

Luminous mysteries: The ministry and teachings of Christ on Earth

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [January 11, 2003](#) issue

Last fall on a weekend trip to Manhattan, I noticed an unusual addition to the art galleries listed in the *Times*. The gallery was in the apse of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, and the art was a collection of religious treasures from Spain, including handwritten letters from Teresa of Ávila and her mentor John of the Cross. After failing to persuade my 11-year-old goddaughter Maddie to go with me, I boarded a northbound train to Amsterdam Avenue, walked a few short blocks and entered the sacred cavern of the cathedral.

Inside I joined the small crowd moving slowly from one lavish display to the next. Whispering to one another as if there were a worship service going on, we worked our way up from the illuminated manuscripts to the altar panels of King David and Solomon to the nativity scenes in which the baby Jesus is seriously overdressed. One young woman wearing black leather stood with her companion in front of a particularly ornate statue. After squinting at the plump cherub robed in gold brocade with a pleated ruff around its neck, she turned to her friend and hissed, "Who is it? I forgot my glasses."

Her friend leaned over to read the identification card. "It's him," he whispered back.

"I seriously doubt that," she said in a normal voice and walked away.

There was no doubting the identity of the figure in the next few rooms, however. Jesus died in them over and over again, on all manner of crosses. He fell in the street on his way to Golgotha. He arched his back as the whip split his flesh. He endured the trickles of blood down his face, like biting flies he could not slap. Although I have witnessed these scenes from the last hours of his life often enough to have learned how to live with them, one large hand-painted Pietà snuck right past my defenses. I was ready for the mortal damage—the pierced hands and feet, the spear hole in his side—but not for the pink skinned knees splayed across his mother's lap. They were the knees of a hurt boy, and seeing them knocked the wind

out of me in a way that viewing the wounds of a savior never had.

I hardly registered the resurrection scenes after that, but by the time I stood blinking in the sunshine on Amsterdam Avenue again I was glad that Maddie had not come with me. She is not a churchgoer, which means that she has no cushion for what she sees and hears about God. When people tell her that the fluid in the communion cup is not really blood, or that Jesus was supposed to die on the cross and that makes it all right, she narrows her eyes. *I seriously doubt that.* What could I have told her about the bloody, sorrowful Christ in the cathedral that would have made her want to know him better?

If only there had been one picture of him holding a loaf of bread in his hands, or reaching down to haul a lame beggar to his feet. Didn't anyone ever paint him with his cool palm on the hot brow of Peter's mother-in-law, or with his bare feet glistening in Mary's oiled and scented hands? I keep imagining a statue as large as the Pietà—only in this one, living children fill Jesus' lap, while others stand behind him with their arms thrown around his neck.

If such images were absent from the cathedral, then that may be because they are also absent from the creed. In the historical formulations of Christian faith, there are only three significant events in Jesus' life: his birth, his death and his resurrection from the dead. Mary hands him to Pilate, who sends him back to God. However reverently we may speak of his ministry on Earth, it does not rate as an article of faith. The teaching, healing, feeding and forgiving all vanish in the shedding of blood, which naturally raises the question of whether Christianity isn't more interested in dying than in living.

One of the more remarkable acts of Pope Paul John II in the 25th year of his papacy has been to add Jesus' life on Earth to the praying of the rosary. For 900 years, Catholic Christians have used this devotion to contemplate three series of sacred mysteries: the Joyous mysteries (Christ is born), the Sorrowful mysteries (Christ is killed) and the Glorious mysteries (Christ reigns in heaven). Now, almost a millennium later, the pope is asking believers to contemplate the Luminous mysteries as well—the ministry and teachings of Christ on Earth.

While this new directive may sail right over the heads of most Protestant Christians, it will change the way that millions of people pray for peace every day. Short of amending the creed, it may be the most significant theological reform possible at

this late date, for it suggests that Jesus' life is as salvific as his death, and that the years he spent giving birth to love on Earth are as full of light for us as the hours he spent dying on the cross. In this season of Epiphany, the Luminous mysteries affirm the truth that lit-up living is as much a part of the Christian way as sorrowful dying, and that love is the singular revelation of them both.

When asked why the pope had decided to make such a change now, one of his spokesmen said, "He is making a statement at the end of his life about what's important to him." Would that be *life*, perhaps? Not the divine life that awaits us later but the divine life that is open to us right now, as we walk ever more deeply into the resplendent mystery of God's own light.