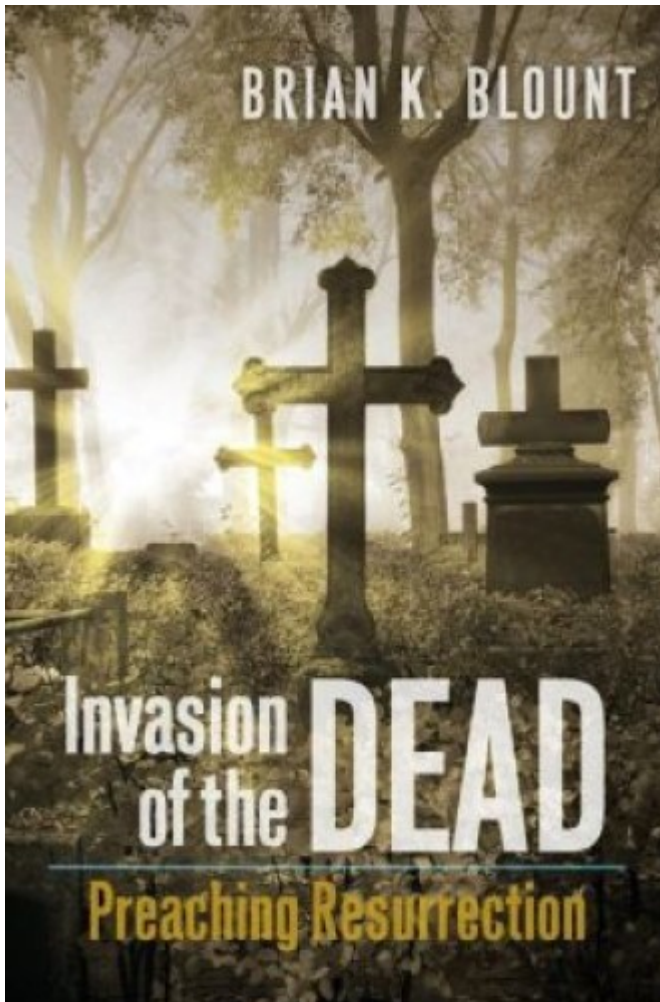


*Invasion of the Dead*, by Brian K. Blount

reviewed by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [April 16, 2014](#) issue

## In Review



### **Invasion of the Dead**

By Brian K. Blount

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In this small book originating from his 2011 Beecher Lectures at Yale, Brian Blount mounts a sweeping, lively, beguiling, and convincing plea for recognition of and bold preaching about the God who, in Jesus Christ, invades and routs death, excites the

“walking dead” and thus provokes “the dawning of the dead.” Resurrection, Blount argues, transforms all of us “living dead” into witnesses that God has plans for our morbidity and that God will not rest until those plans are fulfilled.

“Dead is a relative term,” says Blount. We are in a time of the “walking dead”: zombies are among us. It’s a grotesque world in which “humans and monsters often become hard to distinguish.” With genocide, mass murder, school shootings, and, for mainline Christians, the death of our beloved denominations and the diminishment of our churches, death has become “the new normal.”

In this moribund age Blount invites us to embrace the apocalyptic imagery streaming from popular culture. He considers the proliferation of living-dead TV shows and novels an opportunity for Christian preachers to think themselves back into a fresh affirmation of apocalypticism, and he enlists the testimony of Revelation, Paul, and Mark’s Gospel to show that the resurrection of Jesus is the initial and decisive divine act of apocalyptic re-creation and victory.

Blount not only commends apocalyptic, resurrection-induced preaching but asserts that the resurrection is the substance and the whole point of daring Christian witness. Here is “an apocalyptic moment whose revelatory power and promise trumped even Christ’s spectacular death.” Resurrection begins with the dead and moves to revelation of a God who refuses to leave the dead alone. The cross is our deadly, vicious response to the revolutionary, boundary-breaking love of God in Christ; the resurrection is God’s response to our death-dealing ways. When all is said and done, Paul was right, says Blount. Without resurrection we Christians have nothing to say to a daily dying world.

The opening section, in which Blount boldly affirms the immediate relevance of the Apocalypse, dragon and all, is the most bracing section of the book. At the outset he serves notice that he intends to go against the grain of liberal theology’s century-old squeamishness about apocalypticism. Albert Schweitzer was correct in recognizing Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet but wrong in contending that apocalypticism is incredible to modernity. The best that modern historians can do is to agree that Jesus went to the cross; they are unable, given the limits of modern ways of thinking, to accept God’s revolutionary determination revealed in the resurrection of Jesus.

Blount has written well on Revelation before. One of his fruitful insights is that the battles and victories of African Americans are the fruit of the apocalyptic mind-set of a church that in the face of death-dealing evil stands up and affirms God's present and future resurrection victory. The African-American church has always remembered that the biblical apocalyptic is a God-given weapon in their struggles and that the bold, visionary apocalyptic preacher is "God's weapon" in the revolution known as the coming kingdom of God. Blount made these connections earlier in his *Can I Get a Witness? Reading Revelation through African American Culture*. In *Invasion of the Dead*, his insights are even more striking and appropriate.

He offers an intriguing reading of Mark that convinced me that it is a Gospel not only of the cross but also of apocalyptic resurrection, made all the more powerful by Mark's starting assumption (rather than description) of resurrection.

Running throughout *Invasion of the Dead* is the assertion that we preachers must preach the resurrection as enthusiastically as we preach the cross—and more often. Having seen much theological mischief worked by our preaching the cross rather than resurrection, Blount mounts an impressive critique of Augustinian/Lutheran theology of the cross. He shows in a few bold strokes how Paul is shattered as much by resurrection as by the cross. Then he goes on to argue that resurrection is the most political, countercultural, defiant word we preachers have to say to a world cowering before seemingly omnipotent death.

This polemic against a theology of the cross is the least convincing aspect of Blount's book. I fear that his critique of cruciform theology is unfair to the deeply apocalyptic nature of the best theology of the cross. Cross and resurrection ought to be kept together in any strongly apocalyptic theology. Blount's failure to engage the deeply apocalyptic readings of a theologian of the cross like Martin Luther or John Howard Yoder detracts from his argument against a cruciform overemphasis.

Still, Blount's bold warning to us preachers against embarrassment over or diminishment of the scandal of resurrection and against the defiance of apocalypticism is worth the price of his book. A faithful, clenched-fisted, insubordinate apocalypticism characterizes all preaching worthy of the designation Christian. That's especially clear when Blount relates his critique of accommodationist preaching to the lessons learned in the African-American experience. That segment of the church, I suspect, learned how the theology of the cross can be abused as a tool of dominance where unjust suffering is elevated as a

good in itself and the cross is reduced to a remedy for merely personal sin.

A strong, clear word of resurrection-induced, apocalyptic, revolutionary hopefulness is just one of the gifts I received from *Invasion of the Dead*.