The witness of women
Dying to sin and rising to life

Lydia Neufeld Harder

As the sun rises and sets each day, a crystal hanging in my office window refracts the light in ever-changing patterns. Its various facets catch the light, and rainbow colours flicker across the walls of my study, sometimes behind me, often beside me, and at times in front of me. To me, this crystal is an image of the multifaceted Bible that casts rainbows of hope on and around us as we read its various witnesses and interpret its texts in the community of the faithful. To be effective, the crystal requires the sun—the source of illumination, a symbol of the Spirit—to shed its light first on one facet and then on another, separating into sparkling hues of red, blue, green, and yellow.

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One set of biblical witnesses to the good news of salvation are the women at the empty tomb. As we overhear their witness, rainbows of hope surround us. Though we do not have much information about the ongoing testimony of these women, we can note two contexts within which they experience the cross. These contexts will serve as two facets through which the meaning of Jesus' death for our salvation is illuminated. The image of dying to sin and rising to life will connect these two contexts with the action of God in our own lives. Yet the contexts and analogies that we will explore can only be pointers to the much larger, multifaceted mystery of God's salvation for all of us.

The context of violence and pain

Unlike some of his followers, these women did not run away but stayed to witness the brutality of Jesus' death and then watch as his body was placed in a tomb. They knew firsthand that death by

crucifixion is cruel punishment for a crime considered treason by the Roman rulers and blasphemy by many Jewish leaders. No gentle death to close a rich and full rabbinic life, this was undeniably a violent and humiliating end for the one who had pointed them to the kingdom of God.

At first glance, this context for an interpretation of the cross suggests Jesus' solidarity with all people in suffering, and especially with those who undergo violent death because of commitment to a just cause. Yet there is a more personal, theological angle involved in this death. For these women, Jesus was not a distant heroic figure. He was their leader, their friend, whom they had experienced as a powerful healer and teacher. He was their Lord, the one who had often been a guest at their tables, the one they had accompanied even to a place of terror: these women "used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee" and had now "come up with him to Jerusalem" (Mark 15:41).

The perspective of these women on Jesus' death was probably markedly different from that of the rulers and officials or even of the crowd who sometimes followed Jesus and sometimes fled. Their first response would probably have taken the form of agonized questions. How could the power of the officials have overcome the power of love exhibited throughout his life by their leader? How could they go on without the one who had pointed them to God's kingdom? How could a righteous God let this calamity happen?

Mary's words of accusation when she encountered the angels at the empty tomb point to confusion, pain, and anger: "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him" (John 20:13). Though few of these women's words are recorded for us, we can sense the political, personal, and theological issues of salvation that had arisen in the face of the violence of the cross. Likely, these first interpretations of Jesus' death were direct responses to the injustice of his execution, their horror at the sacrifice of a good and innocent life, and the separation from Jesus and God that this catastrophe seemed to entail. The women may have feared for their own lives, knowing that they too were implicated in Jesus' "guilt" because they were followers of this king. Their decision to anoint his body despite the large stone protecting the grave testifies to their courage but also points to

fear and a sense of weakness and aloneness in the face of such violence. One can only imagine their questions about the God who would allow this horror to happen to their leader.

Again in our day, the violence of the crucifixion has given rise to women's critical questions about lofty theories of atonement and redemption. The image of Jesus as a victim who accepted violence meekly for the sake of salvation has created doubt and anger triggered by women's feelings of powerlessness in the face of a similar violence. Mary Daly was one of the first women to express these questions directly: "The qualities that Christianity idealizes, especially for women, are also those of the victim: sacrificial love, passive acceptance of suffering, humility, meekness, etc. Since these are the qualities idealized in Jesus 'who dies for our sins,' his functioning as a model reinforces the scapegoat syndrome for women."[1]

For many women today, theories of salvation that glorify sacrifice do not foster hope in the face of the violence they know best, the context of abuse against women and children. If Jesus' death was redemptive, is all human suffering also redemptive? Does obedience to God mean that women should negate themselves and willingly accept the violence enacted against them? Is this the path to salvation? These questions are further complicated in a theological framework that asserts that God the Father willed that his child be killed. How does this act model loving parenthood?

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These women point out the insidious effects of the notion that atonement for human sin can happen only through the bloody sacrifice of God's own son: this view supports the sacrifice of innocent lives even in our day, and it can be converted to the belief that suffering and death are necessary to ensure the kind of life we wish to live. Power politics and reckless consumption require victims who willingly accept their suffering. Therefore it is not difficult to understand how the glorification of innocent victimhood, and of redemption as freely chosen suffering, prepare women psychologically to acquiesce in their suffering. To believe that God willed Jesus' cruel death is to see God as violent. For

women caught in a web of violence, this understanding may even suggest that God abandons those who suffer.

Mennonite women theologians have entered the conversation at this point. They agree that some emphases in our salvation theologies, including our peace theology, have had a subtle influence on women's readiness to accept violence against them. As Carol Penner and Mary Schertz assert, the notion of sacrifice has taught women to "be content to suffer" and has contributed to and increased the danger of family violence among us.[2] For these women, the personal-political dimension of the cross is related to the theology of redemption that demands the sacrifice of an innocent person.

Other women respond by seeing in the cross the solidarity of Jesus with women in their suffering. Theologians such as Luise Schottroff no longer view the cross as an atoning sacrifice but rather as a political punishment not restricted to Jesus but suffered by all who act against injustice. Others realize that struggle for God's reign and commitment to God's will often lead to rejection and even death. As Kwok Pui Lan eloquently writes, "It is the very person on the Cross that suffers like us, who was rendered as a nobody that illuminates the tragic human existence and speaks to countless women in Asia.… We see Jesus as the God who takes the human form and suffers and weeps with us."[3] What image of God do we embrace? Do our theories of atonement point to a God who demands violent sacrifice?

Gayle Gerber Koontz speaks to this question of atonement by beginning with an understanding of sin that includes the sins that contribute to violence. She suggests that the sins of the weak and the sins of the powerful need to be confronted by the cross. Pride, overreaching, exploitation, and self-aggrandizement characterize the sins of the powerful, while self-hatred, shame, humiliation, uncleanness, and worthlessness characterize the sins of the weak. She goes on to suggest that sin can be defined in terms of human failure to embody Christ-like relatedness to God, neighbour, and earth. She thus sees salvation as the "restoration of Christ-like relatedness between humans and God," a wholeness that includes new life in all its fullness and rejects violence against another.[4]

How does the cross achieve this wholeness? Koontz opts for the image of the victory of God over the powers that begins with the

liberating and atoning work of Christ throughout his life. This victory is ultimately the work of a Christ who incarnates a divine power that does not compel but rather empowers and invites. Jesus' healing and teaching ministry has already pointed the way. The cross becomes the ultimate symbol of reconciling love, a demonstration of the divine love that continues to love enemies even while they are sinners. We can enter into salvation by embracing this way of life as we receive a new identity in Christ. Thus we too can die to the sins of self-negation and of pride and be empowered to struggle against the evil of violence and domination. In addition, we can be drawn into a liberating community that is not bound by the evil powers. For Koontz, salvation is both social and personal, and it includes rejecting the violence that put Jesus on the cross, as well as the self-denial that would embrace sacrifice out of a sense of worthlessness and self-negation.

Koontz admits that this view of salvation only makes sense if there is reality beyond this world and beyond history, and if God's power is ultimately victorious over death and evil. In order to trust in this view of salvation, we must therefore go on to the second context: the women at the empty tomb.

The context of hope and new life

It was women who were the first to be given a surprising new context in which to interpret the meaning of Jesus' death: the context of new life and therefore hope. However, this shift in context also created confusion and fear. In Mark's account, when the women encountered the empty tomb, they fled, too afraid to say anything. Why this fear? Luke gives us a hint: when the women did speak, "these words seemed to [the apostles] an idle tale, and they did not believe them" (Luke 24:11). And why would they? After all, these were women who had a role to play in anointing a dead body but not as witnesses to a new reality. Yet when Jesus encountered the women on the way, they received the mandate, "Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him" (Mark 16:7). And eventually the women were able to bring the good news of Jesus' risen presence to the rest of the disciples.

What created this readiness to speak with joy? First, the women had seen with their own eyes that Jesus was no longer in the tomb.

The empty tomb signified that Jesus was alive and present. Second, they were told that Jesus was going ahead of them to Galilee, a reminder of Jesus' powerful words and actions in Galilee. If Jesus would be present in their futures as promised, they could testify to the empty tomb. And third, they had met Jesus as the resurrected one. In Mary's case, meeting the risen Christ and receiving the surprising news that Jesus was to ascend to the Father—"to my God and your God"—created the clarity she needed. Now she could say with confidence: "I have seen the Lord" (John 20:17-18). All of the women thus knew that his ignominious death had been transformed into life, not only for Jesus but also for them. The resurrection signified the vindication of the suffering but also the vindication of the message of the reign of God which Jesus had proclaimed and lived. They had not followed him in vain. The power already exhibited in Jesus' life was stronger than the power of death.

Mary Schertz's study of the atonement as presented by Luke suggests that the root metaphor for redemption is not death but life.[5] She studies Luke's view of "divine necessity" (*dei:* "it is necessary") and discovers that the Gospel writer introduces the idea of the necessary will of God first in Jesus' call to ministry. It was necessary for Jesus to study the Torah, to receive a strong sense of purpose to proclaim the coming kingdom of God. She then goes on to show how this necessity was present in his healing ministry, in his feeding of the hungry, and in his seeking and saving the lost. In a pair of texts at the climax of his ministry, however, Jesus chooses to remind himself and his disciples that his way of life is fraught with peril; it is not a triumphal march to claim conventional power. He warns his followers of his approaching fate (Luke 9:22, 13:33). It was necessary for Jesus to suffer and die.

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Schertz then points to the three instances of this term in the resurrection narratives. Each comes in the context of a teaching situation where the Gospel writer points out that it was necessary for Jesus to be betrayed and crucified (24:7), for Jesus to suffer and come into his glory (24:26), and for the scripture to be

fulfilled (24:44). The followers of Jesus are reminded and chided for not remembering these necessary aspects of God's will. Thus Luke shows us that suffering does not by itself define redemption; rather it is the whole mission of God that redeems; it is a mission that includes but is not limited to the tragedy of the cross. As summarized by Schertz:

> *For Luke, what is redemptive is the kingdom of God. People are saved and their sins blotted out when they stop resisting the kingdom and become, in turn, proclaimers and enactors of this kingdom. The conversion of individuals is possible because Jesus preached, taught, healed, exorcised demons, suffered, died, and was raised—all to announce and bring about the kingdom of God. Conversion of individuals comes about through the Holy Spirit and the faithfulness of believers who continue to proclaim and enact the kingdom of God in the name of Jesus.*[6]

Thus it is the turning to the life of the kingdom that creates the passion and the power to enact this kingdom in one's own life and community, even though this enactment may lead to suffering for the sake of the kingdom. When life becomes the root metaphor for salvation, death has lost its sting—as Paul's letters testify.

For the sake of our salvation

In Romans 6, baptism is understood as dying to sin and rising to walk in newness of life. Whether our primary sin is self-negation that willingly suffers, or pride that engenders violence and abuse, our old self needs to be crucified so that we will no longer be enslaved to sin. In solidarity with Jesus (who did not take up violence, nor did he negate his calling as Messiah), we are to consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Jesus Christ. Paul goes on to say that we are not to live unto ourselves. Rather, we become slaves of another power, the power of righteousness for sanctification. The final purpose of this sanctification is eternal life in Christ Jesus.

This turn to life is one that many women can embrace, for it does not deny the brutality of the cross but places it in the context of the abundant and eternal life that the kingdom of God

promises. It rejects sin in its many forms. Yet it commends a rising into a new power, the very power of love and righteousness that Jesus exhibited in his death on the cross and that God confirmed in the resurrection. This rising represents a new holiness, entering a process of sanctification that transforms our very life. This power can only be received as a gift of God freely given for the sake of our salvation.

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The witness of women is often hidden until God's light creates such a rainbow of hope that no one can ignore it. The fact that women begin to play leading roles in the final scenes of the Gospel narratives is one of the surprises of the passion story. Today, rainbows of hope created by the witness of women who have read the gospel in the midst of violence are dancing across the theological landscape, giving hope to many caught in the web of violence. Let us not ignore these voices as though they told an idle tale, for they may point us to the saving power of God exhibited in the life and death of Jesus Christ.

Notes

[1] Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 77.
[2] Elizabeth G. Yoder, editor, *Peace Theology and Violence against Women*, Occasional Papers, no. 16 (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1992), 99. This collection of essays is a record of the first attempt of Mennonite theologians to name this concern.
[3] Kwok Pui Lan, "God Weeps with Our Pain," *East Asia Journal of Theology* 2 (1984): 230.
[4] Gayle Gerber Koontz, "The Liberation of Atonement," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 63 (1989): 172.
[5] Mary H. Schertz, "God's Cross and Women's Questions: A Biblical Perspective on the Atonement," *Mennonite Quarterly* Review 68 (April 1994): 194–208.
[6] Ibid., 206.

About the author

Lydia Neufeld Harder's theological interest is in the interpretation of the Bible for the sake of salvation. Her primary scholarly teaching contexts have been Conrad Grebel College (Waterloo, ON), and Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre. She is enjoying retirement, with its opportunities to write; to preach, teach, and supervise students on occasion; and to spend time with her six grandchildren.