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The Undoing of Death: Sermons for Holy Week and Easter

Jim Keller

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The Undoing of Death

Fleming Rutledge

Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002

360 pages, \$25.00 Hardcover

In the main, sermon collections are notoriously difficult reads. Sermons are not so much delivered dogmatic treatises as they are in-the-moment, unrepeatable events. The same sermon delivered in two places can and will strike entirely different chords. In fact, two persons hearing the identical proclamation of Law and Gospel will be convicted and comforted in entirely unique fashions. Hearer/reader subjectivity must also be factored in, since style may, for some, be just as vital as substance. It is not uncommon for a speaker and hearer with a long history together to remain disconnected due to a relatively minor point of technique. Thus, it would seem that the publication of a singular preacher's work, no matter how exemplary, might be hamstrung from the outset.

Yet, despite these limiting factors, Fleming Rutledge's new sermon anthology, *The Undoing of Death*, has much with which to be impressed. Rutledge, a veteran New York City and area preacher, deftly negotiates her way through the minefield that is Holy Week and Easter preaching, offering a fresh perspective on the ancient themes of vicarious atonement, sacrifice for sin, the problem of evil and the coming of the Kingdom of God. When it seems there are few innovative ideas in Easter proclamation, Rutledge manages to shine new light on the old story. In doing so, she gives a renewed vision of Cross and Resurrection useful to believer and seeker alike.

The Undoing of Death is divided into seven sections that take the reader from the pomp of Palm Sunday through the gloom of Holy Week to the exaltation of Easter. Rutledge, on occasion, provides the date the sermons were delivered. She often provides the setting as well, giving the reader an insight into her use of illustrations. A good portion of the sermons are new creations, while others, especially those pertaining to Good Friday, contain reworked material from previous efforts. The Good Friday section comprises the bulk of the book, owing to several longish multi-part "meditations" that were delivered during a traditional extended service. Rutledge is aware that reading sermons consecutively may become tedious. Thus, she suggests that preachers looking for ideas read "more than one sermon at a sitting," while the average layperson tackle "one sermon at a time from each section, perhaps in sequence according to that of Holy Week itself" (xvii).

Rutledge has an engaging style well suited to print. Many of her sermons do not read like addresses but rather as devotionals shared at a family gathering. All the more remarkable, then, is her ability to convey orthodox dogmatic truth in an inspirational format. Rutledge is able to craft sermons that bring the timeless truths of Holy Writ to bear on the distinct needs of modern people. She makes no attempt to hide her orthodoxy, choosing to remain relentlessly monergistic and Christocentric throughout her work. To that end, she is not afraid to say the unfashionable thing. Furthermore, there is also present a deep concern for the hurting and distraught in these sermons. Rutledge holds nothing back, zeroing in on the reality of sin and the sorry human condition it has wrought. However, she is even more emphatic as she expounds on God's gracious response to human darkness, presenting Gospel hope for thirsty souls. The cross, for Rutledge, will always possess capacity to comfort, since, as she avers, "the cross is backlit by the dawn of God's new day."

The Undoing of Death is a fine companion for Holy Week devotions and makes a welcome additional resource for sermon preparation. It is a most unusual collection for our time, for it shows in a luminous manner that the cross, no matter how unpopular, will not be emptied of its power.

Jim Keller
St. Peter's Evangelical Lutheran Church
(Lutheran Church – Canada)
New Hamburg, Ontario

The New Dictionary of Pastoral Studies

Wesley Carr et al, ed.
Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002
432 pages, \$50.00 Hardcover

In the Introduction to *The New Dictionary of Pastoral Studies*, Wesley Carr outlines a number of goals for the book. This volume is designed for those who are not experts in pastoral studies but are beginning in the field. It is also designed for others who need a short summary of a particular topic. The dictionary seeks to fall mid-way
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