

The Collected Sermons of
David Bartlett

David Bartlett

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Foreword

I first came to know David Bartlett when the two of us were called at the same time to teach preaching and worship at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia (now Union Presbyterian Seminary). The year was 1987. I had just completed my PhD course work at Princeton Theological Seminary, and had not even begun writing my doctoral dissertation. David Bartlett was a seasoned Biblical scholar with a PhD in New Testament from Yale University, several published books, and fifteen years of pastoring churches while serving as adjunct seminary faculty under his belt.

What do I remember about David Bartlett from those early years of teaching and working together?

I remember that David was an enjoyable and respectful colleague with a quick wit and a delightfully self-deprecating sense of humor. He took what we were doing seriously, but he never took himself too seriously. When designing classes together, David was always willing to listen to my point of view, to compromise if need be, and to share equally in classroom teaching time. On occasion—often at his suggestion—we took our theological differences into the classroom with us and allowed the students to see how two professors who both claimed the Reformed theological tradition as our heritage (he as an American Baptist and I as a Presbyterian) might interpret it differently. One classic example was that when we taught students about baptismal theology during the worship segment of the course, I would present the classic Calvinist case for infant baptism and David would counter with the Barthian case for believers baptism. We would then engage the students in conversation regarding where they found themselves on the theological spectrum.

I remember that David strongly believed in biblical preaching—not in a fundamentalist way, but in a way that honored contemporary biblical scholarship and was rooted in solid and thorough exegesis of the biblical text. Union Seminary in Virginia had a strong biblical department with the journal *Interpretation* published there. David did a great job of bridging the worlds between biblical studies and preaching. The expectation in preaching classes was that students would bring the solid exegetical skills learned in biblical classes to their work, and, in a very real sense, bring them to fruition through the interpretive work of preaching. The goal was not to take people back to Bible land and have them dwell there; the goal was to interpret present contexts in light

of the Bible, and to have the exegetical study of texts undergirding and supporting the sermon like the scaffolding of a solid building.

David not only taught with the keen mind of a seasoned scholar; he also taught with the large heart of a compassionate pastor. By the time he reached Union Seminary, David had served as senior minister in three different congregations: University Baptist Church in Minneapolis (1973–1975), Hyde Park Union Church in Chicago (1976–1979), and Lakeshore Baptist Church in Oakland, California (1981–1987). During each of his pastorates he also taught full or part-time at local seminaries: United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities, the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, and the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley. David intentionally chose to live out his own vocational life with one foot solidly planted in the parish and another foot planted in academia. It was an unusual pattern for scholars of his ilk, but it was also a pattern David followed for his entire career. For him pastoring and teaching were two parts of the same vocation: using his scholarship in service of the church and its ministry. His students were the prime beneficiaries of his dual ministry career. From David they not only learned how to hone their skills in biblical exegesis; from him they also learned how to be sensitive to the varied needs and life situations of the congregants who would gather before them on Sunday mornings. They learned not only how to listen to texts with their heads; they also learned how to interpret them with their hearts—and with a heart for God’s whole broken world.

What also struck me about David Bartlett during those years of teaching together was his passion for justice and equality. David firmly believed that the gospel of Christ had a prophetic edge to it, and he believed that our teaching, our preaching, and our living should reflect that reality. Frequently, the sermons he preached in our chapel encouraged us all to live more just lives and advocate more just causes as people of God. David also had a passion for racial justice and unity. In Richmond at the time, there were three theological institutions that made up the Richmond Theological Consortium: Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, the Presbyterian School of Christian Education, and the School of Theology of Virginia Union University—a historically African American institution. Early during his tenure at Union, David approached one of the preaching faculty at Virginia Union, and the two offered a course together entitled “Preaching Black and White.” It was the first such course to be offered in this city that had once been the capital of the Confederacy and was equally comprised of African American and Anglo American students.

Finally (and on a lighter note), I remember David as a man who did not waste words. He would often respond to my lengthy work-related emails with a very few well-chosen words that expressed his point of view without

elaboration. For many years after our time together at Union, I was included in the Bartlett family's Christmas letter list, and that pattern continued. My husband and I used to joke that if David added more than three or four words of greeting at the end of the letter he was being downright loquacious!

In many ways, the traits I experienced in David Bartlett as a colleague and human being are also the traits evidenced in his wonderful sermons in this volume.

The very first sermon in this volume, "Having Nothing, Possessing Everything," preached at a seminary commencement, gives witness to the theological heart of the humility that David expressed and espoused in his life. With the apostle Paul, David truly believed that we pastors and preachers and teachers have been given the gift of God's grace, and that is all we need to sustain us in ministry. Not credentials. Not power or influence. Just grace. That is what we are called to offer others in the name of Christ. And that is all we need.

All of the sermons in this volume give witness to David's passion for preaching that is solidly grounded in the biblical text. Most of them actually begin, as Karl Barth urged preachers to begin, with the biblical text. If they don't begin there, they always get there fairly quickly. And David's interpretations of texts often surprise the reader with their freshness and clarity. For instance, in a sermon he preaches on the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15, David readily acknowledges that he used to preach this parable in the classic way, focusing on the younger son and the father's radical welcome of him. However, it was the comment of a parishioner about his own sympathies with the older brother that caused David to look at the parable anew, and to focus on the fact that there are actually *two returns* (the title of the sermon) in this story: the return of the younger son to the father, and the return of the older son to the recognition that this prodigal is indeed his brother. "Jesus," says Bartlett, "is the one who brings us to our brothers or our sisters when we stand outside the party in some old conviction of our own specialness" (p. 136).

The heart of David as a pastor also shines through in these sermons. When preaching at an Atlanta retirement home ("Whether We Live or Whether We Die"), he addresses the existential reality of death and the comfort that comes in facing it, and he reminds us that Christ is the Lord of the dead and the living. On the Sunday following the shooting at Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, in which nine African American people of faith lost their lives to a white supremacist gunman, David sets aside the sermon he had planned to preach and instead addresses the question of the role of God in the face of such suffering. After acknowledging that he has no answers as to "why," he asserts: "Look out when theologians tell you they can explain

exactly why Jesus had to suffer so that we might come closer to God. But listen to the old old story and trust the old old assurance: that awful time of his death was also the gracious time when God got just as near to us as breathing; hurt with our very hurts, wounded with our very pain. The most unacceptable time is the time in which God accepted us most deeply (“The Acceptable Time,” p. 129).

In like manner these sermons give witness to David’s deep passion for social justice and racial reconciliation. In his sermon “What Child Is This?” he powerfully reminds us of Jesus’ special care for children and calls us as Christians to exhibit that same compassion and care. In “The Things That Make for Peace,” preached in Berkeley in 1971, he challenges a nation enmeshed in the Vietnam War to learn again to see the enemy as our siblings. In that same sermon he confronts the nationalism so prevalent at the time with these words: “to think that one’s loyalty is first of all to country is not good Christian doctrine; it is simple blasphemy. We have only one king and that is Jesus Christ; when we must choose between supporting our government and supporting his kingdom, we have no real choice” (p. 72).

Finally, David’s sermons are marked by their economy of well-chosen words. They are eloquent. But they are also lean. There is nothing about them that is fluffy or showy or padded. Rather, they point us time and time again to the God revealed in Jesus Christ, calling us to take on the mantle of discipleship and to live it more faithfully in the world.

My early years teaching with David Bartlett proved to be much too short. In 1990 he left Union Seminary to go to Yale Divinity School, where he had earned both his MDiv and PhD degrees. He taught there for fifteen years as the Lantz Professor of Preaching and also served as Dean of Academic Affairs. He officially “retired” from Yale in 2005, but not for long! Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, called him to become Distinguished Professor of New Testament, and he served there for another ten years. His pattern of ministering to local congregations while teaching in seminaries continued as he served as theologian in residence at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Atlanta and also preached regularly at The New Canaan Congregational Church in Connecticut. (Included in this volume are sermons and sermon series preached in both venues.)

I would be remiss if I did not mention that David was also a prolific writer and editor of twenty books that brought his scholarly love of biblical studies, preaching, and the church together. Perhaps his greatest labor of love was the twelve-volume *Feasting on the Word* commentary series that he and Barbara Brown Taylor co-edited. It has become the gold standard for lectionary-based commentaries written for preachers, and nearly every pastor of my acquaintance consults it regularly.

I am happy to report that there was a lovely “coming full circle” in my life as a colleague of David Bartlett’s—and it happened just before his untimely death in 2017. Over a quarter century after we taught together at Union Seminary in Virginia, David and his beloved wife, Carol, retired to New Haven, Connecticut. I was then teaching preaching on the faculty of Yale Divinity School, where I had delighted in having their son Jonah as one of my students. David taught occasional courses in Bible after retirement. We shared offices side-by-side on the same hallway, and I loved hearing his booming voice and laugh coming down the hallway. I was present in Marquand Chapel when he preached what no one knew at the time would be his last sermon. It is the last sermon in this volume, and it is vintage David Bartlett for all the reasons I have already noted above.

In his tribute to David Bartlett at the time of his death in 2017, Dean Gregory Sterling of Yale Divinity School wrote these words: “David was far more than a scholar and a minister; he was a model Christian, a first-rate human being.” Perhaps more than anything it is those traits that shine forth in this collection of sermons—that they were penned not only by an outstanding scholar and minister, but by a model Christian, and a first-rate human being. I am more grateful than I can say to the Bartlett family for compiling these sermons for us, so that generations to come can be uplifted, challenged, and encouraged in their own journeys of faith by David Bartlett. And to David I say, “Well done, good and faithful servant. Well done.”

Leonora Tubbs Tisdale
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Having Nothing, Possessing Everything

2 CORINTHIANS 6:1-11

This sermon was preached at Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, in Rochester, New York, at its Commencement Ceremony on May 6, 1978. The University and Divinity School mentioned in this sermon is the University of Chicago and its Divinity School where David was teaching New Testament and serving as minister at the Hyde Park Union Church.

Second Corinthians shows Paul at his Pauline worst—angry, egotistical, defensive, desperately threatened. All the things we learned in classes on pastoral care we were never supposed to be. Here he is caught in that most exasperating bind. Opposition has arisen behind his back in a church he loves. Sly strangers question his credentials, his devotion. The church people, all too gullible, begin to waver. Whom can they believe? Out it comes—all the hurt and anger, all the weakness and the boasting, all the vulnerability of the beleaguered apostle—and all the grace, which time after time shines through his vulnerability.

We are treated as deceivers, yet we are true. We are treated as unknown, though we are known through and through. We are treated as though we have nothing, yet we possess everything. Having nothing; possessing everything.

(6:8-11, author trans.)

Paul admits it. As far as they go his opponents are right. He has nothing—no credentials, no wisdom, no power, no personal attractiveness. But

his opponents are also wrong. He possesses everything, everything that matters—every gift of faith, hope and love, every amazing grace. Having nothing; possessing everything—that is the punch line in Paul’s defense of his ministry.

Here’s how he spells that out. Here’s how we spell that out for us. Having nothing; possessing everything. We are poor but we make many rich. Here is what this might mean for us.

We have no credentials but we possess the word of grace. That is so hard for us. We would so much rather find some way to commend ourselves. Like our desperate wish to be thought of as “professionals.” If that means we want to be more careful and more skilled in what we do, that is a fitting wish. But too often we want to be professionals because we want to claim that our credentials are every bit as good as those of the other professionals—physicians and lawyers. Enjoy this wish as long as you can. Call yourself a professional. Talk about the privileges of the profession. Then in ten years check with your peers who are doctors or lawyers. Compare their salaries to yours. See who society thinks are the real professionals. Having nothing, yet possessing everything. We have no credentials worth talking about, but we possess the one word always worth saying: we possess the word of grace.

There is a moving moment in Frederick Buechner’s novel *The Final Beast*. A woman named Rooney has been involved in a brief, unhappy adulterous relationship. Her minister, Roy Nicolet, has tried to help her with all the pastoral skills he has—all those theological insights and humane hints he picked up at seminary. And it just won’t do. So he goes for advice to an older woman in his congregation, and this is what she says:

“Give Rooney what she really wants, Nicolet.”

“Give her what, for Christ’s sake?”

“She doesn’t know God forgives her. That’s the only power you have, to tell her that. . . . Tell her he forgives her for being lonely and bored. For not being full of joy with a houseful of children. Because whether she knows it or not, that’s what she wants more than anything else, what all of us want. What on earth do you think you were ordained for?”¹

Having nothing, but possessing everything. Having no credentials, but entrusted with the word of grace. “She doesn’t know God forgives her and that’s the only power you have, to tell her that.”

Having nothing but possessing everything. Paul spells it out: “We are treated as deceivers but are true.” We apply that word, too.

We have little intellectual appeal, but we possess the foolishness of grace. We have little intellectual appeal. How I wish that weren’t true. I teach at

1. Frederick Buechner, *The Final Beast* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1965), 115.

an originally Baptist university. The first presidents of the University were teachers of biblical studies. The Divinity School, where I teach, sits at the center of the main quadrangle and we tell divinity students that we sit at the center of the University. But it isn't necessarily so. The folks do not flock to our doors, or if they do it is because we have an inexpensive coffee shop in the basement. We keep teaching dialogical courses—theology and literature, theology and psychology, theology and the physical sciences. But I notice that the courses are full only of theological students—literati, psychologists and physicists alike almost never come. It feels as though we have nothing, so why do we keep at it?

Why do we keep trying to think through the ways in which we can reason out the implications of our faith? We do it because we possess everything. We do it because we possess the foolishness of grace. We continue to teach and study in seminaries and universities since we believe that we seek God because God first sought us. We continue to speak, even when no one much listens, because we believe that behind the hypotheses and the probabilities that our colleagues tally there is merciful love moving the universe. We continue to write, though no one much reads what we write, because we believe that within the history our colleagues scan, personal love took shape in the man Jesus. We continue with the odd task of the intellectual love of God because we possess everything, or at least because we continue to hope for everything.

Augustine has said it for us: "Thou hast made us for Thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee."²

Having nothing, possessing everything. Paul spells it out. We are treated as unknown, though we are known through and through.

We apply it: We have no political power, but we possess the weakness of grace. Having nothing; having no political power. How we long for political power. When I was a student in seminary, we got hold of a little bit. We had enough political power to close a university for a few days; enough to shake a President of the United States, at least a bit. But not enough power to get tenure for our favorite professor. Some things cannot be shaken.

We loved power. That's where our salvation would be. We'd use our power for good of course, but it was power all the same. Then there was trouble. We didn't keep our power. It lasted for a little while and perhaps we accomplished a little bit. But by the end power turned sour in our mouths because we always had to use power against someone. And that someone so easily became the enemy. And before we knew it, we had learned the power of hate.

Having nothing, but possessing everything. Instead of striving for the corrupting satisfactions of power, we live out the weakness of grace.

2. Saint Augustine, *Confessions of Saint Augustine* (New York: Penguin, 1961), 1.

It is hard to know what that will look like. There will be no less zeal for justice, I hope, but a deeper realization that all of us are victims. There will be no less concern for action, I hope, but the humble remembering that our best actions are only poor parables of the Kingdom that God is bringing and will bring.

Will Campbell is a white, Baptist, southern preacher. The moment of truth came for him early in the civil rights movement. A northerner who had come to help in the cause of civil rights had been murdered. Will Campbell hated the murderer, Thomas Coleman. Then in a bitter night Campbell discovered that the one thing he possessed was not his political savvy or his moral indignation. What he possessed was the weakness of grace.

“I was laughing at myself,” he writes, “at twenty years of a ministry which had become, without my realizing it, a ministry of white liberal sophistication, and an attempted negation of Jesus, a ministry of human engineering, of riding the coattails of Caesar, of playing in his ball park by his rules and with his ball. A theology of law and order. I had neglected to minister to my people, the Thomas Colemans, who are also loved by God. And if loved, forgiven. And if forgiven, reconciled.”³

The weakness of grace does not get us off the hook of social concern. It increases the scope and the depth of that concern. “Loved, and if loved, forgiven; and if forgiven, reconciled.” The shape of that concern is radical indeed. Having nothing and possessing everything.

Having nothing, and possessing everything. Paul spells it out: “We are treated as dying, but look! We live.”

We spell it out. We don’t even have ourselves, but we possess the vulnerability of grace. Now that is the hardest of all. We can let everything else go—the credentials, the intellectual prestige, the political power. But ourselves? Surely that is what we bring. Surely that is what this seminary education is about. Who am I, theologically, personally? What does it mean to sort ourselves out, to know ourselves, to be ourselves? But here, most painfully of all, we discover that we have nothing. Any minister can tell you; any person can tell you.

It was Good Friday. I was sitting at dinner when the phone rang. It was the university down the road from our church. There had been an accident on a student trip to Jamaica. A young man in our church had drowned. His first trip away from home. An only son. My colleague and I went to tell his parents the news.

3. Will D. Campbell, *Brother to a Dragonfly, Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 222.

I searched through my seminary education and my experience and my soul and discovered that I had nothing to bring. I didn't even have myself. All this work we do in seminary, getting hold of ourselves. We have sharing sessions and encounter groups; late night discussions; CPE. At the end of it there are fewer surprises about who we are. We are more together, more open, more honest.

Then the crises come, and we rush in more together, more open, more honest. We try to hand ourselves to the desperate needs of the other and not even ourselves will do. Listen, it's not what we own, it's who owns us. It's not who we are, it's whose we are. Nothing can save but grace, not credentials, not wisdom, not power, and God knows, not ourselves.

A student of mine in his first parish wrote, after one of those days when everything went systematically wrong: "To some God has given the gift of apostleship, to some preaching, to some teaching, to some prophecy. And to some God has given a terrible vulnerability."

That's it, I think. That's as close as we can come. The vulnerability of grace. The vulnerability that knows that we have nothing to bring to the awesome pain and the awesome joy of those we serve. The vulnerability that knows God brings us into that awesome pain and that awesome joy. The vulnerability that knows that therefore we possess everything. We possess grace; we possess a word called the gospel; we possess—we are possessed by—Christ, in whom that grace came.

That is all we have. That is all we need. That is, God knows, more than we have ever deserved or dared to ask. We are treated as deceivers, yet we are true. We are treated as unknown, though we are known through and through. We are treated as dying, but look! We live. We are treated as though we are poor, but we make many rich. We are treated as though we have nothing. But we possess everything.

To God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be thanks and praise.

Amen.

Going Before

MARK 16:1-8

The surprising ending of Mark's Gospel always fascinated David, and he took advantage of Year B of the Revised Common Lectionary to revisit the text. This is for the congregation of Lakeshore Avenue Baptist Church in Oakland, California, where David was pastor from 1981-1987, and it was preached on Easter 1982.

“And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid” (Mark 16:8, RSV).

Period. The end of the story. The end of Mark's gospel. Fear. Astonishment. Silence.

Fear, astonishment, silence—because we are dealing with mystery. Not deep, dark mystery but deep, bright mystery. Mystery so bright that no one can look at it directly, but only from one side, at an angle.

The mystery of resurrection. No one can look at it directly. No New Testament writer tells us exactly how it happened; makes us look at it straight on. Each tells us something about what resurrection means—what it might mean still.

Mark is no exception. He makes two claims that help us celebrate this mystery.

The first claim is this. Christ will be with us. Note the future tense, will be with us. Not was with us. Not used to be with us, but will be with us. The women who came to the tomb on that first Easter wanted to put Jesus in the

past tense. They assumed that he was where he belonged, so they came to embalm him. How were they to know the mystery that he belonged, not to their past, but to their future?

And we do it, too. We think that Christ belongs to some magic moment in our past and if only we could relive that moment, we'd have faith in him again. I knew a woman who moved with her husband from Newton Centre, Massachusetts, to Evanston, Illinois, in 1910. In 1960 she said, "I have lived in Evanston for fifty years, but I left my heart in Newton Centre."

Too often we have our hearts camped out in some imaginary Newton Centre, thinking that we need to return to that lost home if we are to know the blessing of our God.

There's the home of an early religious experience. If only I could believe with the simplicity of that time, before all these doubts crept in. Perhaps if I just sing the same old songs, return to the same old church camp, or insist on believing what I really no longer find it possible to believe.

Or there's the lost home of a past relationship, interrupted sadly by change or separation or most sadly, by death. "Then my heart was happy," we think. "Then God was real and near, but not now, not now."

Or there's the lost home of our youth, when life lay all ahead, and death was so far off it was unthinkable.

That's where Jesus is, we suspect, in that blessed past. Now if you'll excuse me, I'll just go to the tomb, anoint the body, and hope somehow to find him again.

Except that there is this odd message: "He is not here. He is risen. He is going before you." Before you . . . ahead of you. Not back there in your early and simple religious experience, but in the deeper faith which knows that faith and doubt are all part of a longing deep enough to hold you for the days and years ahead.

He is going before you. He is not confined to that lost relationship, however precious. He enables you to find new relationships, new possibilities for your life.

He is going before you even into that future that lies on the other side of the valley of the shadow of death—so that whatever else we may know or fail to know about that world to which we go, we know that it will be his world, still.

He is not here. He is risen. He is going before you. This is the Resurrection promise: Christ will be with you.

I have a friend whose wife died this year past from liver cancer. A gentle lady, far too young, to whom that ravishing disease arrived in all her goodness and gentleness. Theirs was one of those marriages where publicly he was

the pillar of strength and privately we knew that she was the strong one, the sustainer, and now she is gone, much too soon.

My friend writes a great deal. He publishes his thoughts and his grief and his hopes and thereby he helps the rest of us. For Good Friday he wrote that he had found some words that helped him most of all. “The deepest truth I have discovered is that if one accepts the loss, if one gives up clinging to what is irretrievably gone; then the nothing which is left is not barren but enormously fruitful.”¹

Then my friend says:

Accepting the loss, giving up clinging, are arts and sciences for which no one can prepare yet which one has no choice but to learn. One gives up clinging to time lost, events past, persons irretrievably beyond grasp . . . then what is left is not barren but enormously fruitful.

Christ is not there, not in that tomb, not in the past of our longing or our imagining. He is going before us, into the future, there we will see him. Christ will be with us.

And then Mark’s second affirmation. Not only that Christ will be with us, but looking at the mystery of Resurrection, Mark can also say Christ will still be wounded.

Our translations don’t catch Mark’s nuance very well. When he records the announcement of the young man at the empty tomb, he writes something like this: “You seek Jesus of Nazareth. The crucified one is also risen. He is going before you.”

The crucified one is risen—still bearing his wounds. It could have been different: Jesus as a kind of Superman, a Captain Marvel of his time emerges from the tomb, brushing off the dust. “See, it was nothing. No real pain; no real wounds.” Sometimes that’s the Jesus we’d like to have, successful Jesus, the Resurrection proving that the crucifixion wasn’t that important. “See, I’m just fine. You needn’t have worried.”

But that is not Mark’s story. The one who rises is still wounded. A real suffering and a real death followed by a real resurrection. Otherwise how could he be our Lord? We, who do suffer, do die; do bear our own more modest wounds.

We could cheer Superman or Captain Marvel, munching our popcorn and then go home. But do they comfort us? Not in the least. Does their invulnerability point us toward Easter? It does not.

1. Robert N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditionalist World* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), xx–xxi.

The only “Hallelujahs” we can sing are for the King of Kings and Lord of Lords who lifts his hands in triumph, and look! The wounds are there.

The one who leads us out of the past into the future doesn’t lead us into a fake future where everything is lovely, and we only imagined that he was hurt. Jesus Christ leads us into the real future, full of uncertainty, pain, and hope because he himself bears uncertainty, pain, and hope.

He will be with us in a future of richer faith, not because he had no doubts but because he doubted on the cross that God cared for him at all. What doubt can we live with that he does not know? Therefore he will be with us in our growing faith and in our continuing doubt.

He will be with us in a future that includes loss and loneliness. He knew the wounds of desertion and of betrayal; he wept when Lazarus died, when Peter left him. What loneliness can we fear that he has not known? Therefore he will be with us as we move into new relationships, a little nervously, a little fearfully, a little riskily. He will be there.

He will be with us as each of us faces the inevitable moment of our future, the moment of our death. He knew that moment, too, not gladly but reluctantly. “I’m not ready yet” he said, and then he died. So in our dying and in the hope for what lies on the other side of death, he will be there.

He will be with us, but he will be wounded. He goes ahead of us into the future, but he does not con us into thinking that our future will be easy, soft, or free of pain. The future will not be easy, soft, or free of pain, but it will be his future. Crucified and risen, he leads us all the way.

Edward Albee is best known for his play *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, but he wrote an equally moving play called *A Delicate Balance*. In that play one middle-aged couple, Agnes and Tobias, have their lives interrupted by two of their friends, Edna and Harry. Edna and Harry find themselves one night simply terrified of the future, not for any discernible reason, but terrified all the same. So they come to visit Agnes and Tobias, and finally, to shield themselves from terror, they ask to stay.

Tobias and Agnes have their doubts about this arrangement, as you can imagine, but finally Tobias decides that he can understand Harry’s fear of the future. He and Harry are not so different. So he decides that they should provide shelter for Harry, too.

Here is what Tobias says:

[W]e’ve known each other all these years, and we love each other, don’t we? . . . Doesn’t friendship grow to that? To love? . . . We’ve cast our lot together, boy, we’re friends, we’ve been through lots of thick OR thin together. So, bring your wife, and bring . . . your plague. You bring your terror and you come in here and you live with

us! You bring your plague! You bring your terror and you come in here . . . and you stay with us! You bring your plague! You stay with us! By God . . . you stay!²

So when we face the uncertain future with uncertain hope, the wounded, risen Lord can say, “Listen, I’ve known you all these years and loved you, too, whatever thick or thin you have been through I’ve been through that too. You bring your terror and you come along and follow me. You bring your fear. You stay with me. By God you stay.”

Amen.

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2. Edward Albee, *A Delicate Balance* (New York: Samuel French, 1996), 87–88.