



# THE LUTHERAN WITNESS™

## BACK FROM THE DEAD



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## TO THE READER

With this issue, *The Lutheran Witness* unveils a fresh, new look in its design. Eight years have passed since our last major updating—going to full-color in April 1998. We felt it was time to enliven the magazine again. Corresponding with the new layout, we also have modified our approach to content, seeking to make our stories more spiritually oriented and distinctively Lutheran. We are redoubling efforts to offer stories that instruct and inspire readers

in their walk with the Lord . . . that strengthen the Lutheran family, embolden our mission outreach, highlight key LCMS ministries, and equip readers with a clearer understanding—from the Lutheran perspective—of important issues in society. We hope you will approve of these changes.

David L. Strand - Interim Executive Editor

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# 'You Did It for Me'

*An oft-used sermon illustration becomes personal.*

by Michael C. Wolfram

As I drove from the New Orleans airport to Camp Slidell on a late Monday afternoon in February, the destruction of Hurricane Katrina was still apparent. Litter lined the road, trees lay on the ground, houses and apartments vacantly stared back. I thought: "How can we possibly make a difference? There is so much destruction! There are so many needs!" The situation reminded me of the well-known sermon illustration:

A man walking along a beach at low tide noticed someone in the distance pick something up and throw it into the sea. He repeated this numerous times as the two walked toward each other. When they finally met, the first man asked the other what he was doing.

"I'm throwing these starfish into the sea; if I don't, they will die."

"But there are thousands on the beach. You can't possibly make a difference."

The second man picked up another starfish and threw it into the sea. "Made a difference to that one."

For us it was one person, one job, or even part of one job at a time as we reached out with God's love to other people with our words and deeds.

On Tuesday, we "mucked out" a house in Chalmette. The owner was a 90-year-old woman, now in hospice care. Her two daughters joined us in clearing out the debris left by the 10 feet of flood waters. I was surprised when I found out that one daughter knows my brother, who used to live in New Orleans, and her daughter and my nephew were best friends in high school. That gave me a little extra energy as I shoveled the mud out of her home.

Words of appreciation assured us that we "made a difference to that one."

Wednesday we washed the inside of Gethsemane Lutheran Church in Chalmette. It had been stripped to the studs and needed cleaning from the black mold that was everywhere. One member said to me, "The National

Guard has left. The government is too slow. It is the church people who are coming here to work that are holding these communities together." We walked away knowing that we had "made a difference to that one."

That evening, we met my congregation's adopted family from Village Lutheran in La Combe, La. This family had lost their home, cars, and business. Now they struggle to survive in a cramped FEMA trailer.

When I presented them with a check from Trinity, they couldn't hold back their tears. Words weren't necessary. We had "made a difference to that one."

On Thursday, we were back in La Combe cleaning up trees in the yard of a young man who lives with his elderly blind father. Eight hours of hard work cleared up all but the largest trees trunks. A can of Coke, a grateful handshake, and a smile affirmed we had "made a difference to that one."

On Friday, we hit the streets of the French Quarter in New Orleans with Bibles. As we shared the Good News, one man, upon receiving a Bible, told us his unbelieving son-in-law was coming that day, and he had promised to give him some religious literature. Now he had what he would give to him. Through strangers, God had provided the Bible he needed.

There were many stories from those streets, but we knew we had "made a difference to that one." Saturday, we packed our gear and flew home—tired but inspired. So many people and so many needs, like starfish on the beach. We could not meet them all. But I lay my head on the pillow that night thinking that God had looked down and said, "Because I love you, you made a difference to that one!"



Courtesy of Author

Chris Matthis, Rev. Michael Wolfram, and Dennis Trollope from Trinity Lutheran Church, Des Moines, Iowa, worked for a week in the New Orleans area in February with Lutheran Disaster Relief.

Rev. Michael Wolfram is pastor at Trinity Lutheran Church, Des Moines, Iowa.

## 'Welcome back, Dietrich'

I think for most of us, there is no misinterpreting Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life and purpose ("Welcome Back, Dietrich," Feb. '06). A man of towering intellectual capacity, he may have moved beyond some of our thinking in certain of his theological writings, but one has only to read *Letters and Papers from Prison* to understand the real Bonhoeffer.

In prison for many months, he continued to write his parents and

fact that other causes (religious or political) hailed him as a champion gave people like me the chance to engage the proponents of these causes on common ground. It gave us the chance to share the clarity of Bonhoeffer's theology of the cross.

Bonhoeffer remains an unrelenting reminder that the "Two Kingdoms" doctrine isn't "either/or" for Christians but rather "both/and." His right hand knew what his left hand was doing. Thank God that saints like

saw it, she once again went off into the wild blue yonder.

Guy Douglas  
Albany, Ore.

Though Francis Albert Sinatra may not have been the best Christian role model, his superb and popular singing voice caused many people to buy and listen to his Christmas recordings, which included, among other songs, "Go Tell It on the Mountain" and "Silent Night."

Who is to say the Holy Spirit could not work through these recordings to help spread the news of Christ's birth?

Robert B. Patrick  
Fairmont, Minn.



*"Bonhoeffer left us much to consider and heed. His legacy as a great man of faith still inspires us today."*

Zachary Hooker  
Griggsville, Ill.

associates letters of hope and encouragement, never expressing bitterness. He believed that God loves all people.

His many "letters and papers" touched a broad range of Christian subjects: love, forgiveness, grace, friendship, and the sacraments. He wrote that Jesus calls men not to a new religion but rather to life.

Bonhoeffer, one of the great theologians of the 20th century, left us much to consider and heed. His legacy as a great man of faith still inspires us today. Thanks for calling our attention to this man of God.

Zachary Hooker  
Griggsville, Ill.

This retired LCMS campus pastor never acknowledged the absence of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer's influence (via *Cost of Discipleship*, *Ethics*, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, *Life Together*) was a constant on college campuses during the turbulent civil rights, Vietnam, and Great Society eras. The very

Bonhoeffer sense the cross of Christ to be both the origin and outcome of the Christian life.

Rev. William Couch  
Knoxville, Tenn.

## Encore for 'The Voice'

I've been reading *The Lutheran Witness* for years and from time to time have found something amusing. But nothing really has "cracked me up" like the letter from Albuquerque ("Letters," March '06) complaining about the inclusion of a Frank Sinatra CD in a photo illustration of Christmas music.

It seems the letter-writer not only disapproves of Sinatra but also Rodgers & Hart. She completely missed the songwriters' point about "The Lady Is a Tramp," for the lady in that tune—unpretentious, unwilling to gossip—is anything but a tramp, which of course is the whole point of the song.

I liked the caption you put over the letter—"Ol' Blue Eyes"—but I'm betting that when Albuquerque

## Doing something special

Thanks for the insightful and informative story about the blessings of adopting children with special needs ("Special Blessings," Feb. '06).

As both an adoptive parent and director of an agency committed to the permanent placing of children in loving homes through adoption, I found the article by Robin Mueller thoughtful and well-researched.

Adoption is a wonderful way to develop a family. Susan Myers, director of Lutheran Adoption Network (LAN), and I encourage any family interested in learning more about domestic or international adoption to contact LAN at [www.lanadopt.org](http://www.lanadopt.org) or toll-free at 877-278-2416 to request information about service in their area.

LAN is a collaboration of adoption agencies specializing in high-quality, comprehensive services to match children with loving, nurturing parents. Families are needed urgently for waiting children in countries around the world and here at home.

Dr. Gary Danielson  
Lutheran Services of Georgia

## ***'Old Glory' in the chancel***

I vehemently disagree with the author's views ("Q&A," March '06) regarding the placement of the American flag in our churches.

The American flag is the symbol of our nation. But more than that, it is our witnessing to, our honoring and supporting, if you will, the American sailors, soldiers, and aviators (including Missouri Synod ones) who have served or are serving in our military.

The flag symbolizes the remembrance of those who have died, been wounded, or otherwise suffered in war, in every corner of the globe, that we might enjoy the freedom to worship our Lord in America according to our own consciences and dictates. This is a debt we owe them. It is our patriotic duty and Christian responsibility to honor those who served under our flag by placing it, along with the Christian flag, in an appropriate place on the outer edge of the chancel.

*Jack Pierce  
Mattoon, Ill.*



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# BACK FROM THE DEAD

*Like Christians of old, we celebrate the resurrection of Christ every day by remembering our baptism.*

by Arthur A. Just Jr.

When the women came to the tomb on that first Easter morning, they came to anoint Jesus' body because they thought He was dead. In the darkness of the first day of the week, they came to finish what they had begun on Good Friday, when they took Jesus' body down from the cross and prepared it for burial. This was no Sunday for them, no day of resurrection, no Lord's Day. This was a day of mourning, a day to anoint the dead body of their Master and Lord.

What a surprise for them to see the stone rolled away and no body of the Lord Jesus in the tomb. Prostrating themselves before two men in dazzling clothes, they heard the first Easter proclamation: "Why are you seeking the living among the dead? He is not here, but He has risen" (Luke 24:6).

Jesus, the Crucified One, was "back from the dead." "He is not here, but He has risen" has been the Easter message of the church ever since.

Easter is Jesus' "pass over" from death to life, celebrated each spring when the Jews celebrate the *Pascha*, or Passover, as nature is reborn after a winter of darkness. From the beginning, Easter was the time of Baptism, as bodies were washed and reborn through water, Word, and Spirit.

Rebirth is one of the dominant images of Baptism, echoing the words of Jesus to Nicodemus: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5 ESV).

For early Christians, to celebrate Easter was to celebrate their baptism as their journey with Christ from death to resurrection.

When Jesus rose from the dead, He showed us in His resurrected body—still bearing the scars of His passion—what we will one day be and what we already are through the waters of Holy Baptism. We are risen creatures, brought back from the dead, celebrating Easter every day as we walk in newness of life. Christ's life is our life, and because we are joined to Him, we share in His resurrection.

This news seems too good to be true. And that is how the disciples responded on that first Easter when Jesus appeared to them. They "disbelieved for joy" (Luke 24:41).

"See My hands and My feet—that I am Myself; touch Me and see, because a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see Me having," He told them (Luke 24:39).

The scourged, beaten, crucified body of Jesus with the nail marks in His hands and feet, and the spear wound in His side, was eating roasted fish before their eyes. Jesus was back from the dead! Was this *their* destiny?

Three hundred years after the Resurrection, the church affirmed this in the Apostles' Creed:

"I believe . . . in the resurrection of the body."

# A NEW CREATION

Easter was the first, and for many years, the only historical event in the life of Jesus that was celebrated by Christians. For the first three centuries, the church organized time by the week, and Sunday was the celebration of God's restored creation, because on this day of the week God's Son rose from the dead. Sunday is the Lord's Day, but it is also the "eighth day," the first day of the new creation, the eternal day that has no end. Luther affirmed this view:

*The eighth day signifies the future life; for Christ rested in the sepulcher on the Sabbath, that is, during the entire seventh day, but rose again on the day which follows the Sabbath, which is the eighth day and the beginning of a new week, and after it no other day is counted. For through His death Christ brought to a close the weeks of time and on the eighth day entered into a different kind of life, in which days are no longer counted but there is one eternal day without the alternations of night. ... For the risen Christ is no longer subject to days, months, weeks, or any number of days; He is in a new and eternal life. The beginning of this life is perceived and reckoned, but there is no end.*

Luther's Works 3:141



This is the reason many baptismal fonts are eight-sided. The number eight was the number that signified eternity in the ancient world, corresponding to the practice of circumcision that occurred on the eighth day after birth. In Baptism, we die with Christ and rise with Him to a life that never ends. For many, this entrance into eternity takes place in an eight-sided font that proclaims the full meaning of Baptism.

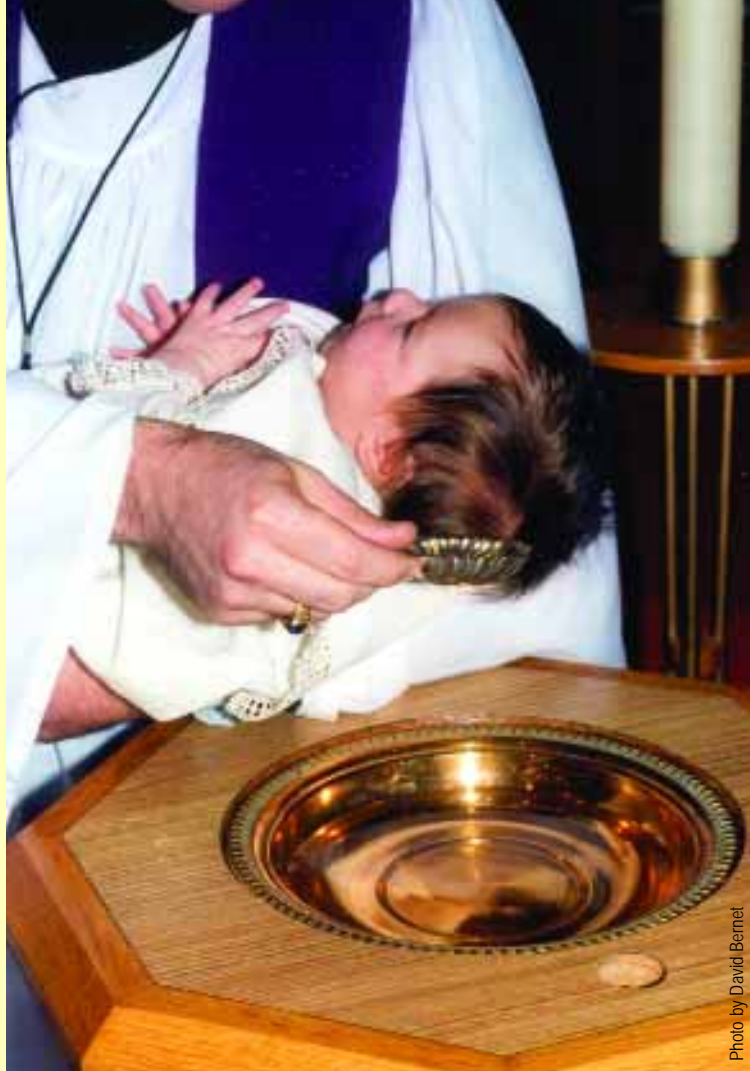


Photo by David Bernet

## FROM DARKNESS INTO LIGHT

In the early church, the time of Baptism was normally the night before Easter, called the Easter Vigil. (For early Christians, Easter began at sundown on Saturday.) Lent was the time for the final preparations for Baptism, beginning on Ash Wednesday with the final enrollment of those preparing for Baptism, who were called catechumens. Lent was primarily a catechetical time, and only secondarily a time of penance.

The rite of Holy Baptism among early Christians proclaimed what they believed about Baptism, about the Resurrection, about Easter. On Saturday evening the faithful would gather in church on a dark spring night to sing psalms. Huddled together with a few candles providing some light, the people would chant psalms in a rhythmic back and forth, binding them together as a community.



After hours of chanting psalms, the catechumens would separate themselves from the community and move outside to the baptistery, men with their sons and women with their daughters.

The baptisteries were buildings outside the church, normally with an outer and inner room. The outer room was smaller, and like the church the gathered had just left, dark and cold. The catechumens turned to the West to renounce Satan and all his works and all his ways. The West was the place of darkness where Satan dwelled. After the renunciation, the catechumens would be anointed with plain olive oil on the eyes, nose, lips, ears, and chest to seal out Satan. Like warriors readied for battle, they were prepared to fight the Evil One.

Next, the catechumens would strip off their clothes. In this dark, cold room, they were naked as Adam was before the Fall and as Christ was on the cross. Early Christians saw this nakedness as representing both

Adam and Christ. Jesus was crucified naked on the cross, emphasizing the shame of the crucifixion, but also showing that in His humiliating and shameful nakedness, vulnerable to all, He had the power to defeat Satan. This is truly a profound proclamation of the theology of the cross.

Cold, naked, and standing in darkness, the catechumens saw the doors to the baptistery burst open, whereupon they entered a magnificent room, warm and filled with light, arrayed with mosaics of paradise on the walls.

"You have entered paradise," a church father would say, for this was in fact the place where they would cross the boundary from death to life and enter into communion with Christ, a communion that never ends.

Catechumens would often step down into fonts to be baptized, immersed three times—once in the name of the Father, again in the name of the Son, and finally in the name of the Holy Spirit—but also



Photo by Mel de la Motte

*A white robe would be placed upon them.  
The robe represented Christ's righteousness,  
which now covered them by their baptism.*



immersed three times for the three days that Jesus spent in the tomb.

Baptism in the name of the Triune God is here united with Romans 6: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:3-4 ESV). One church father writes that in the waters of Baptism we both died and were reborn, that the font was our tomb and our womb, our grave and our mother.

Coming up the stairs on the other side of the font, dripping with water, the newly baptized would be anointed with chrism, a sweet-smelling olive oil representing the anointing of the Holy Spirit. They now stood there as "Christs." A white robe would be placed upon them. The robe represented Christ's righteousness, which now covered them by their baptism. Washed, anointed and robed, the newly baptized returned to the assembly of believers waiting in the church.

## THROUGH WATER, WORD, AND SPIRIT

How incredible it must have been for the congregation to smell the chrism covering these newly baptized Christians. The smell of Easter in the early church was not the smell of lilies but the sweet scent of the newly baptized, who had died and risen in Christ. What a way to celebrate Easter, where the reality of Christ's death and resurrection is lived out by all in the baptism of adults, children, and infants, who have now entered the paradise of God through the water, Word, and Spirit.

Jesus Christ is back from the dead! Celebrate this Easter reality every day by remembering your baptism.

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# Sing Alleluia!

by Greg J. Wismar

One of the sacred words used in our hymnody is the familiar alleluia, or hallelujah. This joyful praise to God occurs in hundreds of Christian hymns. In one hymn alone, "A Hymn of Glory Let Us Sing," it is used more than 40 times.

Experts in the Hebrew language note that the word historically connotes being sincerely and deeply thankful. God's people, redeemed by Christ, cannot help but express their gratitude to God. The time-honored word "alleluia," which means "praise the Lord," is a fitting way to voice that appreciation.


Although alleluias appear throughout the Bible, many may be found in the book of Psalms. Often the psalmists link the use of "Hallelujah" with some form of exuberant musical expression. As we sing our alleluias, we faithfully join the countless generations that have been blessed by using that most meaningful expression of praise: Alleluia!

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chairman of the LCMS Commission on Worship and  
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Photo by Connie Blackwood



# A HOLY WEEK Q & A

by William Weedon



## Why Do We Celebrate Easter When We Do?

Over the years Christians have had serious disagreements about the day to celebrate Jesus' resurrection. In the early years, Christians even excommunicated each other over this question.

Lutherans, Roman Catholics, and Protestants determine the date of Easter by assigning it to the Sunday following the first full moon after March 21.

Sounds simple, but in practice, it is a little more complicated. The full moon is called an "ecclesiastic" moon and may not exactly correspond to what we see in the sky (though it often does). So, Easter—a "moveable feast"—wanders around and can occur anywhere between March 22 and April 25.

Eastern Orthodox Christians use the actual moon in the sky at the latitude of Jerusalem to determine the date of Easter, and that is why they often observe it on a different day.



## How Did Holy Week Become Part of the Church Year?

Holy Week came together in the fourth century through the practices of the church at Jerusalem. In the days leading up to Easter, the Christians living in Palestine gathered at the various sites where the events recounted in the Gospels took place. There they offered prayers and hymns and relived through Scripture readings the events of that momentous week.

Pilgrims from other parts of the world who visited Jerusalem carried home the customs they observed. Thus Holy Week gradually spread across the Christian world.



## Do All Christian Churches Celebrate Holy Week and Easter the Same Way?

No, of course not. Christians vary in how they celebrate Holy Week and Easter, though there has been a growing trend toward a fuller observation of these special days. In Lutheranism, you will find that some parishes conduct services every day of Holy Week; others observe only Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter.





## **How Does Holy Week Prepare Us for Easter, The Pinnacle of the Church Year?**

Each of these days provides a liturgical experience that enables Christians to spiritually follow along and become witnesses to the great events of that most important week in all of human history.

For example, on Palm Sunday, we join in waving our palms and singing to the King who comes into our midst. On Maundy Thursday, we witness the institution of the Eucharist and partake of the feast. On Good Friday, we stand in the darkness beneath the cross and worship Christ as He offers His life in exchange for our own, destroying death by death. On Holy Saturday, we watch the light of a never-ending day break from death, and we know that, baptized into the Risen One, we will have a life that never ends.



## **How Did Foot-Washing Come to Be Associated With Maundy Thursday? What Does It Signify?**

Foot-washing is fairly new to Lutherans. The practice visually sets before us exactly what our Lord did on the night of His betrayal. (Read John 13:1-15.) Lutherans know that Christ did not institute foot-washing as a sacrament; after all, He said, "That you should do as I have done for you," not "*what* I have done for you."

Some parishes have found the practice useful as a reminder of our Lord's service to us, and His call for us to serve one another.



## **How Do the Colors of Easter Help Us Understand the Significance of the Resurrection?**

When the myrrh-bearing women arrived at the tomb, they found an angel in white. Ever since, white has been the joyous color of the Resurrection. It is with this in mind that, beginning in ancient times, the church clothed the newly baptized in white garments as a visual confession that by Baptism God has clothed these persons in the very resurrection of Christ Himself. Death will never be the end of the baptized. They belong to Him who trounced sin, hell, and the grave. They belong to Him who promises His people a life that never ends.

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Rev. William Weedon is pastor at St. Paul Lutheran Church, Hamel, Ill.  
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# Beyond Bunnies: Teaching Children about Easter

by Linda Bredehoft



@Seswaio.com

Illustrations by Steve Edwards



## Family fun should be a part of your Easter celebration, but remember to teach your children about the real reason for our joy.

"Spring has sprung!"

I remember my mom saying these words to me when I was a child, usually on one of the first nice days after a cold winter. As a small girl desperately waiting to get out of the house and into some spring-type mischief, those words made me smile with joyful anticipation. Everybody seems to love springtime—especially those of us who live in northern climates.

As all of nature comes alive again, we as Christians are reminded of Jesus' resurrection and the promise of new life that He holds out for each of us. Surely, this news—the glorious news of Easter—brings a smile to every Christian's face.

How can you share with your children the joy and excitement of knowing our Risen Lord? How do you move beyond the Easter Bunny, the colored eggs, and the other distractions that surround us? Once you explain the real meaning of Easter, how do you tell your children of the horrible suffering and death that Jesus endured without traumatizing them?

While the Easter Bunny may be fun, he is not real. We want our kids to know that the love of Jesus, His death and resurrection, and the promise of new life are real and that these wonderful facts are the true meaning of Easter. Here are eight ways to share the Easter story with your children.



**1. First, simply tell your children the truth in an age-appropriate manner.** The Bible—the ultimate truth—is the best way to share the story of Easter with children. Read the scriptural account of Jesus' death and resurrection from a children's Bible to share with them the suffering, death, and ultimate victory of the Easter story. This may be stating the obvious, but it is amazing how many Christian parents do not read the Bible with their children.

Concordia Publishing House ([www.CPH.org](http://www.CPH.org)) has several children's Bibles that include features to help young Bible readers.

**2. Take your children outside and view spring as God's reminder to His world that Jesus rose from the dead.** Make sure your family takes time to see God's glorious creation coming to life again after the dark winter days. Talk to your children about how nothing can keep God's life from bursting forth. No one can stop the trees from budding or the flowers from pushing their heads through the soil.

Go for a nature hike, a trip to the local park, or simply walk around the block. As you do, tell "walking" stories from Jesus' ministry. Or tell about His journey to Jerusalem, Palm Sunday or His walk to Emmaus on Easter evening.



**3. Grow flowers indoors.** Let your children help. Watching as bulbs sprout and bloom indoors in late winter or early spring can provide a wonderful Easter lesson—and a beautiful, welcome one—to help kids relate to new life coming out of darkness. Instructions for forcing bulbs can be found at the library, a local garden center, and on the Internet. Children will enjoy peeking at the seemingly "dead" pots for weeks, awaiting the promise of gorgeous, blooming flowers.



**4. Decorate your home for Easter.** Christ's resurrection was the most important event in all of human history, and we really need to celebrate. Flowers (real or drawn or three-dimensional hand-crafted creations by your family), Easter scenes drawn by little hands, eggs, lambs, crosses, or other visual reminders of Lent and Easter help us recall the season and the celebration to come.



**5. Get up very early on Easter morning to watch, as a family, the earth "wake up."** Talk about God's gift of life that we see all around us. Talk about God's gift of life that was given to us through Jesus' dying and rising again. If you can, cuddle up with blankets and take a seat outdoors to watch the sun rise. Tell about the Easter women who got up early. Read the Easter story from the Bible. Then join your congregation at worship to celebrate the Son's rising.



**6. Consider giving up something for Lent as a family.** God sent His Son as a sacrifice for us. To sacrifice means to give up something. This should be a family decision. And what you decide to give up should be a real sacrifice, not like me giving up housework or my daughter giving up spinach. The discussion your family has before you make your decision can be fun and interesting, and the weeks you spend "sacrificing" can be a constant reminder of how hard it is to give up something. Of course, this activity in no way measures up to God's sacrifice of His Son, but it may provide food for thought throughout the weeks preceding Easter.



**7. Cook with your family.** Cooking together can teach children cooperation and planning skills, and it's just plain fun. For example, bake something traditional such as hot-cross buns, a lamb cake, or resurrection cookies. The recipes for these can be found easily on the Internet. You may even want to bake extra items for friends as a way of sharing the true meaning of Easter with them.

**8. Decorate Easter eggs so they reflect true Easter joy.** Adorn them with Christian symbols such as crosses and lilies. As you decorate the eggs, talk about the new life they represent.

Whatever you do with your family this Easter, "do it up right." Easter is, after all, a celebration of the greatest day in human history. Be sure you celebrate the new life all around us and the new life you and your family members have been given through Jesus Christ's death and resurrection. Happy family time. Blessed Easter!



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Linda Bredehoft is a member of Immanuel Lutheran Church in Elmhurst, Ill., and director of the early-childhood learning center at Immanuel Lutheran School. Her email address is: [bredehoftdavid@sbcglobal.net](mailto:bredehoftdavid@sbcglobal.net).



# HOPE IN THE HOUR OF NEED

by Kenneth J. Doka



SADNESS

LONELINESS

SHARE THE HOPE OF EASTER  
WITH PEOPLE YOU KNOW ARE  
DEALING WITH GRIEF AND LOSS.



## Lives again our glorious King! Where, O Death, is now thy sting? Once He died our souls to save; Where thy victory, O Grave?

Many of us will sing “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today” (LW 142) on Easter morning, perhaps with trumpets accompanying the organ. Most important as Christians, we fervently believe the promise this hymn celebrates.

Yet, for those experiencing a powerful and important loss in their lives, those words might seem hollow, the promise of resurrection remote. The sting of death hurts too much; the grave seems victorious—burying not only someone we love, but also our sense of hope and happiness.

It is in the midst of the journey of grief that the congregation’s ministry to the bereaved can be a critical witness to the power of the Resurrection and the ways that it touches us as we struggle with loss.

For this ministry to be effective, it has to be more than simply a recitation of our faith. It begins with a solid assessment of what bereaved individuals need.

### UNDERSTANDING GRIEF

Often, we are surprised by grief. We do not expect it to last so long or to be so painful. We think of grief as feelings. It is. But the range of emotions that accompany a loss can disturb and confuse us: sadness, loneliness, anger, guilt, jealousy, yearning. We might even feel relief after someone we love has died after a long and painful illness—and then we feel guilty about feeling relieved. But grief is more than feelings. Grief affects us physically, often leaving us listless and fatigued. Sometimes it depresses our immune system and endangers our health. Our behavior may change. We may become disinterested in activities or short-tempered. It influences our cognitive processes.

It can even affect us spiritually—perhaps bringing us closer to God or, in other cases, alienating us from our faith.

The process of grief may be far more erratic than we imagined, and this can trouble us. We fear the ways that grief sneaks up on us—stealing our holidays and celebrations by turning them into reminders of just how much we have lost.

### A FIRST STEP

Ministry to people in grief starts with validation—a reassurance that their experience is a natural response to loss. We can’t talk people out of their reactions to and experiences of loss, but we can invite them to share those experiences with us—listen to them without judgment and provide opportunities to explore not only what they are experiencing but also how they are reacting to their loss.

Shallow words of comfort and blithe lectures on the importance of faith may not be what bereaved persons need. Think of our Lord in Gethsemane. He didn’t want His disciples to be cheerleaders, offering the easy comfort that it would all be over in a few days. He wanted them to watch and to pray with Him.

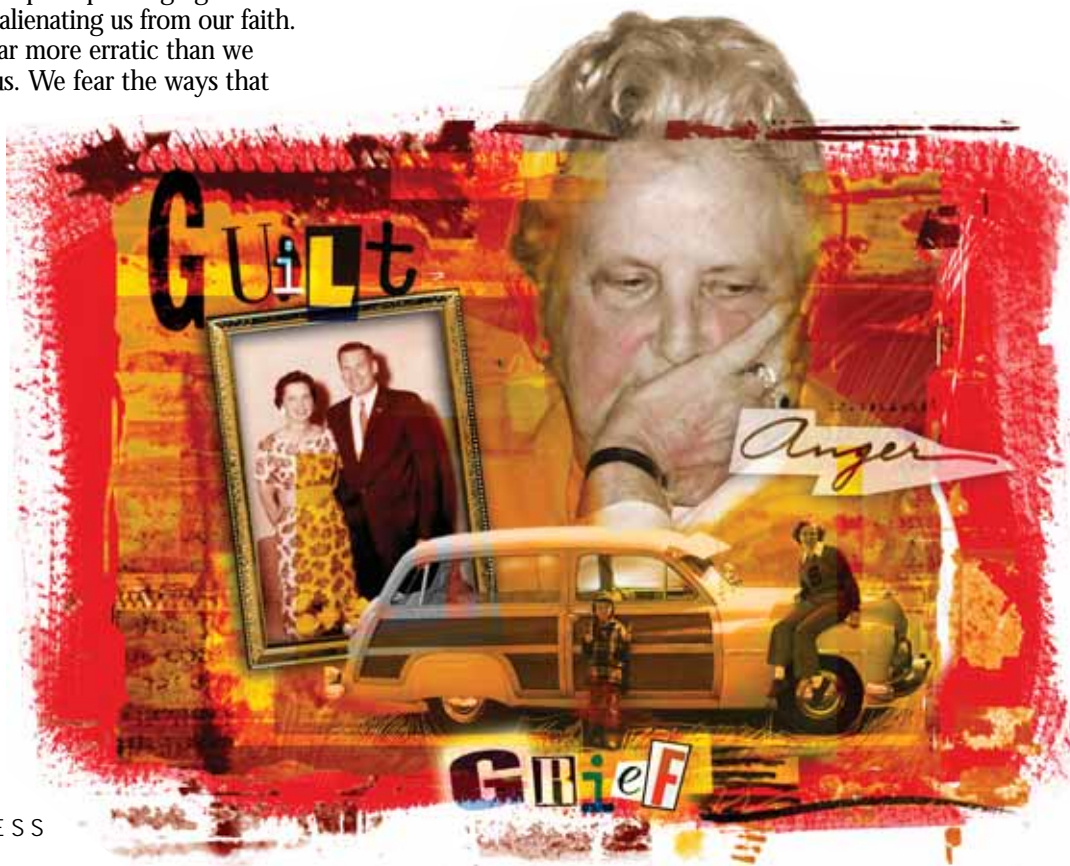
The people we minister to ask the same—to respect their grief and to journey with them. Our presence in this moment is a living witness that God has not abandoned them.

Several years ago, a woman shared with me the powerful presence of her pastor. Her teenage son had died suddenly on vacation. On her return home, her pastor met her at the airport. As he embraced her, she angrily lashed out, “Do not tell me how loving God is. I am furious with Him!”

As the pastor led her through the airport, arm on her shoulder, he simply stated, “I am pretty angry with Him right now myself.”

The pastor provided a commanding witness that he would not abandon her—that he could accept and understand her feelings and reactions, that he could even tolerate her anger.

This doesn’t mean we shouldn’t share our beliefs. The promise of the Resurrection is the heart of our ministry to the bereaved. As we minister, we need to share how our faith speaks to us at this moment, how it has helped us get through past times of loss. Later, that same pastor could explore that anger with the mother—and the assumptions behind it.







**As we pray with and for them ...  
sharing our faith and the Resurrection  
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of the love and presence of Christ  
in their lives.**

The great Christian writer C.S. Lewis had similar questions when his wife died. He had been so faithful, he reasoned. How could an all-powerful God allow his wife to die in such pain? If God is so powerful, how can such bad things occur? How, in the face of the evidence of the world, could someone believe in the power and goodness of God?

Lewis wrote of his struggle in *A Grief Observed*. He never fully answered his question. Like Job, he experienced the presence of God even in the midst of his struggle and his doubt. He embraced the mystery—believing God to be good and powerful, fully aware of the inherent paradox.

Our ministry to grieving friends, at its best, provides space for that faith journey. We listen to those who are suffering; we respect and honor their grief. As we pray with and for them, as we journey along with them, honestly sharing our faith and the Resurrection promise, we offer tangible evidence of the love and presence of Christ in their lives.

## BEYOND THE FUNERAL

Grief is a long journey. Ministry to the bereaved does not end after the funeral. Holidays, anniversaries (including the anniversary of the death), and birthdays can be difficult. A call, a visit, or even a card can mean much to people struggling with loss.

Our grief ministry can do more. We can use all the gifts of our ministry. Certainly this begins with our funeral liturgy. Personalized and participatory funerals do much to facilitate grief adjustment. We can, together with families, select psalms, hymns, and readings that may have particular meaning to the family or the person who died.

Family and friends may participate as readers, ushers, or acolytes. One woman shared with me how meaningful it was for her that her 4-year-old

great-grandson solemnly handed out the service bulletin at the graveside of her husband's funeral.

There may be other opportunities in our liturgy to minister to the bereaved. Many congregations, for example, read the names of congregants who have died in the past year during the All Saints' Day service. Some churches have created a "longest night" service on Dec. 21 to minister to those who grieve in the midst of the holiday season.

As a congregation, we can minister in many tangible ways—bringing meals, helping with tasks, or driving a widow to church. These are all very real ways to manifest God's love.

## A PART OF THE WHOLE

Our grief ministry as a congregation is a critical part of our whole ministry to one another and to our community. Loss is an inevitable part of life. Even those who are not grieving a death may be grieving other losses such as the loss of a job or a relationship. As we deal with our own grief, it is important to remember that even as we grieve, we need not despair. Despair means that we have lost all hope. Easter reminds us of the Hope we share.

The theologian Helmut Thielicke captured this paradox of Holy Week best: "I walk through the night of death, truly the darkest night. Yet, I know who awaits me in the glorious morn."

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# The Da Vinci Distortion

ARE PEOPLE BEING MISLED BY THIS BEST-SELLING NOVEL AND SOON TO-BE RELEASED MOVIE? AS A LUTHERAN, HOW SHOULD YOU DIFFERENTIATE BETWEEN TRUTH AND FICTION?



by Paul L. Maier

Photo by Simon Mein © Columbia Pictures, Property of Sony Pictures

Some have called it the worst literary attack on Christianity since Celsus, a third century opponent of Christianity. On May 19, the assault will bloom onto thousands of the nation's theater screens. The Ron Howard production of *The Da Vinci Code*, starring Tom Hanks, will surely compound the damage done by Dan Brown's best-seller. That publishing phenomenon—40 million copies worldwide before even going into paperback—is regrettably typical of a media horizon currently littered with caricatures of Christ and the church that He founded.





Photo by Simon Mein © Columbia Pictures, Property of Sony Pictures

Reactions to the *Code* come in all shapes and sizes, and Christians should be prepared with a ready reply to all of them. Here are a few:

"I thought the novel was fun reading – a real thriller."

Agreed! The book is indeed a page-turner. However, halfway into the story, a cascade of deceptions, distortions, and outright falsehoods about our faith ruin Brown's effort for anyone still interested in the truth.

"Oh, a few things might be wrong in the book, but nothing serious."

If only that were true! Unfortunately, many statements in the novel are fantasy, not fact—outright perversions of history and malicious attempts to discredit Christianity. The book claims "almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is false." It tells us that Jesus married Mary Magdalene; that Constantine, the first Christian emperor, was "a lifelong pagan" who collated the New Testament; that the early Christians thought Jesus was only a man until the Council of Nicaea turned Him into a god; that Mary Magdalene was sitting to Jesus' right in Da Vinci's painting of The Last Supper; that God had a divine consort—and dozens of other falsehoods that have seduced some readers into abandoning Christianity while shaking the faith of others.

"OK, but I still think that Brown is on to something. Where there's smoke, there's fire."

Not necessarily. The smoke might be fog—an opaque mist of mendacity, luring conspiracy theorists and the impressionable into wrongheaded conclusions based on misinformation.

"Brown's publisher would never have produced the book if it had all these errors."

Never make the mistake of assuming, "If it's in print, it must be true." Recently, it seems, many publishers have sold their souls to the corporate bottom line under the motto, "If it's sensational, it'll sell; never mind the facts!" *The Da Vinci Code* would not have been published by any reputable New York publisher a half century ago unless massively re-edited. James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* is only the latest example of literary fraud.

"I still think Brown and his book are reliable."

Well, then, know this: There is not one reputable

scholar anywhere in the world who endorses what Brown has done.

And finally, the most frequent response of all (I get it regularly): "Chill out, Maier! It's fiction, isn't it? Why all the fuss?"

Point taken, and it's a good point! Trouble is, many people read fiction as if it were fact. Witness the damage caused by this novel. In fiction, there is a foreground dimension that involves the principal characters and their actions, and a background, which is the setting. The novelist is free to do whatever he or she wishes with fictional foreground characters—that's obvious! But the background (unless it clearly is a fantasy novel) is always accurate for purposes of credibility.

Brown, however, has fictionalized both! Accordingly, readers who are used to factual backgrounds will assume the same for *The Da Vinci Code* and will be deceived.

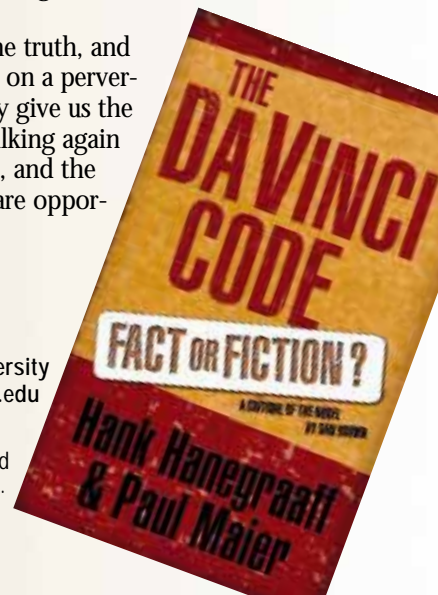
An illustration may help. Hundreds of novels have been written about World War II. Why, in the background of all of these, do the Allies win and the Nazis lose? Duh! Because that's what happened! Now, if Dan Brown were resorting to the same approach that he used in the *Code* for a World War II novel, he would have no problem painting a backdrop in which Hitler won the war and put Roosevelt on trial in Washington and Churchill in London! Young readers, with little knowledge of history, might even believe this.

What about seekers, non-Christians, and even Christians with little knowledge of history? Some are believing the *Code's* falsehoods and therefore disbelieving Christianity. That's the danger and the tragedy.

All of us must battle for the truth, and the release of a movie based on a perversion of the past will certainly give us the chance. And with people talking again about Jesus Christ, the Bible, and the church, this can even be a rare opportunity for Christian witness.

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For an in-depth study of the novel and its historical distortions presented as background facts, read *The Da Vinci Code, Fact or Fiction?* by Paul Maier and Hank Hanegraaff.



# The Ugly and the Beautiful

by Uwe Siemon-Netto

Don't be fooled by paintings and sculptures depicting Christ's crucifixion as a serene event. He did not hang there looking charming. His arms outstretched to bless humanity in a farewell gesture of sorts. Such images, often found in churches, almost seem to support the contention of some heretics that God spared His Son the tortures of the most painful form of execution—in other words, that the crucifixion was a divine hoax. The truth is dire. Christ's passion was horribly ugly. After all, He was true man as well as true God. As a true man He felt the torment.

His body, reeking, sweating, bleeding, was as contorted as the bodies of the two criminals to His right and His left. He doubtless groaned, screamed in agony. And He sensed dereliction: "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?"

Let's not kid ourselves—there was nothing aesthetically pleasing about what happened on that first Good Friday at Golgatha. Look at Matthias Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece in Colmar, France, reproduced here. So shocking is this sight that you may be tempted to turn away, just as you may have closed your eyes during the scourging and crucifixion scenes in Mel Gibson's film "The Passion of the Christ."

But this is precisely how it must have been. Had the crucifixion not been ugly, had Jesus not experienced evil at its very worst "pro me," as Luther said, meaning "for me," then all this would have been bogus, a lie. Then the resurrection would have been a lie as well. We would have been deprived of the participation in its eternal beauty. In fact, we would not be Christians at all but still dwelling in darkness. We would not be saved.

It seems we have moved away from the sound theology of Grünewald—or the artists who created the

mosaics in the vault of the magnificent Cathedral of St. Mark in Venice showing realistically the ugliness of Christ's suffering and the beauty of His Resurrection. Tragically, thinking of the Christian faith in terms of aesthetics is not fashionable in post-modernity, whose relativism blurs the distinction between ugliness and beauty, just as it blurs the line between evil and good.

"I think this is beautiful," said a Frenchman I know whose entire body is covered with "Gothic" tattoos

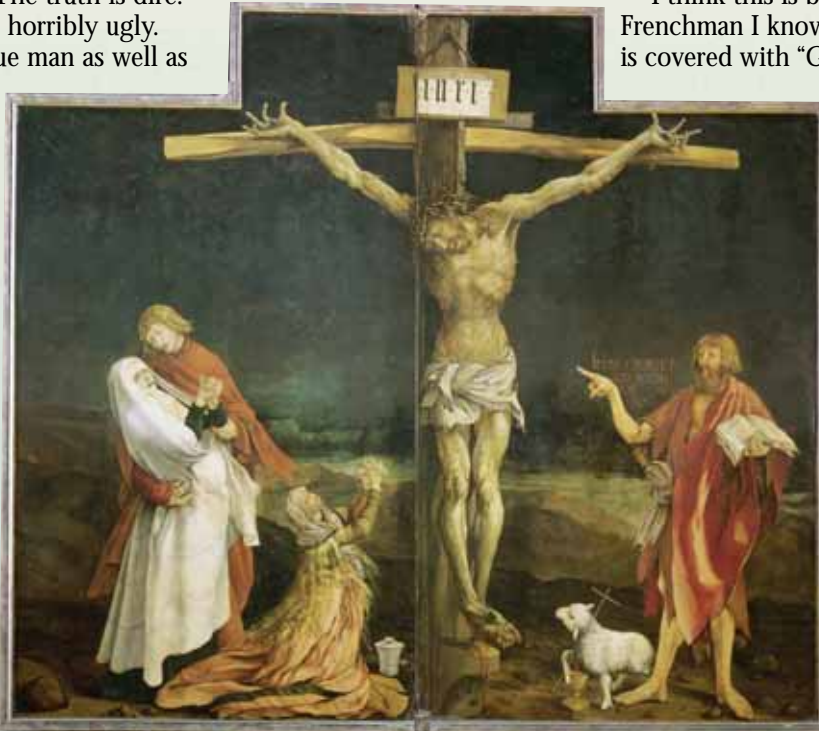
depicting Satan's realm—skulls and bones, chains and flames, and the ghastly visages of demons. "This was a beautiful work of art," said German composer Karl-Heinz Stockhausen about the 9/11 photographs of airplanes crashing into New York's World Trade Center bursting into balls of flames.

Bad equals good and ugly equals beautiful.

There is a Greek word for this contemporary folly: *diaballein*, literally "throwing across," or turning things on their head. This expression has given the devil his name.

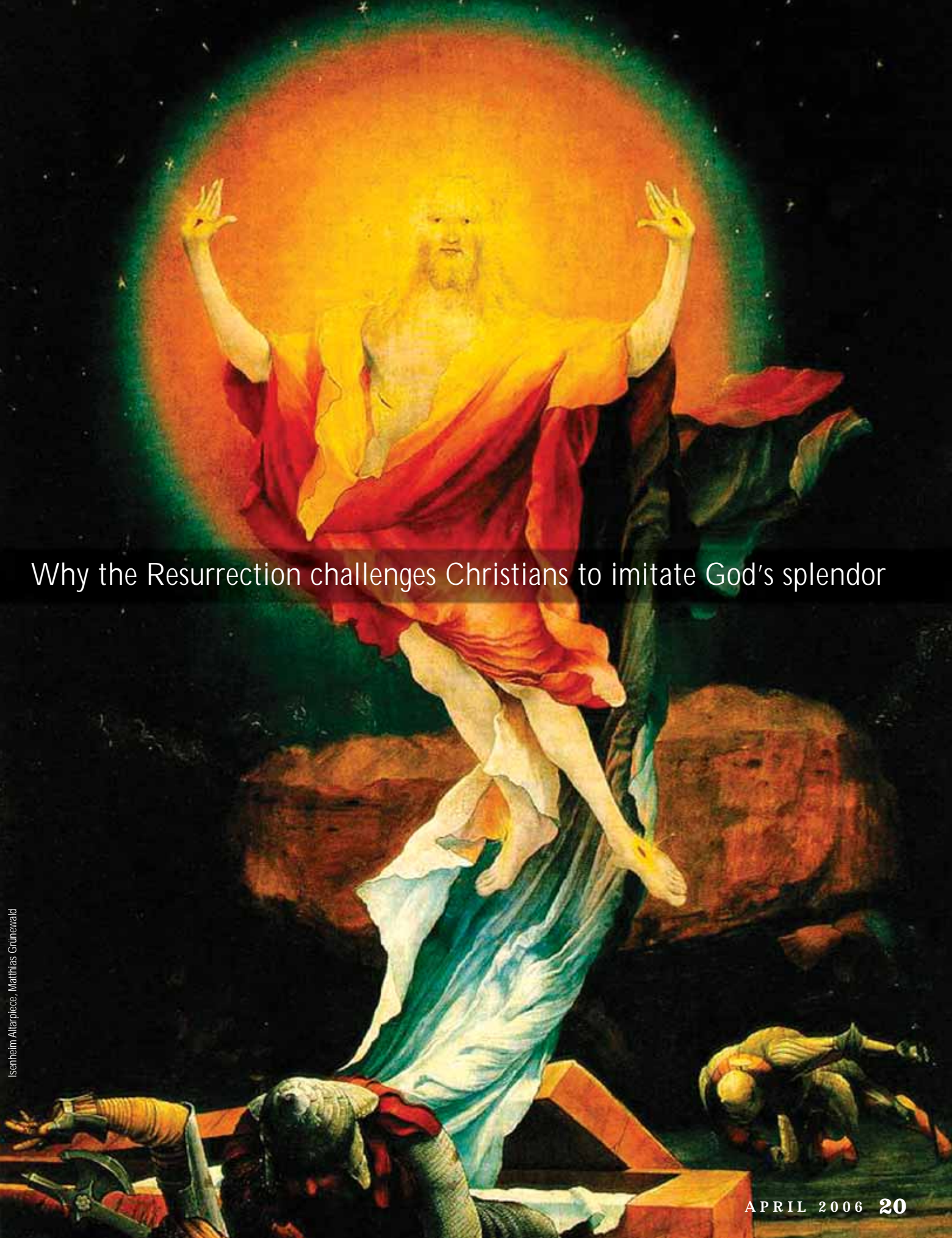
As post-moderns, worshipers included, groove to "music" without melody and harmony, as even Christians regale in the noises emitted by the likes of Eminem, who screeches out his vulgar and destructive lyrics, I wonder: What happened to the Biblical notion that beauty is willed by God; that God himself "shines forth ... in beauty" (Ps. 50:2)? What happened to the insight that beauty is a key element of civilization, and that civilization is the fruit of the order created by God? Whatever happened to man's God-willed yearning to become civilized?

St. Thomas Aquinas called beauty the "splendor of order," and the church father St. Gregory of Nyssa saw beauty as God's uncreated order.



Isenheim Altarpiece, Matthias Grünewald





Why the Resurrection challenges Christians to imitate God's splendor



*The desire to seek and create beauty appears to be built into the nature of the human species...*

*So how do we explain contemporary man's urge to create ugliness?*



Yet there is nothing exclusively Christian about seeing beauty as coming from God, and that creating beauty is therefore one of humanity's most noble endeavors.

"Whichever way I turn I see the face of God," says the Koran, referring to nature's loveliness. As a journalist covering the dialogue between religion and science, I discovered that, of all scientists, astrophysicists from every culture were most inclined to acknowledge God's existence. Many told me that the breathtaking beauty of the universe left them no option. "Why do I believe in a Creator?" asked a Hindu cosmologist rhetorically. "Because I need someone to say 'thank you' to," he explained.

The desire to seek and create beauty appears to be built into the nature of the human species, even those who did or do not know the true God. Thousands of years ago, cave-dwelling people in southwestern France created magnificent cave drawings in their grottos.

We easily recognize the exotic beauty of ancient Chinese or American Indian works of art. Though generally not Christians, the Japanese, perhaps more than any other people on earth these days, are embracing and sometimes allowing themselves to be converted by Johann Sebastian Bach's music, which must at first have sounded alien to their ears.

To be sure, "*de gustibus non est disputandum*," as the Romans said, there is no disputing about taste. I make no judgment here whether a Beethoven symphony is superior to a Johann Strauss waltz or a W.C. Handy song played by Louis Armstrong or sung by Ella Fitzgerald. They are all beautiful.

So how do we explain some people's urge to create ugliness, a perversion seemingly unique in the history of civilization? How do we explain the proliferation of treeless malls, bland apartment housing, or heavy-metal music or, worse still, black metal, its Satanic counterpart?

My friend by correspondence, Rev. Philip G. Meyer of Terre Haute, Ind., sees today's trend toward ugliness as a manifestation of modern man's rebellion against God. He is right. If God equals beauty and is the Author of beauty, then it behooves man as the one created in God's image to imitate the Creator (Eph. 5:1)—or, in Lutheran vernacular: Conform to Christ, the beauty of whose resurrection defeated the ugliness of His crucifixion.

It's also too common for God's beautiful creatures to willfully use "body art"—especially tattooing and piercing—to achieve the opposite image—the image of Satan. Someone cleverly observed that tolerance is the last virtue of a depraved society. With this in mind I'll state with cheerful intolerance: The post-modern fad to create ugliness to the point of destroying one's God-given features is not something we can dismiss as neither good nor evil. It is evil—period!

This is why cultivating once again one's own sense of aesthetics, and raising future generations to appreciate beauty, should be seen as a profound obligation by God's people. And there is no more appropriate time of the year to remind ourselves of this than this month when we commemorate the horrific ugliness of Christ's Passion followed by the splendor of His Resurrection.

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# He Did Not Die Again!

Perspiring heavily, Joshua now stood before the opening and bowed his head in prayer

once again. Then he opened his eyes, held his head erect, and called out loudly, "Shimon Levine! By the power of almighty God, arise and come out!"

Nothing happened.

Shannon felt a trembling in her knees. She squeezed Jon's hand even more tightly.

"I said, come out, Shimon!" Joshua repeated.

Silence.

Jon shook his head and thought, He's gone too far this time!

"Shimon!" said Joshua, almost angrily. "Do you hear me?"

Finally a muffled voice called plaintively from inside the tomb: "Yes, Master. I would come out, but ... I'm trapped in this sheet. I can't move!"

Shouts of excitement rose from the inner circles that heard the voice.

"Help him!" said Joshua, smiling at Yakov and Yohannon.

This passage is from one of Dr. Paul L. Maier's novels, *More than a Skeleton* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003). This book is a contemporary thriller that involves an Israeli named Joshua Ben-Yosef, who people begin to believe is Jesus Christ returned to earth.

The icing on the cake comes when Ben-Yosef apparently raises one of his followers from the dead—on live television—in a scene reminiscent of Jesus raising Lazarus 2,000 years earlier. This act grabs the attention of religious leaders worldwide, who gather at the Vatican to listen to the message that this man has for them and for the world.

If you want to know more, you'll have to get the book. I don't want to ruin it for anyone! But suffice it to say that no one but the Creator, God Himself, could actually bring back to life someone who had been dead for days.

By raising Lazarus, Jesus showed everyone that He has power even over death! On the Last Day, Jesus will

return and use His power also to call out of their graves those who have died. If we are among them by the time Jesus returns, we, too, will come back to life by that power. Jesus has only to say the word!

We don't celebrate Easter, though, because *Lazarus* came back to life. While it was the same power, the power of the One True God, that raised Lazarus and that raised Jesus, Lazarus died again. Not so with Jesus!

Jesus' resurrection conquered death once and for all! He did not die again! "For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him" (Rom. 6:9).

Death no longer "has mastery" over us, either.

Paul notes that if Christ has not been raised from the dead, our faith is futile and we are still in our sins. But, he quickly adds, "Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor. 15:20)!

A couple of years ago, Dr. Jeffrey A. Gibbs wrote about this in *The Lutheran Witness*. "Jesus' resurrection is the first fruits of ours," he wrote. "His complete victory over death and sin is our promised complete victory over death and sin."

"Because we believers in Christ Jesus are connected to Him by our Baptism, we will come forth as the full and final harvest of which Jesus is the first portion," Gibbs continued. "Just as Christ died for us and in our place, He also rose for us and in our place, to guarantee that great and final victory for us on the Day when He comes again in glory. That is what Easter means, most gloriously and most especially!"

Because Jesus lives eternally, so will we. May He richly bless your celebration of the Resurrection—His, of course, but also ours—this Easter!

**Jerry Kieschnick**  
John 3:16-17

Lives Transformed through  
Christ, in Time ... for Eternity!

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By raising Lazarus, Jesus showed everyone that He has power even over death. But Lazarus died again. Not so with Jesus! And because Jesus lives, we too are assured that we will be raised to eternal life, never to die again!

"Resurrection of Lazarus", Duccio di Buoninsegna 1308