in our parish activities would surely be a gain over more lyrical ways of talking about the resurrection in terms of butterflies and rainbows.

Children in our parishes are given clues to help them understand the historicity of the birth of Jesus. They learn to sing carols like "Long Ago on Christmas," they wear costumes from another time and place, and they hear the generations

recount the stories of how Christmas was celebrated in the past. A similar and consistent use of simple language to talk about the resurrection would help even the youngest children to know that ours is a risen Christ.

I taught the kindergarten class during last summer's Vacation Bible School. All sorts of props helped to cast the story of Jesus in its historical context. We sat on the floor of a make-shift tent, wearing sandals we had made as a class project. As I told the story of Jesus preaching in the synagogue, I overheard myself saying: "And when Jesus lived...."

I should have known better. For how will these same five-year-olds come to know anything about the resurrection if it sounds as though Jesus lived a long time ago, but lives no more? If I had introduced that same story by saying: "And when Jesus was a boy...." I would not

have created the same confusion.

2. *“Christ Has Died, Christ Is Risen, Christ Will Come Again”*

One way to introduce language of resurrection to children is to draw from the simple affirmations made in the Eucharistic Prayer. “Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.” Each of these sentences is theologically rich. The young need not be interested in theories of the atonement or in arguments about realized eschatology to learn that there is meaning to the sequence of these three acclamations. The story of Christ who has died, and yet lives is the basic narrative which defines our lives in the community of faith.

Or does it? Could it be that we are more adept at talking about a real baby born in Bethlehem than we are at ease in talking to the young about a real Jesus who died on the cross and was given life again by God because we ourselves find the first far more believable than the latter?

Last summer I sat surrounded by an audience of teenagers and university students as I watched the then newly released film “Ghost.” There was riotous applause as the heroics of the character played by Patrick Swayze were rewarded with his being carried away into an eternal beam of light. Curiously, that same applause was elicited by a scene in which upon his death a greedy, murderous counterpart was swept from view by small, demonic creatures. The young are at home in a world in which we seemingly receive at life’s end what we deserve.

3. *Power More Than We Deserve*

But that is not the world called into being by the God we worship when we announce: “Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.” The resurrection suggests a far different rationale by which we are to live and die as members of the community which gathers in the name of the risen Christ. The young deserve a timely introduction to the way in which God calls us to live by motives not dependent on our own heroics, but on the life-giving death of our Lord Jesus. Making such motives clear is a second challenge we face in introducing the resurrection to the young.

In discussing my involvement with the local affiliate of Habitat for Humanity, one of my neighbors said that she would like to see her young son get involved, too. “I want helping others to be part of his growing up.” We might think it commendable that a parent today cares about such values. But I want more for the young in the parish I serve. I want them to help others for the sake of the risen Christ. Only in the movies are our human shoulders broad enough to bear the weight of a lifetime of experience with all its joys and sorrows, its failures and successes.

The young learn much about the power of Christ’s resurrection when we are bold enough to name that singular event as the source of our courage and the guide for our present living. Whether we are involved with projects to feed the hungry or house the homeless, we do well to let the young know our reasons for giving our time to others. It is the same powerful God, who raised Jesus from the dead, who frees us to care about others. “Because God helps me, I like helping others” expresses a motive even a pre-schooler can understand.

Children do understand language about God, even if the logic of their understanding differs from our own as adults. Once I asked some younger children why they thought we prayed

for particular people in our prayers on Sunday morning. “Because they are sick,” one answered. Confident in the direction we were headed, I next asked what they thought happened to those people after we prayed for them. “Why, they die,” one child answered. The logic of that connection puzzled me. Then I realized that we prayed each Sunday by name for those who were ill and those who had died. The following week we began to include in the prayers petitions which gave thanks for healing in the lives of particular people.

4. Giving Credit Where Credit Is Due

If the resurrection defines our motives in the midst of life, we need to give credit where credit is due, and acknowledge the power of the risen Christ in our own lives. Children who hear us, as adults, voice our gratitude for the way in which God leads us through times of discouragement and grief will know far more of the grammar of their own lives as Christians than those who are left to guess our motives because we are silent.

III. VOICING THE TRUTH

In certain ways that was precisely what my young friend, Lisa, was asking of me on the day I was called to her house. She wanted to know the truth about heaven, but it was my voicing of that truth in particular for which she asked.

“Oh Lisa, remember how you showed me that crystal bowl in the dining room that was used when you were baptized as a tiny baby? Well, when you were baptized God promised to love you, Lisa, and to care for you, forever. Heaven is how God keeps that promise. I’ve never been there myself, but I’ll tell you what the Bible has to say.

In heaven God is in charge. Everything is the way it was meant to be from the beginning. These legs of yours that can’t move any more, why in heaven they’ll be good for dancing again. Lisa, you won’t ever have to be sick again. No more surgery. No more shots. No more IV’s.

And Lisa, you know how sometimes your mom gets all tired out? How some days she can barely lift you by herself and then she gets more crabby and cranky than she means to be? Well, our God isn’t like that. The arms of God stay strong about us. God is going to hold on to you no matter how weak you become. No matter how sad or angry you become. No matter what happens.

Remember how some of the kids from school said they would come visit you and then they didn’t? Or how I sometimes forget to come when I say I will? Well, God isn’t like that either. Our God keeps every promise. And it’s God’s promise to be with you always.

In the Bible Jesus talks about that by saying that heaven is a place with room enough for everyone. For you, dear Lisa. For your great-grandmother, who died last Christmas. For your mom and dad, your brother Eugene and your sister Laura, for your nurse, Jody, and for me some day. Even for those cats you love so much, there is room enough.

There are stories in the Bible that talk about heaven being like a big

banquet. There are stories about people sitting on chairs near God. There are even some stories that describe how heaven is a magnificent city that is so beautiful because it is made out of jewels and gold and song. But most of all, Jesus promises that in heaven we are with him. And we are loved. I wish I could tell you more, but that's everything I know for sure."

How we introduce death and resurrection to the young is much like how we introduce everything else to the young. With sensitivity to the age and the feelings of the child, we are called to do our best to tell the truth. It is a truth, first of all, which comes not from ourselves but from God. It is the truth of God's love for each one of us, shown most clearly in the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus. It is a truth we tell with well-chosen words, and a truth we show by well-motivated actions. Most of all, it is the rock bottom truth by which we ourselves live and die.