



EXCERPT



Easter *The Season of the Resurrection of Jesus*

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In this short volume, priest and New Testament scholar Wesley Hill explores the history and significance of Easter for the church and for our own spiritual formation. Each volume in the Fullness of Time series invites readers to engage with the riches of the church year, exploring the traditions, prayers, Scriptures, and rituals of the seasons of the church calendar.

World Upside Down

On Holy Saturday in 2019, *The New York Times* published columnist Nicholas Kristof's interview with Serene Jones, the president of New York's famed Union Theological Seminary. In the interview Kristof, Nicodemus-like, tiptoes toward Christian faith with hesitation but sincere interest.

"For someone like myself," he says, "who is drawn to Jesus' teaching but doesn't believe in the virgin birth or the physical resurrection, what am I? Am I a Christian?"

"Well," Jones replies, "you sound an awful lot like me, and I'm a Christian minister." In another part of the interview, she elaborates:

For me, the message of Easter is that love is stronger than life or death. That's a much more awesome claim than that they put Jesus in the tomb and three days later he wasn't there. For Christians for whom the physical resurrection becomes a sort of obsession, that seems to me to be a pretty wobbly faith. What if tomorrow someone found the body of Jesus still in the tomb? Would that then mean that Christianity was a lie? No, faith is stronger than that.

In the hours after these comments appeared online, I watched many Christians express their dismay about Jones' comments. It wasn't only conservative evangelicals who were upset. Believers of all stripes, including progressive Catholics and mainline Protestants, voiced their dissent. Here, for example, is how Andrew McGowan, dean of the Episcopal seminary at Yale, responded: "If Easter really meant just that love is more powerful than death but Jesus didn't rise, how's the love-death score today?" (The "today" in question was the day terrorist bombs killed hundreds of Christians in Sri Lanka.) "Is it coincidental," McGowan asked, "that liberal Protestantism grows in the soil of privilege?" For those unshielded by safety and comfort, vague notions of love without concrete, bodily restoration aren't enough. What about the human corpses scattered on the ground like so many ragdolls?

In Acts, after Paul and his companions proclaimed the resurrection in Thessalonica, some hostile hearers concluded, "These people who have been turning the world upside down . . . are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus" (Acts 17:6-7). To many of those who heard it, the announcement that Jesus had been raised from the dead was an unwelcome declaration that their days of exploitation and domination were numbered. The Easter message was understood exactly for what it was: not a timeless proverb that spring always follows winter but the heralding of a new king with an agenda to right the world's wrongs.



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Wesley Hill is an Episcopal priest and associate professor of New Testament at Western Theological Seminary. His PhD in New Testament is from Durham University in the UK. He has spoken and lectured at numerous Christian colleges and seminaries in the U.S. and internationally. A contributing editor for *Comment* magazine, he writes regularly for *Christianity Today*, *The Living Church*, and other publications. Among his books are *Washed and Waiting*, *Paul and the Trinity*, *Spiritual Friendship*, and *The Lord's Prayer*.

One of the noteworthy features of the Easter season in my church tradition is the replacement of the typical Old Testament reading in the Sunday service with a reading from the book of Acts. Normally (and appropriately!), we hear a reading from a portion of the Old Testament, followed by a psalm, followed by a reading from one of the New Testament epistles, and then, climactically, a reading from one of the four Gospels. But during Eastertide, the Old Testament reading is suspended for a few weeks as we follow the narrative of the early church's mission beginning in Jerusalem after Jesus' resurrection and continuing, as Luke tells it, to the ends of the known world (Acts 1:8).

Why this highlighting of Acts in the season of Easter? An initial answer is found in the book's opening sentence. The author, Luke, frames Acts as a companion volume to his Gospel: "In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen" (Acts 1:1-2). Theophilus is probably the patron who funded Luke's research and writing. Addressing him with an honorific dedication, Luke explains the connection between his two writings: The Gospel recounts all that Jesus did in his Galilean and Judean ministry of teaching, healing, and the rest, culminating with his saving work on the cross and in his resurrection. Now the sequel, it is implied, will narrate all that the risen Jesus *continues* to do through his Spirit. Though he has died, Jesus is now, in the words of one scholar and priest, "alive and at large"—on the loose, we might playfully say. Though now exalted to the right hand of God, he is still active and dynamic on the earthly stage.

Acts is the story of the aftermath of Easter. It is one of the most striking pieces of evidence we have for the truth of the Easter proclamation: If Jesus had not appeared to his dispersed and demoralized disciples, imbuing them with new vigor and purpose, how could we ever explain their almost overnight transformation from a fearful huddle hiding behind locked doors to a barn-burning band of fearless preachers and ministers who were ready to defy the empire, if necessary, to take their message to the farthest reaches of human society?

—Adapted from chapter four, "World Upside Down"



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