

The Disturbing Work of Resurrection

BY WALT DRAUGHON

Following the shooting death of an African American teenager during a traffic stop in the Midtown area of St. Petersburg, Florida, in 1996, a congregation led a fifteen-year movement to build meaningful, cross-cultural relationships with the people and congregations of the neighborhood.

Following the shooting and death of an African American teenager during a traffic stop in the fall of 1996, the city of St. Petersburg, Florida, experienced what the national media described as “chaotic and sweeping race riots.” I had been the Senior Pastor of the First Baptist Church of St. Petersburg for one month.

The day after the first “riot,” I drove into Midtown where the shooting had occurred—a population block of approximately forty thousand people, which was a veritable seedbed of gang activity, poverty, and violence. The carnage from the night before continued to burn with a “societal heat” that laid bare the obvious: the death of a teenager, while tragic, as not the only fatality of that dark night. In a real sense, our entire city, the seventeenth largest in the United States, had “died.” Fragile relationships had been severed; accusation was the majority response, and blame was the weapon of choice. We, all of us, were in need of resurrection. I, along with many others in our city, was “greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.”

“All we have to do,” I said to myself, “is talk this thing out. I will schedule a few meetings of church and civic leaders, provide a platform for the right people to ‘be heard,’ and voila, a resurrection we will have! Jesus himself commissioned us to ‘raise the dead’ (Matthew 10:7-8a), didn’t he? Really,

how difficult can it be?"

The years ahead, however, would prove to be educational. Trained in the disciplines and literature of theology, I had yet to learn – intellectually, emotionally, and volitionally (that is, behaviorally) – the large differences between orthodoxy and orthopraxy, between doctrine and ethics, between credo as profession and credo as expression. As I led our congregation through multiple victories and failures, I returned again and again to the story of Jesus' resurrection of Lazarus in John's Gospel. Gradually, painstakingly, I was able to find and "take my own place" in that text – a discipline which, I believe, is the ultimate goal of biblical interpretation. There, in the company of those weeping, puzzled, skeptical people, I shed *my own* tears, asked *my own* questions, identified *my own* doubts, prayed *my own* prayers, and shouted (repeatedly) with *my own* voice, "Lazarus / St. Petersburg, come out!" In that amazing story and in St. Petersburg I learned that from start to finish, resurrection is "disturbing work" indeed.



After Lazarus fell ill, his sisters Mary and Martha sent for his dear friend, Jesus. But Jesus delayed coming for two days, and Lazarus died. The Gospel of John describes the scene in Bethany when Jesus finally arrived:

Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

...When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed¹ in spirit and deeply moved.² He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked

upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

John 11:21-27, 32-44



For fifteen years, we worked to build meaningful, cross-cultural relationships with the people and congregations of Midtown. In the process, our own church demography morphed radically: in 1996, our adult membership was 100% Caucasian American, 85% of whom were college-educated; in 2011, our adult membership was 70% Caucasian American, 25% African American, and 5% Other American, 55% of whom were college-educated. In other words, we began to "look like" our mission arena, Tampa Bay. As we built cross-cultural and interracial bridges, we learned much. Here is a sampling.

We learned that *large, "signal" events do communicate the resurrection-vision*. The pastor of the largest African American church in the city and I became close friends. His church was located in Midtown. In 1997, after much planning, First Baptist Church

rented St. Pete's largest downtown auditorium, a "neutral site." On a summer Resurrection Day, both congregations shut their church doors and came together for worship. Our choirs and music leadership were on the platform, not juxtaposed but interspersed, like salt and pepper on mashed potatoes. My friend was our preacher, and I led in the observance of the Lord's Supper. Problem was, when

we stepped out from the presidium to begin the service, our two congregations were there, yes, but they had segregated themselves — one church on one side of the auditorium, and one church on the other! Immediately, I stepped to the podium and explained that we were gathered to witness a resurrection: "So, rise up! Meet someone whose skin color does not match yours, learn his or her name, and ask if you might sit with him or her for the

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next hour and a half!" Pointing at the choir on the stage, I said, "You need to look like this!"

Individual, personal relationships carry systemic power to heal. Their whole is greater than the sum of their parts. At that first worship gathering of the two congregations (we scheduled others over the following years), new relationships were born and dormant ones were awakened. The word

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spread. Two large groups of people, separated by suspicion, rejection, and accusation, met that day — one from Midtown, the other from the north side; one black, the other predominantly white — and they not only "got along," they actually laughed and embraced! Though, characteristically, there was little media attention, the word spread anyway. Indeed, we became "the talk of the town."

If you want to build bridges across racial and cultural boundaries, you have to "go to church" together. Mark it down! There is no substitute for the healing power of God's people at worship! In 2011, while I was in Phoenix, Arizona, for a meeting, I received a phone call saying two police officers and one troubled man had been shot and killed in Midtown. Slightly more than a month later, a young Midtown teenager shot and killed yet another officer. The teenager was sentenced to life in prison.

First Baptist hosted the funerals for the police officers. More than ten thousand people gathered for each of the funerals, and this time, the national media did its job. News teams reported and the Internet streamed clips, headlines, and even live video of the services. For more than a year, I received calls and e-mails from around the world, from Canada to South Africa. Most were from police officers; many were concerned about their spiritual lives and destinies. Still, with four more dead and one in prison, it was glaringly apparent that our resurrection-efforts were falling short.

In consultation with a small group of First Baptist Church leaders, we formed a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that applied for and received IRS authority for tax-deductible donations, and took our places at the mouth of Lazarus's tomb with a new plan. In a few months, *Rise Up, St. Pete!* (RUSP!) was off and running. With a steering team recruited from Midtown and the north side of St. Pete, our congregation hosted several meetings of governmental, civic, community, and religious leaders from Midtown. We listened, compiled the data, and agreed on two major principles. First, societal healing

takes place only by the formation and maintenance of personal relationships across schisms. In other words, when it comes to people and people-groups, fusion is the best remedy for fission. And second, the most effective means by which to lead people and people-groups from segregation into integration is a shared mission.

Time and again we have seen that when two entities – even violently disparate ones – agree that a well-defined task is necessary or beneficial to their respective lives, that the task can be accomplished only in partnership with the other, and that each of their voices will have import in both the design and implementation of the task-plan, and then each entity behaves in ways that contribute to the realization of the plan, *healing happens*. Somehow, the work of common mission – in this case, the “disturbing work of resurrection” – functions as a type of relational glue. When everything is said and done, it is difficult to throw rocks at a friend.

The RUSP! steering team identified various Midtown challenges to resurrection, such as job development and training; health care acquisition; parental, filial, and marital counseling; provision of food; domicile renovations to meet city code requisites; public education support; and so on. Finally, we formed action teams comprised of co-leaders and workers from each side of the schism, and we went to work. Again, we learned much.

Expect a strong pull toward equilibrium, back to the previous status quo. In my younger days, I had viewed these types of people as “the opposition.” But that was before I had spent more than a decade with Jesus and the crowd at Lazarus’s tomb. As I now see it, every system – whether comprised of people, pipes, or penguins – wants the safety and security of widespread adherence to predictable norms. The problem is that resurrection not only *emerges* from “disturbance,” it also *causes* “disturbance.” On more than a few occasions, serious people from both inside and outside our congregation attempted to convince me that RUSP! was draining our resources, retarding our growth, doomed to fail, and so on. While some offered helpful counsel, most were simply frightened. Midtown, heretofore “out of sight and mind,” was now regularly “among us”! “Lions and tigers and bears! Oh my!”³

Most people, even concerned, invested people, prefer objectification over obedience, definition over devotion, analysis over action. We human beings tend to substitute “talk” for “walk.” I learned always to conclude conversations and meetings with a simple question: “Now, what are you going to do?” Then, and this is key, I waited until each person identified and committed to a particular action.

Return, again and again, to the veracity of your commission. Resurrections are almost never quiet. People are incessantly talking, especially about the one who demanded that the stone be rolled away from the tomb! However, the murmurs of the crowd, while sometimes hurtful, can function profitably – namely, when you allow them to drive you back to the “great disturbance” of the beginning, there to fine-tune and ratify your understanding

of and commitment to God's resurrection-call.

Dream, design, and act with a view to repeatability. As RUSP! progressed, we encountered more good ideas than we could process, much less implement. In our efforts to cope with multiple action-ideas, we landed on what came to be a valuable metric-question: given that we can dream it, design it, and implement it, can we *repeat* it? Societal resurrections, we discovered, ride on repetition. Many are the folks and entities who engage challenges among people-groups but soon are nowhere to be found; their absence becomes toxic to the personal relationships on which resurrection pivots!

Resurrection is and will continue to be an unfinished work, until Jesus comes again. Ever thought about the high probability that Old Lazarus not only "limped" out of that tomb, but also died again? The same is true in the case of societal resurrections. Most of Midtown's challenges continue to this day. In 2015, the year after my retirement from First Baptist Church and relocation to North Carolina, RUSP! leaders and I decided to dissolve the non-profit. Our time had come, and gone.

Was it worth it? Well, for my money, a "limping Lazarus" trumps a "dead Lazarus" every day of the week! Question is, what are *you* going to *do*? Somewhere, most likely close by, there is a "tomb" with your name on it. *Get to it.* Amen. So be it.

NOTES

1 The Greek root *embrimaomai* means to snort in expression of rage, to become indignant, angry, or furious.

2 The Greek root *tarassó* means to stir up, to disturb.

3 This is the worried refrain of Dorothy, the Tin Man, and the Scarecrow on the Yellow Brick Road through the woods before they gather their "courage," the Cowardly Lion, in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939).



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