

Embodying Resurrection  
*A Theology for Church Revitalization*

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## Introduction

*“He gave her his hand and raised her up. Then he called God’s holy people, including the widows, and presented her alive to them. The news spread throughout Joppa, and many put their faith in the Lord.”—Acts 9: 41-42*

With the miracle of Peter raising Tabitha from the dead, the author of The Acts of the Apostles demonstrates the essential unity of the church’s evangelistic mission with that of the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Without the power of resurrection, the church is like any other social group, motivated by the desire to avoid organizational death. Sharing in the power of resurrection, the church is motivated not only to charitable works, but to also serve as witness that even death is no match for the power of life in Jesus Christ.

Yet, we are told that the church, at least in North America, is dying. Conferences on best practices of church revitalization are legion. Popular literature on church growth and renewal dominate the shelves of Christian bookstores. And while much, but certainly not all, of the literature invokes spiritual disciplines, such as prayer, as essential in revitalization, there is a startling paucity of appeal to any doctrine of resurrection.

Take, for example, *The Purpose-Driven Church*, a church growth and revitalization text by Rick Warren, one of the most influential pastors of the past 30 years. Warren suggests that churches are struggling because they lack purpose, driven instead by tradition, finances, programs and personalities.<sup>1</sup> In order to be *healthy*, and therefore growing, churches instead should be built around the five New Testament purposes giving to the church by Jesus: worship, fellowship, discipleship, ministry, and mission.<sup>2</sup> As Warren argues, “When congregations are healthy, they grow the way God intends. Healthy churches don’t need gimmicks to grow—they

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 81.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-49.

grow naturally.”<sup>3</sup> While it would be hard to argue with the success of these principles in Warren’s own context, they are presented as foolproof principles that, once mastered, are easily applicable to any setting. There is little room for the mystery of resurrection to be lived out. Death is seen as a failure of faithfulness to these principles, rather than an opportunity to experience resurrection. And, most telling, the only sure indicator of such faithfulness is numerical growth.

A second influential book, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned Around and Yours Can Too*, attempted to bring some sociological research into the conversation of church renewal. The authors conducted interviews and research on 324 Protestant American churches that had all experienced significant growth after a period of steady decline.<sup>4</sup> After their study, the authors offered the top five factors for initiating a “comeback”: effective leadership, vibrant faith, active laypeople, intentional evangelism, and celebrative worship.<sup>5</sup> In their conclusion, the authors rightly observe, “From its inception, the church has followed this very pattern throughout its history—growing, decaying, and being restored.”<sup>6</sup> Yet they stop just short of making the connection to that pattern in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Nor do they attempt to see how the power of Jesus’ resurrection operated in the growth of the early church. In their estimation, church revitalization has everything to do with us and our abilities. In the book’s closing paragraph the authors claim, “If you are a pastor or a church leader, that change begins with you. Get your life revitalized and get your focus right.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>4</sup> Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned Around and Yours Can Too* (Nashville, Tennessee: B and H Publishing Group, 2007), xiii.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 210-212.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 219.

Lest one think that mainline church publications are immune from similar sentiment, take as an example the September/October 2016 edition of *Interpreter*, the official magazine of United Methodist Communications. The entire edition was centered on the theme of navigating change as local churches and a denomination. The magazine was full of articles on church renewal, missional transformation, and church growth. Yet only one-third of one article explicitly referenced the resurrection of Jesus Christ in connection to church renewal. Even then, the reference was actually just a section heading rather than a sustained engagement with the topic.

Surely, the resurrection of Jesus Christ must be deeply connected to how the church embodies its life in the present. If the church, the living body of Christ, shares in the promise of resurrection—if indeed we are in some way *already* sharing in the first fruits, then how do we embody that reality in the world? If a local church is experiencing a decline toward an apparent death, we should articulate a vision of church revitalization that draws deeply from such an understanding of the resurrection, rather than simply reference it in passing.<sup>8</sup>

Much of the literature of church revitalization offers the *how*, without sustained attention to the *why* of church revitalization. Scripture serves as a rich source of material for many of the authors in their attempts to offer a “biblical model” for church revitalization. In many examples the principles and ideas they name are sound and ultimately very helpful. What can be picked up from much of the literature’s focus on “healthy churches” is a real concern that death must be

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<sup>8</sup> This paper will not address in detail the theological differences between resurrection, reification, or resuscitation as it pertains to the dead coming to life again. There is some discussion of this in the exegetical section, but I contend that this debate is an inauthentic imposition onto the writer of Luke and Acts. The evangelist appears to present the healing stories as straightforward examples of resurrection, connected intimately with Jesus’ own resurrection. I believe that the evangelist would find such a debate distracting from the purpose of his message: to present the power of God at work in and through Jesus, and subsequently his disciples.

avoided at all costs in order to be a successful church. And so, there remains a lack of attention to the core story of Christianity, namely the resurrection of Jesus, and its entailing corollary; real life can actually come through death.

Instead of naming the resurrection of Jesus Christ as the defining event in the life of the church, the literature of church revitalization reduces it to something akin to what Vincent Miller calls the commodification of faith. He argues, “consumer culture encourages a shallow engagement with the elements of religious traditions because we are trained to engage beliefs, symbols, and practices as abstract commodities that are readily separable from their traditional contexts”.<sup>9</sup> One can purchase a “kabbalah bracelet” without fully understanding Jewish folk mysticism. A St. Jude prayer candle can be purchased from the same grocery shelf as the fabric softeners. And a church can simply implement the best business practices in order to experience resurrection.

This paper is a sustained exploration of the significance of the theological and scriptural importance of Resurrection for church renewal. Section I will examine voices in the theological literature that argue for Resurrection as a defining principle for organizing the life of the church. Section II is an exegesis of three passages from Luke-Acts that emphasize the connection between Resurrection and the life of the church. Section III is a retelling of one congregation’s history, witnessed through the lens of Resurrection. The final section provides concluding thoughts. I argue that although the literature of church revitalization and renewal is immensely helpful, it must not supplant the primary story that the body of Jesus Christ has already been raised. And it is the power of resurrection that offers the best hope for church renewal in every time and place.

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<sup>9</sup> Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2003), 30.

## Section I: Review of Resurrection Theological Literature

Kevin J. Madigan and Jon D. Levenson offer a sweeping examination of the shared theological entailment of resurrection among Jews and Christians. Against any misconception that the concept of resurrection was a novel theme among Christians and anathema to Jews in the first century C.E., Madigan and Levenson endeavor to show that the Christian hope of resurrection has deep Jewish roots.

They highlight particularly the “restoration eschatology” of the second temple period; arising out of exilic and post-exilic reflections on the experience of loss and foreign domination. What emerges is the belief that “the God of Israel would reclaim his throne, his capital city Jerusalem would be restored, and his palace, the Temple, rebuilt.”<sup>10</sup> Most notably was the belief that there would be a general resurrection of the dead accompanying a judgment by God.<sup>11</sup> This notion of resurrection, heralding the dawning of a new age, is not the dead entering an “otherworldly heaven” but participating in the “regeneration of the present world.”<sup>12</sup>

Madigan and Levenson contend that this belief in restoration eschatology was widespread in the century leading up to the life of Jesus, as well as the century that saw the rise of the initial Christian movement.<sup>13</sup> It is not surprising then that Jesus’ teaching is so dominated by themes of an eschatological arrival of the kingdom of God.<sup>14</sup> The expected destruction and subsequent restoration of the Temple is a sign of the dawning of the new age. In this light, we can see the theological perspective out of which Jesus’ followers came to interpret his own death and what

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<sup>10</sup> Kevin J. Madigan and Jon D. Levenson, *Resurrection: The Power of God for Christians and Jews* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 5.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

they believed to be God raising him from the dead.<sup>15</sup> First-century Christians were therefore interpreting what they understood to be Jesus' bodily resurrection as a sign that the present age was ending, and that the "long-promised restoration had begun."<sup>16</sup> Rather than a novel interruption of the theological tradition, Jesus' resurrection is only properly understood in the context of Israel's eschatological hope.

The apostle Paul translated the eschatological theme of resurrection into a matter of ecclesiology. He picks up the theme of the eschatological hope through Jesus' resurrection when he equates the church to a body. Just like Israel, Paul suggests, the church is a body, a collective unit made up of its constitutive members. The individual members of the church, together, are the body of Christ. And, just as God raised Jesus from the dead, so too the church, which makes up the body of Christ, will be raised.<sup>17</sup>

Lest we think that somehow Jewish "restoration eschatology" and its Christian adaptation is an aberration of a minority within the Hebrew Bible, Madigan and Levenson challenge us to look again at the witness of scripture to see the prevalence of God's resurrecting power. For instance, looking at how the psalmists describe Sheol, the place of the dead, we see not so much an eternal place, but a liminal space from which God can remove people. As they observe, "grave, pit, underworld, utmost bounds of the earth, engulfing waters, subterranean city, prison—all these metaphors communicate a mode of existence, one that...characterizes people who have not 'died' in our sense of the term at all."<sup>18</sup> In fact, Sheol is often mentioned in the context of imploring God to bring people back from there and praising God for doing so.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 53-54.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 67. The authors cite the Song of Hannah from 1 Samuel 2:1-10 as an example.

Instead of permanent and irreversible death, the psalmists equate Sheol with illness, and a miraculous return to health as continuous with an exodus from death to life.<sup>20</sup>

What is of striking difference between this and much of modern American Protestantism is the focus on a hyper-individualized conception of resurrection. Madigan and Levenson see in the Hebrew Bible a concern for God to bring back people from the dead, not as individuals necessarily, but as participants in the larger community. What seems to consume the existential thought of the Israelite people is the hope that the people *as a group* would continue.<sup>21</sup> In the Hebrew Bible when the ancient heroes die, much concern is paid to the lineage of their descendants.<sup>22</sup> This is why the absence or loss of descendants becomes the functional equivalent of death. Abraham's story is one of promised children, infertility, a miraculous birth, and then the near sacrifice of the child. Job's existential and theological crisis begins with the loss of his children. The stories of Hannah, Ruth and Naomi, and others deal not so much with the threat of personal death, but the fear of being left childless. Even the story of Adam and Eve inculcates the idea that death is defeated by the birth of children.<sup>23</sup> The Hebrew Bible seems less interested in showing that individuals can live again after death, as much as it contends that the resurrecting power of God is seen in that the community continues in the face of death. Even in perhaps the most famous instance of resurrection in the Hebrew Bible, the vision of the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel 37:1-14, there is no sense that the individuals Ezekiel sees resurrected will now live forever.<sup>24</sup> Instead, the truth that is proclaimed is that God has honored the unbreakable pledge to

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 46-47.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 111-114.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 153.

their ancestors. Madigan and Levenson put it bluntly, “*Israelite people* die, like anyone else; the *people Israel* survives and revives because of God’s promise, despite the most lethal defeats.”<sup>25</sup>

In a similar vein to Madigan and Levenson, much of N.T. Wright’s work has been an attempt to correct an understanding of resurrection as some distant event, either in the past or the future, which has only a tangential importance to the church in the present. Wright notes that the centrality of the resurrection to the life of the early church is anecdotally observed in that Paul talked of Jesus and the resurrection so often that the Athenians mistook it for two different gods, *Jesus* and *Anastasis*.<sup>26</sup> Wright observes that in Luke’s gospel, Jesus’ resurrection is the center point of meaning, so that the entire gospel is the story of resurrection, not just the final chapter.<sup>27</sup> However, Wright argues, Luke does not intend for us to understand the primary meaning of Resurrection as merely a promise of a “post-mortem” existence. The conclusion for Luke is not “you too can have life after death” but instead, “the divine plan for Israel and the world has come to its unexpected climax, and that you are hereby commissioned to implement it in the world.”<sup>28</sup>

Wright likens the work of the church, in light of the resurrection, to that of building a great cathedral. The work of preceding generations is built upon in the present, and the work will undoubtedly go on into the future.<sup>29</sup> Ultimately, the work of construction is guided by the finished design, which in the present can only be glimpsed in partiality. Therefore, even if the work is not completed in one’s own mortal lifespan the work is not in vain, particularly because the hope of resurrection is also the promise that our work in the present will find its way into the new creation of God’s new heaven and new earth. As Wright puts it so captivately, “God’s

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 453.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 436.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 649.

<sup>29</sup> N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 210.

recreation of his wonderful world, which began with the resurrection of Jesus and continues mysteriously as God's people live in the risen Christ and the power of the Spirit, means that what we do in Christ and by the Spirit in the present is not wasted."<sup>30</sup>

Rowan Williams intensifies this reality by arguing that it is precisely through the church that the risen Christ is experienced. The church's existence is a witness to the historical event of the resurrection of Jesus and it is also the place where Jesus' body is now met.<sup>31</sup> He notes that in the Acts of the Apostles, none of the apostles seem bothered that Jesus has ceased his post-Easter bodily appearances. Instead, by the power of the Spirit, they experience the risen Christ in the community of faith. They continue to do mighty acts in his name, and his power is available to them, even the power to raise others from the dead.<sup>32</sup> This is the core of the apostolic faith in the early church. Williams writes, "to believe in the risen Jesus, is to trust that the generative power of God is active in the human world; that it can be experienced as transformation and recreation and empowerment in the present; and that it's availability and relevance extends to every human situation."<sup>33</sup> Whatever power the church has in this world, whatever hope for renewal or revitalization, whatever belief that its work has lasting value; is irrevocably connected to the reality that the church is Jesus' body, and that body has been raised.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>31</sup> Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Morehouse Publishing, 1994), 104.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 49.

## Section II: Resurrection in Selected Passages from Luke-Acts

In the New Testament, resurrection is not a theoretical idea or instructional metaphor. It is a real, embodied event that involves real dead bodies coming back to a living state. And notably, Jesus' bodily resurrection becomes the foundational claim of subsequent Christian proclamation.<sup>34</sup> The essential nature of Jesus' resurrection can be seen, for instance, in the very narrative structure of Luke-Acts. Luke's resurrection account occurs in chapter 24. It occurs, not just at the end of the Gospel, but also at a significant turning point in the theological argument of the Luke-Acts sequence. Luke imagines three stages of salvation history.<sup>35</sup> It begins with the story of Israel, recounted in the Law and the prophets (see Luke 16:16). The story continues in Jesus who is loyal to Israel, thus ensuring that God has not changed the divine plan, but fulfilled it in him. The Jesus story dominates from Luke 3:1 through Acts 1:26. This gives way to the story of the church, empowered by the Spirit to bear witness to the Son to the ends of the earth. Jesus is the centerpiece binding together Israel and the Church.<sup>36</sup> Thus Luke 24, bearing witness to the resurrection of Jesus, is center-point of the Lukan salvation history. In that light, we will turn to three passages from Luke-Acts, including Luke 24, to demonstrate even more fully the significance of resurrection to the theological understanding and life of the church.

### *Luke 7:11-17, The Son of the Widow of Nain*

In Luke 7:11-17, the evangelist tells the story of Jesus raising the son of the widow of Nain to illustrate the prophetic role of Jesus and the power his word has to restore life. This

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<sup>34</sup> William H. Willimon, "Preaching as Demonstration of Resurrection," *Journal for Preachers* 38, no. 3 (2015): 6–10.

<sup>35</sup> Raymond Edward Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 228.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

narrative consists of a healing story in which Jesus, moved by compassion toward a mourning widow, raises her dead son back to life. The mourners, upon seeing this miracle, proclaim that Jesus is a great prophet and that God had visited them. In response, word spreads about Jesus throughout Judea and the surrounding country.

The narrative follows the typical form of a healing story.<sup>37</sup> First, there is an appearance of a healer (v. 11). Second, there is an appearance of a person in need of healing (v.12). Third, there is a request for healing (possibly v. 13) and the healing itself (v. 14). Finally, there is a demonstration of the cure (v. 15) and a recounting of the response to the healing (v. 16-17). While the basic pattern is observable, there are two notable distinctions. There is not an explicit verbal request for a healing. Rather Jesus, seeing the mourning widow, is moved by compassion, and decides to heal unbidden. Additionally, rather than record the responses of the healed man or the widow, Luke instead focuses on the reaction of the crowd. While a slight deviation from the standard form of healing stories in the Gospel, this comports with the way Luke tells the story of Peter raising Tabitha in Acts 9:36-43, which will be addressed further below.

The narrative describes a scene that would be very understandable in first-century Palestine. A stretcher carrying a corpse, a procession of mourners accompanying the body, and burial outside the city walls are standard funeral practices of the time period.<sup>38</sup> However, the ways Jesus acts are culturally unexpected. He steps forward and speaks publically to the widow, eschewing expected boundaries of propriety.<sup>39</sup> He also reaches out and touches the stretcher of

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<sup>37</sup> Walter T. Wilson, *Healing in the Gospel of Matthew: Reflections on Method and Ministry* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2014), 6–8.

<sup>38</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, Ky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 96.

<sup>39</sup> Verlee A. Copeland, "Luke 7:11-17 Gospel Homiletical Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, ed. David Lyon Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, 1st ed., Year C, vol. 3. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 119.

the dead man, instantly making himself unclean.<sup>40</sup> His compassion moves him to disregard his social status and religious standing in order to comfort a widow in an extremely vulnerable situation.<sup>41</sup> This, in addition to the unexpected resurrection of a dead man, perhaps helps to underscore why the reaction of the crowd was both fear and praise.

Luke 7:11-17 is the second healing story in a three and a half chapter block focused on the miracles and parables of Jesus. The intensity and drama of the stories appear to build upon each other until the climactic moment of Peter's declaration in 9:20 that Jesus is the Messiah of God. As we look at this intermediate literary setting we understand the raising of the widow's son as part of a larger witness to the identity and power of Jesus. The previous verses (7:1-10) also involve a miracle healing, in which Jesus heals a centurion's servant who is "close to death." Jesus heals with a word, and at a distance. The healing of the widow's son in 7:11-17, is obviously connected and serves as an escalation of the story.<sup>42</sup> Now instead of someone "close to death," Jesus encounters one who is already dead. Furthermore, rather than healing at a distance Jesus is close enough to touch the coffin. Within the literary context this is an intensification of the theme. It also sets up the following story of Luke 7:18-24, in which messengers from John the Baptist come to Jesus asking if he is "the one who is to come." The response Jesus offers is to tell John, among other things, "the dead are raised."

There is an obvious connection between Luke 7:11-17 and Elijah's raising of the son of the widow of Zarapeth in 1 Kings 17:17-24. The similarities are striking: the dead men are both

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<sup>40</sup> Steven J. Kraftchick, "Luke 7:11-17 Gospel Exegetical Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, ed. David Lyon Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, 1st ed., Year C, vol. 3. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 119.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, vol. 9: *The Gospel of Luke, The Gospel of John*. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 157.

young, both mothers are widows, and both encounters begin at the city gate.<sup>43</sup> In the LXX, the close connection between the widow of Nain and the widow of Zarapheth is even more obvious. Luke 7:15, *kai edoken auton te metri autou* (he gave him to his mother) is an exact quotation of the Greek form of 1 Kings 17:23.<sup>44</sup> It is clear that the reader is intended to understand the connection between these two widows, these two miracles, and these two prophetic healers, Jesus and Elijah.

Because of the similarities, the differences are even starker. In Luke a crowd is present, it is clarified that this is the widow's "only son," and unlike the intense physical contact between Elijah and the son, Jesus heals simply by his words.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, in Kings, the widow and Elijah have a contentious and obstinate relationship; the widow even blaming Elijah for her son's death.<sup>46</sup> On the contrary, in Luke, Jesus is affirmed by the crowd and God is praised.<sup>47</sup>

This text provides an opportunity to reflect on the theological dimensions of healing in Luke's gospel. First, it is notable that Elijah, Elisha, and even Peter later in Acts, employ direct physical contact with those who are healed. For Jesus, just words seem to suffice. Luke shifts the transfer of divine, life giving power from touch to the words of Jesus.<sup>48</sup> In Acts 9:40, again addressed more fully below, Peter must implore God to send power, yet Jesus already possesses that power.<sup>49</sup> It seems that the apostles and the church can participate in the healing power of God, but clearly do not possess such power of their own. Additionally, Luke notes that Jesus

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<sup>43</sup> Craddock, *Luke*, 96.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Culpepper, *NIB*, 9:158.

<sup>46</sup> Kraftchick, *Feasting on the Word*, 3:117.

<sup>47</sup> Culpepper, *NIB*, 9:158.

<sup>48</sup> Gregory Anderson Love, "Luke 7:11-17 Gospel Theological Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, ed. David Lyon Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, 1st ed., Year C, vol. 3, Year C (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 118.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

decides to heal because he has compassion on the mourning widow (7:13). Luke uses the word “compassion” two later times in connection with the Good Samaritan (10:33) and the father of the prodigal (15:20). For Luke, compassion not only entails great emotional capacity, but also leads to action, such as raising the dead.<sup>50</sup>

In Luke 7:11-17, the story describes the meeting between two parades: a parade of life (Jesus and the Disciples) and a parade of death (the dead man, his mother, and the mourners).<sup>51</sup> No one from the crowd asks Jesus for help, demonstrating their belief in the power and inescapability of death. Perhaps they believe that it is too late; nothing can be done.<sup>52</sup> When the parade of life encounters the parade of death, Jesus is moved to compassion and then moved to action. In Luke-Acts, Jesus, and by extension the apostles, have power over death. The parade of death ends whenever it encounters the parade of life. And when we enlarge our perspective, encompassing the ancient stories of Elijah and Elisha, we observe that life-defeating death has been a perennial concern of God. The story of the raising of the widow of Nain’s son, functions in the life of the church as a clarification of the prophetic identity of Jesus and as an assertion that through Jesus we may participate in the divine power of life defeating death.

*Luke 24:13-35, The Walk to Emmaus*

In Luke 24:13-35, Luke tells the story of Jesus meeting two men on the way to Emmaus, to highlight the essential role that the constitutive ecclesial acts of proclamation and Eucharist play in encountering and discerning the risen body of Christ. In this extensive narrative, two

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>52</sup> M. Jan Holton, "Luke 7:11-17 Gospel Pastoral Perspective," *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, ed. David Lyon Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, 1st ed., Year C, vol. 3 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 116.

disciples leave Jerusalem and journey toward Emmaus. Along their journey they discuss the recent events surrounding the death of Jesus and are joined by a stranger who inquires about these events. Not recognizing that the stranger is the risen Jesus, they continue the journey while he interprets the scriptures to them. Upon arriving at Emmaus, the disciples invite the stranger to stay with them. At the evening meal the stranger breaks the bread, instantly becomes recognizable to the disciples as Jesus, and then vanishes. The disciples immediately return to Jerusalem to relate the details of their encounter with the other disciples.

The narrative is structurally composed of four sections.<sup>53</sup> The first section is the meeting of the disciples with Jesus, whom they are kept from recognizing (vv. 13-16). The second section is an extended conversation between the disciples and the incognito Jesus as they continue walking (vv. 17-27). The third section is the Emmaus meal where Jesus' identity is revealed (vv. 28-32). The final section recounts the return of the disciples to Jerusalem (vv. 33-36). The tight composition relies on the narrative suspense of when, or if, the disciples will recognize Jesus and what the catalyst will be for that recognition.

The pericope is clearly in a narrative form, consistent with much of the rest of Luke and Acts. It is also typically Lukan that the narrative dialogue takes place in the context of a journey, particularly echoing the journey of Jesus and the disciples to Jerusalem in Luke 9:51-19:27.<sup>54</sup> The passage is dominated by direct discourse between Jesus and Cleopas. Between the two of them we are given the basic kerygma of the early church, i.e., 1 Cor 15:3-5, Jesus died, buried, was raised, and appeared, "according to the scriptures."<sup>55</sup> Of note is that the direct discourse occurs only when the identity of Jesus remains hidden from the disciples. The revelation of

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<sup>53</sup> Culpepper, *NIB*, 9:476.

<sup>54</sup> Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 261.

<sup>55</sup> Culpepper, *NIB*, 9:475.

Jesus' identity takes place not as the result of explicit speech, but rather through the descriptive actions of Jesus at the meal. The words used to describe the action, "took, blessed, broke, gave" have significant Eucharistic resonance.<sup>56</sup>

The narrative hinges on an important literary feature. The plot revolves around the failure of the two disciples to recognize their fellow traveler.<sup>57</sup> The tension this creates is not resolved until the meal at Emmaus. This resolution, known as the *anagnorisis*, is a typical scene in classical drama. Aristotle wrote that such "recognition is, as its name indicates, a change from ignorance to knowledge, tending either to affection or to enmity; it determines in the direction of good or ill fortune the fates of the people involved." Such recognition may be based on visible signs, memory, or reasoning, but the best kind is "that which arises from the actions alone."<sup>58</sup> Luke executes the *anagnorisis* to superb narrative effect and, perhaps more significantly, with great theological import.

Luke employs the verb *epiginosko* to great effect in this passage, as well as others throughout the Luke-Acts sequence. The verb means "to know" or "to recognize" as in being familiar with the physical appearance of another. Yet it also carries the sense of being "completely familiar with" or "fully aware" of some person or idea. More than passing recognition, it entails a deeper awareness of another.<sup>59</sup> We can see the variety of meanings as Luke employs it in various settings. Luke 1:4 contends that the whole gospel is written so that Theophilus may "know" the truth. In Luke 5:22, Jesus "knows" the true reasoning behind the Pharisees who question his authority. Of course in Luke 24:16, the men first do not "know" it is

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<sup>56</sup> Craddock, *Luke*, 286.

<sup>57</sup> Culpepper, *NIB*, 9:475.

<sup>58</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1452a, 1454b-55a. Quoted in Culpepper, *NIB*, 9:479.

<sup>59</sup> Robert Young, *Young's Analytical Concordance to the Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992), 579.

Jesus and then subsequently, in 24:31, they “know” his identity. In Acts 3:10, Peter heals a man by the Beautiful Gate and all the people “know” the man who is healed and are amazed.

This narrative is the second of three connected stories in Luke 24, all dealing with the resurrection of Jesus. Luke 24:1-12 recounts the discovery of the empty tomb by Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and the other women. Luke 24:13-35 is the Emmaus narrative. Luke 24:36-52 recounts the sudden appearance of Jesus among the gathered disciples, the promise of the Holy Spirit, and then the ascension. All three stories deal with issues of disbelief, lack of recognition, or fear as the first reaction to the news of the resurrection of Jesus. All three stories are purported to take place on “that same day” of Easter.<sup>60</sup> While this stretches narrative reality, the theological import is significant. Easter is not just one day, but stretches forward into eternity. The Emmaus narrative, as an essential part of Luke 24, helps to serve as the conclusion of the Gospel of Luke. Jesus is alive, and people are beginning to know, understand, and respond to this news. Jesus’ true identity is not always obvious when people first encounter him. People doubt the women’s witness as an idle tale, the two disciples on the road are unable to recognize him, and the other disciples first assume they are seeing a ghost. Luke 24 is as much about the ability or inability to recognize the risen Jesus in our midst.

An Old Testament text that echoes in the background of Luke 24 is surely the Lord’s visit to Abraham by the Oaks of Mamre in Genesis 18:1-15. In a similar fashion, Abraham encounters strangers who, through some narrative uncertainty, are slowly revealed to be the Lord. In addition to an extended conversation, there is a shared meal between Abraham and the visitor(s). The theme of a divine messenger (or the actual divinity) being at first unrecognizable, and then

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<sup>60</sup> Culpepper, *NIB*, 9:476.

only ascertained through conversation and a meal holds significant thematic similarity to the Emmaus story.

The socio-cultural significance of the two disciples' hospitality toward the stranger is key to the narrative function of the Emmaus story. At first the stranger joins them on the walk and they easily welcome him into a conversation. It is this first act of hospitality which occasions the opportunity for the incognito Jesus to share with them interpretation of the scripture. Then as they arrive at Emmaus in the evening, they entreat the stranger to stay with them and share a meal. The two disciples seem deeply imbued with the cultural expectation, found repeatedly in the Torah, to honor the stranger in your midst. Their hospitality is actually the catalyst for the ultimate revelation of Jesus' identity. It is conceivable that had they not offered such hospitality, Jesus would have continued on his journey and they would have missed the revelation. True and right sharing in the proclamation and the Eucharist entails that the church makes room for the stranger, the other, and the unexpected guest. Absent such hospitality the church may fail to discern the risen Jesus in their midst.

This passage enriches the church's life and practice when we see the intimate connection between proclamation and Eucharist in discerning the risen Christ in our midst. Furthermore, the story centers on the communal aspect of the "journey of faith," "scriptural interpretation," and of course the "shared meal." The two disciples, gathered around the word and the table prefigure the church. The central figure is the welcomed stranger who becomes the host. Hospitality gives way to the revelation of the risen Christ in our midst. The Emmaus story functions as a warrant for the ecclesial elements of word and table as constitutive practices necessary for experiencing the risen Christ in the midst of the gathered church; and any subsequent claim that the church is the body of Christ.

*Acts 9:36–43, The Raising of Tabitha*

In Acts 9:36-43, Luke tells the story of Peter raising Tabitha from the dead to illustrate the important role healing miracles play in the evangelization strategy of the early church. This is a straightforward narrative consisting of six brief units. First, verses 36-37, introduce the setting of Joppa and the character of Tabitha, a devout woman who has died. Second, in verses 38-39a, Peter is summoned to Joppa from nearby Lydda, and is taken to see Tabitha's corpse. Third, in verse 39b, a group of widows weep and show Peter the clothes Tabitha had made. Fourth, in verse 40, following solitary prayer, Peter commands Tabitha to get up. Fifth, in verse 41, Peter assembles the saints and widows and shows them the risen Tabitha. Finally, verses 42-43 recount that in response many people come to believe in the Lord. The narrative contains only two moments of direct discourse (vv. 38 and 40), seeming to focus attention on the actions of the characters, notably Peter and the widows.

The narrative follows the typical form of a healing story. First there is an appearance of a person in need of healing (vv. 36-37). Second, there is an appearance of a healer (v. 39a). Third, there is an assumed request for healing (v. 39b) and the healing itself (v. 40). Finally, there is a demonstration of the cure (v. 41) and a recounting of the response to the healing (vv. 42-43). This pattern, appearance-request-cure-response, is easily observable.<sup>61</sup> Of note, however, rather than an explicit verbal request, it appears to be the widows' weeping and display of Tabitha's wares that prompts Peter to action. Additionally, following the healing, rather than recording the response of Tabitha and the widows, Luke tells us the response of the unnamed "many" that become believers in the Lord.

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<sup>61</sup> Wilson, *Healing in the Gospel of Matthew*, 6–8.

The verb root, *anastemi*, appears frequently in the Luke-Acts sequence. A form of “to rise” appears 27 times.<sup>62</sup> Often, in the most basic kinesthetic sense, the verb is used to simply denote the movement of the character from a lower position to a higher one. But notably it appears in several healing stories: Peter’s mother-in-law (Luke 4:38-39), Jairus’ daughter (Luke 8:55), ten men with a skin disease (Luke 17:19), the restoring of sight to Paul (Acts 9:18), and the paralyzed man, Aeneas (Acts 9:34). The use in Acts 9:40 comports with the usage in other Luke-Acts stories of healing.

The immediately previous story (Acts 9:32-35) also involves a miracle healing, this time Peter proclaiming the paralyzed Aeneas to be healed by Jesus Christ. The result of this healing is the profession of faith in Jesus by many of the residents of Lydda and Sharon. The story immediately following the healing of Tabitha, the conversion of Cornelius (10:1-48), while not a healing story, nevertheless does involve divine encounters that result in many people coming to faith in Jesus. The sequencing of these three stories speaks to the intimate connection between miracles and evangelization.

The raising of Tabitha appears at a critical point in the narrative of Acts, immediately preceding the conversion of the first gentile, Cornelius. Luke is completing the narrative section dealing with the early church’s mission in Samaria and Judea.<sup>63</sup> The events of 9:36-43 conclude with Peter in Joppa, geographically closer to Caesarea. The narrative places Peter in the home of Simon the tanner, whose work is ritually unclean. Peter is now theologically and geographically positioned to deal with issues of cleanliness in the conversion of Cornelius.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Young, *Young’s Analytical Concordance to the Bible*, 49.

<sup>63</sup> Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 280.

<sup>64</sup> Robert W. Wall, "The Acts of the Apostles: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leader E. Keck, vol. 10: *The Acts of the Apostles, Introduction to*

The outline of the Book of Acts provides the literary evidence for understanding the narrative as the result of specific directive of Jesus to the apostles in 1:8: “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”<sup>65</sup> This literary framework is then evidenced in that chapters 2:1-8:1 recount the mission in Jerusalem, chapters 8:1b-12:25 detail the missions in Samaria and Judea, and then chapters 13:1-28:31 contain the stories of Paul’s mission to “the ends of the earth.”<sup>66</sup> This very narrative structure supports the conclusion that a primary motivation of the evangelist is to relate the success of the early evangelistic efforts of the church, highlighting the role of the Holy Spirit (i.e., Pentecost) and the miraculous signs that accompanied the apostolic effort (i.e., the raising of Tabitha).

Although there is obviously no synoptic parallel to the raising of Tabitha, the passage does seem to echo Jesus’ raising of the daughter of Jairus in Luke 8:49-56. Brown notes that in the Markan parallel to the passage (Mark 5:21-43) Jesus’ command, “*Talitha cum*” seems similar to Peter’s command in Acts 9:40, “*Tabitha anastethi*.”<sup>67</sup> While the connection between the passages is slim, the basic claim remains valid, that the healing power of Jesus is now available to the apostles in their evangelistic endeavors.

The text illustrates the significance of widows in the life of the early church. While Tabitha is not explicitly identified as a widow, the fact that she is accompanied by widows showing Peter her wares seems to indicate this. Acts 6:1-6 deals with the treatment of widows, while passages in the Pastoral Letters suggest a prescribed ecclesial office of widow (I Timothy 5:9-15). Additionally, both Ignatius and Polycarp indicate in their writings that an established

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*Epistolary Literature, The Letter to the Romans, The First Letter to the Corinthians.* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 162.

<sup>65</sup> Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 281.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 299.

“order of widows” exists in their time, as a forerunner to the office of deaconess.<sup>68</sup> This perhaps underscores why Tabitha is treated with such reverence and emphasizes the role of women in the evangelistic mission of the early church. In this light, the raising of Tabitha allows for a demonstration of the power of prayer, the return of this woman to her acts of service, and entails the conversion of many in the city of Joppa. The story of Tabitha functions as an encouragement for all of God’s people to commit themselves to good works (Acts 9:36) and acts of restoration (Acts 9:40) in order that the evangelistic witness of the Church might be strengthened and the number of believers might increase.

### *Summary*

In these stories, we see the evangelist’s belief that the church participates in the power of Jesus by embodying resurrection to the world. The power of resurrection serves a significant dual function of undergirding the missiological and evangelistic purposes of the church. In raising the widow’s son to life, we see that Jesus has the power to raise people from the dead. In the encounter at Emmaus, we see that Jesus himself has conquered death and invites the disciples to share in his life through shared word and broken bread. In Peter’s raising of Tabitha from the dead, we see that the church is now empowered to bring life from death so that the work of the church may continue. As a result of resurrection the mission of the church can continue, even in the face of death, and many will come to believe in Jesus as a result. In light of these theological and exegetical claims, we turn now to the example of a retelling of a congregation’s history as witness to resurrection.

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<sup>68</sup> James L. Price, “Widow” in *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier et al. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 1212.

### **Section III: Resurrection Stories from St. Luke's United Methodist Church**

St. Luke's United Methodist Church is a 108-year-old congregation in the Fondren neighborhood of Jackson, the capital city of the State of Mississippi. Throughout the church's history, it has mirrored the surrounding community. The church was organized just as this new neighborhood was established, grew as the neighborhood expanded, declined as the neighborhood transitioned, and at present is significantly connected to an ongoing renaissance of the neighborhood.

Throughout its life cycle as a congregation, St. Luke's has experienced several moments of "near-death" that were followed by times of significant growth. In 1909, the members of the First Methodist Episcopal Church, South who had moved to the outskirts of Jackson organized a new church and built a small, white, wood-framed building. The church grew modestly in its first several decades. In 1929, that original church building caught fire during a morning worship service and burned to the ground.<sup>69</sup> The membership, numbering around 100, decided instead of rebuilding the small white building, to build a larger, brick, neo-gothic sanctuary that would seat triple the number of the original building. They also moved to a lot directly across from the new elementary school for the neighborhood. This all took place during the first year of the Great Depression and the new sanctuary was dedicated one day short of the one-year anniversary of the fire. In the immediate years following, the church experienced a period of rapid expansion.<sup>70</sup> Growing from a relatively small congregation that lost everything the church owned, to a large neighborhood parish in just one decade is a powerful symbol of resurrection. One of the stained glass windows the congregation selected for the new sanctuary was the ancient symbol of a

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<sup>69</sup> The date and story of the burning of the original building are taken from a commemorative photo and plaque that hangs in the foyer of the current church sanctuary.

<sup>70</sup> In 1929, the membership was 154. By 1941, the membership was 510.

phoenix rising from the ashes. Sanctuary windows were added throughout the next two decades, with a final central window installed over the altar in 1949. The selected image was that of the risen Christ.

A second watershed event occurred in 1964. St. Luke's was, like many churches in Jackson, mired in the struggle for civil rights. As a Methodist Church, St. Luke's was aligned with a denomination that officially supported equal rights for African Americans, including an end to segregation and granting of full access to the voting polls. As the events of Freedom Summer in 1964 reached a fever pitch in Jackson many young activists attempted to integrate the worship services of the city's churches. St. Luke's was divided over whether or not to allow its worship services to be open to everyone regardless of race. After a contentious struggle for leadership, a new church council chair was elected who favored an open policy. Over 200 active members left St. Luke's and formed a new church, Riverside Independent Methodist, which was officially against integration of churches. Like the loss of the original church building, the loss of so many members in such a contentious manner was a significant threat to the health of the congregation. Yet again, in the years immediately after 1964, the church expanded its membership significantly and launched one of its most enduring legacies.

In 1965, in the aftermath of the church split, the newly elected church council chair, a local businessman, and another church member who was a physician created the idea to build a physical rehabilitation hospital. These two men believed the city and the state needed a place where people with traumatic injuries could recover and lead fulfilling lives. With the business acumen of the church council chair, the medical expertise of the physician, and the financial backing of St. Luke's, the Methodist Rehabilitation Center was formed. Today, it is a 200-bed facility treating patients recovering from strokes, traumatic injuries, and other neurological

diseases. St. Luke's had significantly formed the faith of both of these church members, which combined with their vocational interests—business and medicine—to shape St. Luke's and their neighborhood in profound ways. The establishment of the Methodist Rehabilitation Center embodied the belief at St. Luke's that Christians should be involved in the healing of bodies. In this view the theology of resurrection can, through appropriate reflection, give deep grounding to these practices.

A recent survey conducted with members of a Disciple Bible Study offered helpful insights into St. Luke's congregants' views on resurrection.<sup>71</sup> When asked what the “after life” will be like, 64 percent described it is a re-creation, with new physical bodies in a newly remade world. When asked what one must do to gain access to this “after life” the majority responded that it requires faith in Jesus Christ, lived out through good works. During in-depth interviews with two church members, one a young attorney married with two children and the other a retired secretary, never married, in her late 80s, the similarities of their answers were striking. Although one had been a member of the church since the 1940s and the other only since the 1980s it was clear that that church consistently formed them in a particular way of envisioning how Christians are to live now, and how we envision we will live in the life-to-come. It appears that St. Luke's has believed and practiced through its life as a congregation that faith in Jesus Christ should manifest itself in this world through practices that bring healing, restoration, and that ultimately embody resurrection.

In the 1990s, the neighborhood around St. Luke's experienced a significant decline as businesses moved, homeowners relocated to the suburbs, and finally the elementary school

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<sup>71</sup> The demographics of this Disciple Bible Study class are representative of the larger congregation: 71% female, 29% male; 21% ages 18-60, 57% ages 61-85, 21% ages 81 and above. The survey was conducted in October of 2016.

across the street closed. The community around the church was dying and once again the church came close to death as membership precipitously declined. In the early-2000s, a group of remaining business owners and residents, led by members of St. Luke's, joined together to form a neighborhood renewal organization committed to revitalizing the community. Through their efforts of marketing, recruitment of new businesses, and partnership with the local medical community the resulting renaissance has been miraculous. The resurgent health of the community has re-energized the church, which is now growing again for the first time in over a decade. During the past seven years, the church has once again been a place where the connection of vocation and faith found expression as a church member who teaches Spanish at one of the local high schools launched an ongoing mission partnership with The United Methodist Church of Honduras. While the neighborhood school is still closed, St. Luke's itself now provides a full preschool for ages 8 months to 4 years. In 2012, the church launched its first ever capital campaign to renovate its church facility. The renovation of the building, the first brick structure built in the neighborhood, has become a symbol of the renaissance itself.<sup>72</sup>

For those who have just arrived to St. Luke's, or the neighborhood, it could be easy to think the events of the last several years are unique or a surprising anomaly; however, for those with ears to hear the story that the people of St. Luke's have lived it is no surprise. It is instead the living embodiment of the story of a people who believe in the power of resurrection, the power of God that can bring life from death. It is the story of those who put their faith in Jesus Christ, and who live out that faith through good works of compassion, justice, and mercy; thereby embodying resurrection.

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<sup>72</sup> Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Congregation and Community* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 59.

## Conclusion

As a pastor leading a United Methodist congregation I have spent most of the last ten years of my ministry reading about how the church in America is dying. I have been to conferences on best practices to reverse the trend. I have read numerous books on church revitalization. And while much of the literature invokes spiritual disciplines and sound theology I was struck by lack of any explicit appeal to resurrection. Furthermore, there was never any clear sense of the reason why we should work to revitalize our churches at all. Do we work to revitalize a particular congregation out of a sense of nostalgia or to reassert cultural relevance? Much of the literature was simply evangelically motivated; we revitalize churches so that we can save souls. But save them for what? I contend that we work to revitalize local congregations, and all that entails, in order to *embody resurrection* to the world.

Throughout the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts, we see the centrality of the resurrection to the early church. Those first Christians believed that we are destined for a bodily resurrection like Jesus and to dwell with him in the Kingdom of God. After his own death and resurrection Jesus commissions his disciples to continue his work. And so they are left to teach others about Jesus, about his resurrection, and about his promise to return and raise us all to new life. The earliest Christian preaching is focused primarily on the resurrection of Jesus as the defining event for Christians, and in fact the defining event for the entire world. In Jesus' resurrection from the dead we see our own future, and we see a call to live now in ways that embody that future in the present. We have a living hope for as we were baptized into a death like his so we are to be raised like him. And so the early Church taught, no doubt influenced heavily by Jewish "realized eschatology," that the dead in Christ await a bodily resurrection into

a “new heaven and a new earth;” a restored creation, with a bodily existence, in a kingdom without end.

But all that raises the question: If when we die we go to dwell with God until the resurrection when God will restore all things, why do we bother doing anything now? Why work to clean up rivers? Why try to eliminate poverty? Why bother coming to church? Why work to renew or revitalize churches at all? Why live on earth like it matters to heaven? Too many people, and far too many Christians, believe, or at least act, like heaven has nothing to do with earth—subscribe to the myth that what happens here doesn’t matter because we will leave it all behind. But a disembodied existence is not our future according to Christian theology; resurrection is our future. Jesus is the first fruits of that reality (1 Corinthians 15: 20, 23). In the incarnate and risen Jesus, heaven and earth are forever joined and his death and resurrection is the declaration that death is forever defeated. Resurrection is not merely a re-description of death; it is a profound *No!* to the power of death and decay in this world. If from time to time it looks like death has its way, even in a beloved congregation, we know that it is merely the last gasps of a defeated enemy. And though our bodies, and even our churches for a time, appear to be conquered by this enemy, we have a living hope that beyond the grave our bodies will rise again to a life that will never end.

And so rather than pointing us away from earth, Jesus’ resurrection power points us back to earth, to proclaim to a world enamored by things that lead to death that there is another way that leads to life. Jesus’ resurrection gives meaning and power to the prayer, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done; on earth, as it is in heaven.” Jesus’ resurrection doesn’t mean that we escape from this world; it means this world cannot escape from God in Jesus Christ, and that is the Good News. Sharing this message is the work of the church. And it means that our work as

the body of Christ is not in vain because God will use it all in his coming kingdom. N.T. Wright puts it this way, “Every act of love, gratitude, and kindness; every work of art or music inspired by the love of God and delight in the beauty of his creation; every minute spent teaching a...child to read or to walk; every act of care and nurture, of comfort and support...every prayer...every deed that spreads the gospel, builds up the church, embraces and embodies holiness rather than corruption, and makes the name of Jesus honored in the world—all of this will find its way, through the resurrecting power of God, into the new creation that God will one day make.”<sup>73</sup>

This is why we work to renew and revitalize the church. The church is the body of Christ and the body of Christ has been raised to new life. The work of renewal in a local expression of that body should be done in light of this larger reality and as an oblation to God. Much of the popular literature of church renewal is very helpful in giving us the *how*; but it is the resurrection of Jesus Christ that gives us the *why*, and it is the God who raised Jesus who gives the *power* to the church in its ever present work of embodying resurrection to the world.

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<sup>73</sup> Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 208.

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