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An Interview with the Rev. Fleming Rutledge

By Laura Saunders

What is the meaning of the Crucifixion? All four Gospels testify that Jesus Christ died a torturous, shameful death typically used to punish society's nameless castoffs. From the beginning, this death has posed problems both for believers and non-believers. St. Paul referred to the Crucifixion as a "scandal," a "stumbling block," and "folly," even as he insisted that it was utterly central to understanding God's work among us.

Taking her cue from Paul, who wrote "I was determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified," the Rev. Fleming Rutledge recently published **The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ** (Eerdmans, 2015). Rutledge is a celebrated preacher and teacher of preachers—and a true daughter of New York, although she was born and raised in Virginia. After studying at both General and Union Theological Seminaries, she was ordained here in 1977 as one of the first women priests in The Episcopal Church. She served in parish ministries in New York for 21 years before pursuing an international teaching and preaching vocation.

The Episcopal New Yorker recently spoke with Fleming Rutledge about her capstone work.

Why focus on the Crucifixion, rather than the Resurrection?

I was both amused and appalled to hear that a friend's rector told her, "The cross is not a good tool for church growth." This degree of superficiality and incomprehension is harmful to the church. Our understanding of the Crucifixion is too

small, and our understanding of the Resurrection is too small. If the Resurrection is not a victory over the greatest evils, then it is not worth much more than a flowery, generic greeting card.

Well, it's not possible to say exactly, since it has been a trend for a long time, but it has something to do with a wholesale turn away from the idea of substitution—Christ's death not only *for us* (on our behalf), *but in our place*. This very simple idea was overly rationalized and overly focused on wrath and punishment. Worse still, it was preached and taught in a way that seemed to divide the Trinity, placing the Father over against the Son, whereas we should understand that the crucifixion of the Son was a work undertaken from within the Trinity itself.

The sad result, though, was a reaction by academic elites against the whole concept of substitution, depriving the ordinary person in the pew of a great consolation that has struck the hearts of many throughout Christian history. I was one of those in the pew who was badly hurt by being told that "we don't believe that idea of atonement any more." And yet we continue to sing, on Palm Sunday and Good Friday, "Lo, the Good Shepherd for the sheep is offered/The slave hath sinned and the Son hath suffered... 'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee/I crucified thee." In other words, I am the guilty one, and the innocent one dies in my place, "for my salvation." Thank God for our great hymns.

For 30 years straight, from 1975 to 2005, I preached on Good Friday at some church somewhere in the U.S., usually for all three hours. Then the invitations

stopped coming. Maybe it's just me! But I don't think so. The Good Friday liturgy in the 1979 Prayer Book contains many pre-Reformation practices, such as veneration of the cross and reception of the Reserved Sacrament, which were not previously familiar to most broad-church Episcopalians. Stations of the Cross, another practice discontinued after the Reformation, was also re-introduced and is now popular in many parishes. The result has been a significant de-emphasis on the preached interpretation of Christ's crucifixion that was standard practice in larger churches until the 1980s. For many years, Good Friday services featured several sermons, often in the form of seven meditations by a specially invited guest preacher. A very few parishes such as St. Thomas, Fifth Avenue still continue this preaching tradition, but they are the exception. The 1979 liturgy is very effective as devotion, but the crucial opportunity to convey the full *theological* content of the crucifixion is lost.

You say that many preachers speak mainly of two agencies in the world—God and human beings—but you say the Bible identifies a third agency, which is evil, or Satan. What does that mean?

Yes. This is the subject of the chapter in my book that means the most to me, called "The Descent Into Hell." It took me two years to write it. In a sense I've been struggling with the problem of evil all my life. That's a major reason that I wrote this book about the Crucifixion. If the Christian faith cannot stand up to the fact of radical evil in human nature, it's just religious wishful thinking.

After the Enlightenment, many thought we had evolved into a much more rational and sensible race, having no use for outmoded notions of a Devil. Since World War II, conversation about the Devil has begun anew. Many serious scholars and journalists have taken up the subject. I like the essayist Lance Morrow's definition of Evil personified. He wrote a book called, simply, *Evil*. In it he writes that the concept of evil "suggests a mysterious force that may be in business for itself." Various other writers, even nonbelievers like Andrew Delbanco of Columbia University, have recently expressed the opinion that the symbolism of the devil, or Satan, was useful for understanding the world and that we are worse off without it.

In the New Testament, the presence of an evil antagonist is simply assumed. This Enemy is a major player in every New Testament book. As the Yale theologian Miroslav Volf has argued with considerable passion, God is actively engaged in warfare against this Enemy of his purposes. When the Son became incarnate, he didn't step into a neutral situation. He entered occupied territory. That's why casting out demons is the first thing he does in Mark's gospel. When we talk as if the only people on the stage are ourselves and God, we've lost sight of the New Testament world-view.

The horrors of the 20th century, such as genocide and atomic war, made it a lot harder to believe in human progress. What light does the Crucifixion shed on such events?

How right you are to say that it's getting harder to believe in human progress—and the 21st century shows no signs of being any better than the 20th. I was just reading about the extreme cruelty being inflicted on helpless people in South Sudan. Philip Yancey calls the problem of evil and suffering "the question that will not go away." It's the greatest conundrum in all of theology. I like a phrase of David B. Hart; he writes at some length about the insufficiency of all the attempts that have been made to "explain" evil and suffering, and concludes that the only honest response is "rage against explanation." We don't know why there is suffering, and saying such things as "everything happens for a reason" is too glib.

I've tried in my book to show that while the Crucifixion of Christ is not an "answer," it shows us something about God that enables us to hold on to faith and hope. In Christ, God has taken on the Powers of Sin and Death—I capitalize them to show their significance as agencies of terrible, annihilating destruction. God has taken them on, and in submitting to them, has conquered them. The Resurrection has to be understood as the vindication of the Crucified One, or it becomes just a vague, generic message of renewal and "rebirth"—whatever that's taken to mean.

The Crucifixion was anything but a generic religious event. It was a horrific, state-sponsored, religiously approved method of torturing someone to death in public, and it happened within history, at a specific place and time. This makes it irreligious and godless at its very core. God experienced Godlessness, within history. That means, doesn't it, that there is nothing human beings can suffer that is equal to the suffering of the man who cried on the Cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He was forsaken so that we would never be. If we don't look directly at that, then we don't understand that the Resurrection was the conclusive

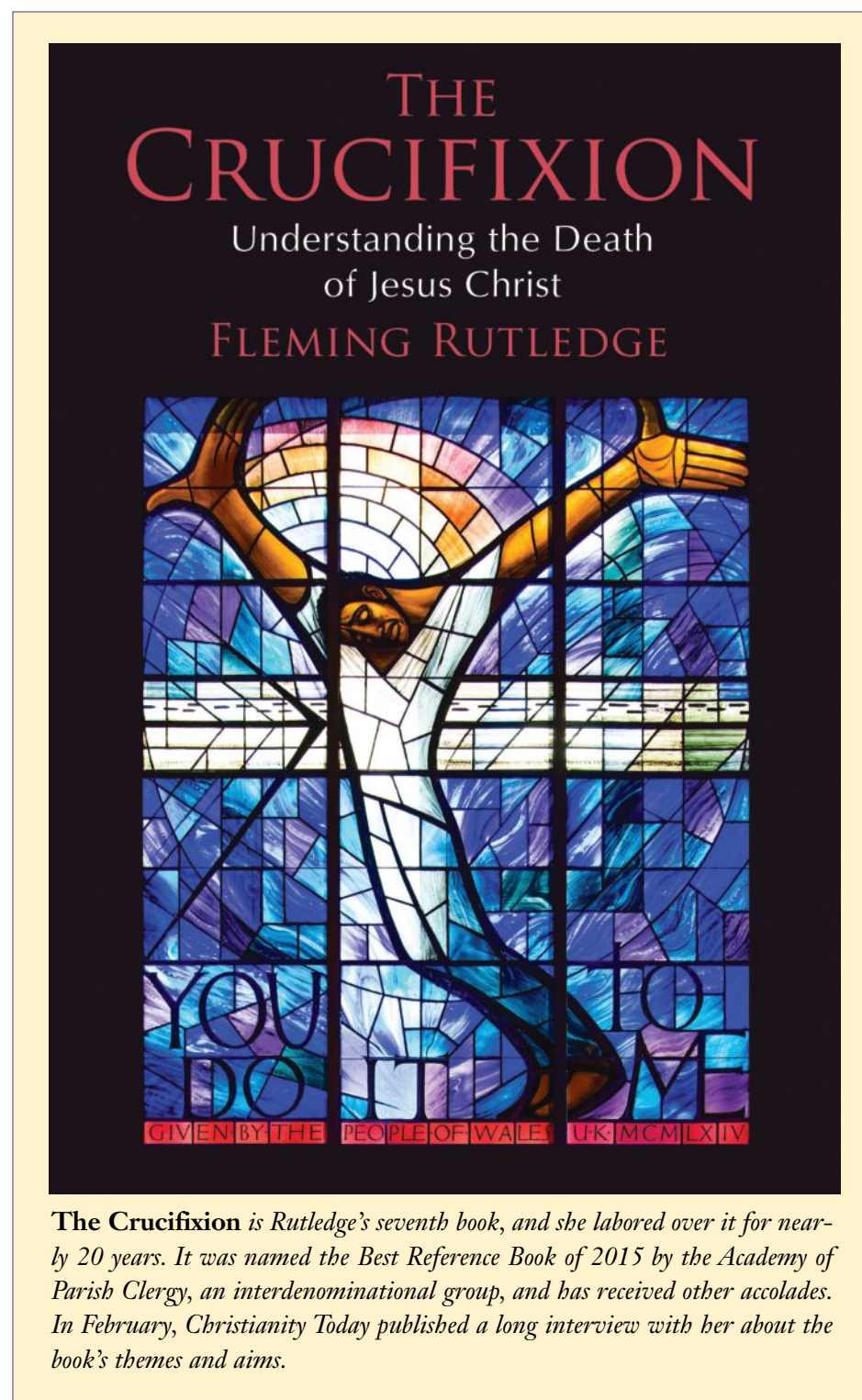
transhistorical victory over godlessness. In that respect I'm convinced that the Christian gospel has uniquely unexpected and compelling features.

You write a great deal about the "justification of the ungodly." Who are the ungodly?

That's easy. The ungodly "r" us. It's all of us. "There is no distinction." St. Paul wrote that. It's funny that we call him "Saint" Paul. I do think the Protestant insistence on leveling the people of God is correct and should be held on to. The so-called "saints" are the first to admit their inner ungodliness. I was relieved when it was disclosed that Mother Teresa, soon to be canonized, struggled with doubt and resentment. Dorothy Day famously said, "Don't call me a saint! I want to be taken seriously." Vaclav Havel, who lived through the Soviet era in what was then Czechoslovakia, wrote that everyone was drawn into some form of collaboration. He concluded, "The line between good and evil runs through each person."

The "justification of the ungodly" is the center of the gospel. That's not a thought that I came to by myself. It's been identified by quite a few New Testament scholars. It's in Romans 4 and 5. An easy way of remembering this is contrasting two sayings. A lot of Christians think that "God helps those who help themselves" is in the Bible. It's not. Here's what's in the Bible: "While we were still helpless, Christ died for the ungodly" (Romans 5:6). That ought to be great news for us all. A favorite hymn, "Abide with me," means more and more to me as I approach old age: "Help of the helpless, O abide with me."

Saunders serves as chair of the Episcopal New Yorker's editorial advisory board, and is a member of the Church of the Heavenly Rest in Manhattan.



The Crucifixion is Rutledge's seventh book, and she labored over it for nearly 20 years. It was named the Best Reference Book of 2015 by the Academy of Parish Clergy, an interdenominational group, and has received other accolades. In February, Christianity Today published a long interview with her about the book's themes and aims.