

Raised up: Christ goes with us

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [March 23, 2010](#) issue

In time for Holy Week, this issue features David Cunningham's [essay](#) on the destiny of the "other thief" who was on the cross beside Jesus. It also contains William H. Willimon's [witness](#) to the radical news of Easter. I suspect I'm not the only preacher who will retell Willimon's story of students on a mission trip being disarmed by the laughter and raucous singing of Haitian children in the midst of unmitigated tragedy.

It is, of course, a central Christian claim that even in the midst of the worst that can happen there is a divine presence that is redemptive, hopeful and ultimately victorious. After four decades of watching the sanctuary fill to overflowing on Easter Sunday, I have concluded that people turn out on Easter not entirely out of convention and custom, but because at the deepest level they want to hear a word about life in the midst of death.

It's tempting to scold people for coming to church only on Easter and Christmas—to wish the Easter congregation a Happy Fourth of July, Halloween and Thanksgiving because you know you won't see many of them again until next December. They will all laugh politely. But they have come to hear what the church has to say about life after death, and in the final analysis that is all we have to offer, and everything.

This issue also contains Vigen Guroian's reflection on Christ's descent into hell on Holy Saturday. Drawing on the traditions of Eastern Orthodoxy, Guroian speaks directly to that claim about Christ defeating death. He also speaks to the realities of life in the church.

A year ago a minister I know had to lead her suburban Chicago congregation through an unspeakable tragedy: a member of the congregation shot and killed his wife and her son and then killed himself. The minister had to comfort her congregation and hold it together.

She spoke at a memorial service for the mother and son. What is there to say in that situation? She told the congregation crowded into the sanctuary that there was a phrase in the Apostles' Creed that had always bothered her: the phrase stating that

Jesus “descended into hell.” She told how the pastor of the church in which she grew up so disliked that line that he went through the hymnals with a large black Magic Marker and crossed it out.

“I grew up saying the creed without that line,” the minister said. “Now, this week,” she said, “I understand it. We have descended into hell together and Christ has gone before us, into every corner of it. The good news is that when life takes us there, when we have to go there, he goes with us.”

“The good news,” she concluded, “is that God raised him up and he ascended into heaven that we might be raised with him.” Amen—and have a blessed Easter.