

**Gospel Proclamation As Opera?**  
**Thoughts on the Making of “Resurrection:” An Opera in Two Acts**

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**Abstract**

How may an opera composed as an interpretation of John 20 be experienced as a proclamation of the Gospel? This is at issue here in this report of and reflection upon a performance of that opera. An opera requires poetic and musical invention. But the gospel is not of human invention. It is a divine *poesis*. It is a divine act of self-disclosure in human terms. It is a *mystery* revealed, an immensity—the *immensity*—cloistered in human form. Selections from the opera have been recorded and will be played for discussion and reflection. The libretto is included.

Paul S. Undreiner – Composer  
Charles L. Bartow – Librettist

**Reflections on the Writing of the Libretto**

*Charles L. Bartow*

How may an opera composed as an interpretation of the Gospel According to John, Chapter 20, be considered gospel proclamation? That is the question before us here.

Over two years ago, Paul Undreiner, director of music at First Presbyterian Church, Ramsey, New Jersey, and adjunct professor at the Mason Gross School for the Arts, Rutgers University, said to me: “Chuck, I’d like you to consider writing a text, a libretto, for an opera I have in mind based on the resurrection narrative in John, chapter 20.” I was startled. I had written two books of poetry, and five poems from the first book Paul set to music and had professionally performed. But a libretto was not in my line of work, so to speak. I was daunted. I suggested to Paul that there were professional librettists he might consider. Of course he knew this. But he said, “I’d rather have someone write it who believes it.” In other words, he wanted a “from faith for faith” effort, an attempt at proclamation of the gospel in operatic form. It took me about a week to make up my mind to give it a try.

Paul gave me DVDs of several operas to watch and listen to, with full texts of the librettos in hand (fortunately, where necessary, translated into English). I worked on the text of “Resurrection,” on and off, for a year and a half, consulted with Paul on certain issues about interpretation of the text and dramatic structure, and at last produced a completed document on the basis of which his composition of the musical score could proceed.

In approximately eleven months the musical score was completed. A première performance was scheduled for June 25<sup>th</sup>, 2017. It was to be performed as an operatic oratorio, not a staged production. Paul Undreiner was himself to accompany the singers on the piano. This is one common way operas initially are presented. Orchestration can come months or years later.

Since Paul Undreiner and I agreed wholeheartedly that this collaborative effort should be an attempt at operatic proclamation of the gospel of the resurrection and not merely an artistic composition inspired by John 20, my work as a librettist had to be undertaken with appropriate constraints. The structure, progression and thematic content of John 20 had to be honored. Also, the language of the libretto had to echo the rather stately, traditional cadence and flavor of the biblical text. The NRSV was consulted carefully and other translations as well. Exegetical care had to be taken so as not to contradict or mute the witness of the Johannine text. Within the limits of my competence, I studied the biblical Greek text, and I consulted numerous scholarly commentaries. Special attention was given to Raymond Brown's *Anchor Bible Commentary*, to *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, and to Cullen I. K. Story's *The Fourth Gospel: Its Purpose, Pattern, and Power*, a commentary that gives meticulous attention to the grammar of the Koine Greek original inscription.

Nevertheless, a risky venture remained. A drama – and an opera is a musical drama – deals with character, with giving expression to the characters' subjectivity. Scripture, of course, does not take us into Mary Magdalene's inner thoughts and feelings as she approaches Jesus' garden tomb. Likewise, it does not reveal to us the depths of Thomas' psychic struggle. Still less does Holy Scripture encourage us to speculate upon the intrapersonal thoughts and feelings of Jesus and the content of his private, prayerful conversations with his Father. These, with fear and trembling, as before the *mysterium tremendum*, I had to imagine. In other words, the demands of operatic form had to confront the constraints of exegetical and hermeneutical fidelity – and humility! – in proclamation of the gospel. An opera requires poetic and musical invention. But the gospel is not of human invention. It is a divine *poesis*. It is a divine act of self-disclosure in human terms. It is a *mystery* revealed, an immensity—the *immensity*—cloistered in human form (see John Donne's "Nativitie"). Therefore, one prays for a sanctified imagination. Therefore, too, one trusts the God who overrules all human sin and error to overrule whatever sin and error may have found its way into the task at hand.

I was more confident in writing chorales or hymn texts to celebrate culminating moments in the opera. They are poetic – musical comments *this* side – i.e., *our* side – of the biblical witness. Here also, however, I tried to exercise an ecclesiastically responsible imagination and not simply give an idiosyncratic response to climactic moments in the story of the resurrection as attested in the Johannine text.

Many years ago Halford Luccock said of the resurrection: "The most dangerous man in the world is alive!" And is not proclamation of the gospel – in any of its dimensions and in any form of human discourse or public declaration – *the* most dangerous, perhaps even audacious, yet necessary, work of any "servant of the Word" (H. H. Farmer)?

At last I turn to a few technical notes. Cited texts outside John 20, in order of use, are as follows: Song of Songs 8:6, Jn. 19:25-26, Ps. 42:3, Jn. 11:25-26, Ps. 27:1, Ps. 36:7, Ps. 36:9, Ps. 150:1-6 (with the *hallelujah* from Luther's German translation), Jn. 3:16, Jn. 1:5 (and other words from the prologue), Jn. 8:12. The ensemble chorale at the end of Act 1, Sc. 2 is in iambic meter with a line syllable count of 7, 6 alternating. The ensemble chorale at the end of Act 2, Sc. 2 is in iambic meter with a line syllable count of 8, 7 alternating. The concluding ensemble chorale features a line syllable count of 8, all in iambic meter. I note as well that the texts for arias, duets, etc. were heard in my head as implicitly musical. All thus were written with poetic form in mind. And some, not all, were written in iambic pentameter (e.g. Mary Magdalene's aria at the very beginning of the opening scene of the opera).

From the start I understood the performers to be tasked with *suggesting* biblical characters much as would be the case in the oral interpretation or performance of literature. I didn't understand them as actors seeking, as it were, to become, or to appear to become, the characters assigned to them. Consequently, if the opera were to be staged (and not sung as an operatic oratorio as in the première performance) robes, or other neutral garb would be worn, not costumes.

Last, Paul Undreiner and I agreed that, though the angels in John 20 doubtless were seen as male (as in other gospel accounts), sopranos were needed for the sake of musical aesthetics. This was allowable, I believe, since the singers were understood to be oral interpreters of the libretto and musical text and not operatic actor-singer as in traditional dramatically staged operatic productions.

Paul Undreiner's comments on his composition of the music for the opera follow. Those comments are followed by the full text of the opera. Keep in mind that literary and musical texts are in fact "arrested performances."<sup>1</sup>

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## COMPOSER'S REMARKS

Paul Undreiner

The conception of *Resurrection* dates back to 2014, at which time I began to formulate an outline for the work. Although there are only a few major operas in the repertoire based on scripture, (*Nabucco*, *Salome* and *Samson and Delilah* comes to mind), I believed that the genre would be an extremely effective way of spreading the gospel message. Furthermore, the successes of several other more recent biblical operas, such as *The Cave* by Steve Reich and *The Last Supper* by Sir Harrison Birtwistle, were encouraging. The outline consisted of a series of acts, scenes and musical numbers (arias, recitative, ensembles, etc.), organized and derived from the account of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, as found in the Gospel of John, Chapter 20.

Once the outline was complete, the libretto needed to be written, before any music could be composed. My friend and colleague Charles L. Bartow agreed to prepare the text for me. His background in poetry, theology and scripture made him the ideal librettist, as did his sensitivity to and understanding of the language of music. Indeed, his insights into the narrative, lead to an additional scene being added to the second act of the work. This scene, which was not part of my original outline, clarified the dramatic action, greatly enhanced the overall flow of the story and provided insight into the sorrow within the Disciple Thomas, before he is confronted with the risen Christ. In order to coordinate the musical form with the text and to familiarize Dr. Bartow with many of the conventions of the genre, I provided him with a series of operas on DVD, each with a very different take on musical structure and language. These ranged from standard repertoire by composers such as Mozart and Wagner, to more recent operatic works by Olivier Messiaen and John Adams.

A little more than one year after I completed the outline, and while the finishing touches were being added to the libretto, the composition of the work commenced. The work took almost a year to compose and was finally completed in the late spring of 2016. One of the main themes in the narrative is belief and more specifically, the way in which the disciples of Christ

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<sup>1</sup> See Beverly Whitaker Long and Mary Frances HopKins, *Performing Literature* (Prentice Hall, 1982), p.2. See also Charles L. Bartow, *God's Human Speech* (Eerdmans, 1997) pp. 63-65.

come to believe (John believes initially without understanding 20-8; Angels appear to Mary before her encounter with Christ 20:11-16; while Thomas refuses to believe until he is confronted with Christ in the flesh 20:24-29). Musically, the work attempts to move through these series of revelations using a variety of key changes (disbelief/sorrow often being represented by minor keys, while belief/joy being represented with major keys) and motives, which represent the various characters, emotions and events being represented (very much in the manner of the *leitmotiv* of Wagner). In order to illustrate the heavenly angels who appear to Mary, I opted to utilize the language of the medieval church modes, as opposed to the standard major or minor keys, to convey an otherworldly and timeless presence. Additionally, several well-known hymn tunes are incorporated into the body of the work, which hopefully will convey a sense of familiarity to the listener, as well perhaps subliminally refer them back to the original text (for example, the hymn tune *Lancashire* appears in the finale of act 1 and is often sung to the text *The Day of Resurrection*).

The premier performance of the work occurred on June 25<sup>th</sup>, in New Jersey. The work was given as a concert performance, without staging or costumes, in the manner of an oratorio

## **RESURRECTION**

### **ACT I – Scene 1**

#### Mary's Thought on Her Way to Jesus' Garden Tomb

To me your words were light in deepest night,  
Expelling demon threats and sick'ning fears,  
And pointing out the way that I should go  
To apprehend the presence of my God  
In love as strong as death, and tender yet  
As all-forgiving, all embracing care.  
O blessed Rabbi, Jesus, teach me still,  
Despite your cruel end on Golgotha,  
To claim your promised peace to ease my grief.  
O Life! O Love! Sustain me as I walk  
This cheerless, dark, and long sepulchral hour.  
Ahead I see the garden tomb, the stone—  
The stone! The stone is rolled aside, and who,  
Oh! Who has taken you away, and where?  
I must tell John and Peter, "Come and see!"  
God grant me speed!

#### Mary Magdalene to Peter and John

Peter! John!  
This first day of the week—  
It still was dark—  
I came to our Lord's tomb.  
The stone was rolled aside!  
They took away the Lord out of the tomb,  
And we do not know where they laid him.

#### Trio: Mary, Peter, John

Mary: Your words to me were light in deepest night.  
O Life! O Love! O Lord!

I yearn to see you still,  
 If only in your grave clothes lying there.  
 But you've been tak'n away, and who knows where?

Peter: What can this mean, your grave clothes laid aside,  
 O Life, O Love, O Lord?!

Your words—eternal life—  
 Though you are gone, silenced, still echo here.  
 What's come of you? And what's to come of us?

John: I see and I believe you've conquered death!  
 O Life, O Love, O Lord,  
 For us, for all, you said:  
 "I am the resurrection and the life;  
 Those who believe in me shall never die." (Jn. 19:25-26)

## ACT I – Scene 2

### Mary (weeping)

My tears shall be my food now, day and night,  
 While others taunt me: "Where, where is your God?"  
 For Jesus, my beloved Rabbi, Lord  
 My healer, whom I long have served with joy. —  
 From back home by the sea of Galilee,  
 Up to this very spot where I must mourn  
 The loss of him, all trace of him removed—  
 Was hung on Golgotha, while I stood by  
 With mother, Mary, watching death come on.  
 Yet here the smell of death itself seems gone  
 Without a trace! How strange this darkness is  
 At dawn! How strange as well the brightening day!  
 It seems an inextinguishable light,  
 The very light of life! And from the tomb  
 A twinned, white, beck'ning radiance appears!  
 Despite my tears, I must seek out its source.

### Trio: Mary, Angel 1, Angel 2

Mary: Two figures, dazzling white  
 Are seated where my Lord  
 Was laid: one at his head,  
 One at his feet, just so,  
 An apparition! Now  
 They speak as angels speak,  
 As messengers divine.

### Angels: Questioning Mary

Angel 1: You're weeping, tell us why.  
 Angel 2: Why are you weeping here  
 Angel 1: Before this empty tomb  
 Angel 2: That's bright'ning with the dawn,  
 Angels 1 and 2: The very light of life?

Mary: Responding to the Angels' Questioning

They've tak'n away my Lord,  
I know not where or why.  
Despite this bright'ning day,  
I weep the very light  
Of life he seemed to me.

Mary, Angels 1 and 2

Angels 1 and 2: This empty tomb, once dark,  
Fills with the bright'ning day,  
Inextinguishable light!  
It is the very light of life!

Mary: This empty tomb, once dark,  
Fills with the bright'ning day.  
Inextinguishable light!  
He seemed, the very light of life!

Mary, Jesus

Jesus: Woman, why are you weeping?  
Whom are you looking for?

Mary: O gard'ner, Sir, I'm weeping  
For they've tak'n away my Lord.  
If you have laid him somewhere,  
Tell me where you have laid him;  
And I will take him away.

Jesus: Mary!

Mary: Rabbi!

Jesus: Mary, do not hold me,  
I've not yet ascended  
To the Father.  
But go to my brothers,  
And say to them:  
I am ascending  
To my Father  
And your Father,  
To my God  
And your God.

Jesus Prays to his Father

O Father whom I love and long for so,  
So long I've been away from heav'n my home,  
To you I'll soon return, my work here done,  
Your work of saving love for all the world.  
The overflowing love of God is theirs,  
Whose love for me has drawn them to yourself,  
And stirred in them belief and trust in me  
For life eternal as the life we share,  
My resurrection not all mine alone,  
But promise of their resurrection too,

That they, and you, and I, might all be one.  
As Mary just now heard me speak her name,  
And recognized me in the voice she heard,  
So shall all know me Shepherd of their lives,  
Who hear in voices echoing my tone,  
The voice of their Good Shepherd, Rabbi, friend,  
Their light in darkness, trial, and martyrdom.  
“I am the resurrection and the life.  
Do you believe this?”

Mary, Chorale: Ensemble

Mary: O blessed Peter, O beloved John,  
Disciples dear, all brothers of my Lord:  
I’ve seen the Lord. He said to tell you this:  
    “I am ascending to my Father  
        and your Father,  
    To my God and your God.”

Ensemble: Mary, Disciples:

O word of joy and gladness,  
Of light, and life, and love,  
Good news to quell our sadness,  
Peace sent us from above!  
Jesus our Lord is risen  
O’er all the world to reign.  
Despite night-fears we’re given  
Courage to praise his name.  
Yet still we’re filled with yearning  
Once more to see his face  
And hear his voice still burning  
Into our hearts God’s grace:  
The grace of sins forgiven  
Of souls set free for love,  
Clouds of injustice riven  
By heav’ns descending dove.  
The vesper hours are nearing,  
The hours of evensong.  
God grant our Lord’s appearing  
Will cheer us here ere long.  
Our Holy Savior’s greeting,  
His call, “All hail and peace!”  
Will make our nightfall meeting  
A resurrection feast!

## ACT II – Scene 1

Peter: Those who crucified the Lord  
Also threaten us with death.  
Therefore shut and bolt the door

Lest from fear we find no rest.  
 All: There is a deeper darkness  
 Than this now descended night,  
 Such darkness as inhibits  
 All glad welcoming of light,  
 Such light as Mary spoke of  
 When she said, "I've seen the Lord!"  
 John: Such light as I was blessed with  
 At the empty tomb this morn,  
 In love believing promised  
 Love and life from Christ our Lord.  
 Andrew: Remember—at the temple—  
 Before his appointed time,  
 How he faced the evil pow'rs  
 Lurking still outside this door,  
 How he said to one and all,  
 "I am the light of the world,"  
 And, "Whoever follows me  
 Will never walk in darkness  
 But will have the light of life"?  
 All: Yes, all this we recall.  
 Peter: Let us pray and sing to God,  
 Our light and our salvation,  
 Pray and sing—in Jesus' name.  
 All: How precious is your steadfast  
 love, O God!  
 All people may take refuge in  
 the shadow of your wings.  
 For with you is the fountain of life;  
 In your light we see light.  
 Jesus: Peace be with you—my brothers.  
 Here, see my hands and side.  
 It is truly I myself.  
 The crucified is risen  
 Vanquishing pow'r's of darkness,  
 Conquering both sin and death.  
 Peter: Already all our dark fears  
 Are abating! Our Rabbi  
 And our Lord restored to us!  
 Hallelujah!  
 Disciple 1, Peter: Praise the Lord!  
 Disciple 2: Praise God in his sanctuary;  
 3: Praise him in his mighty firmament;  
 4: Praise him for his mighty deeds;  
 5: Praise him according to his surpassing  
 greatness!

6: Praise him with trumpet sound;  
 7: Praise him with lute and harp!  
 8: Praise him with tambourine and dance,  
 9: Praise him with strings and pipe!  
 10: Praise him with clanging cymbals;  
     Praise him with loud crashing cymbals!  
 All: Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!  
     Praise the Lord!  
     Hallelujah!  
 Jesus: My brothers! Peace be with you.  
     As the Father has sent me,  
     Even so do I send you.  
     My Father gave to Adam  
     Breath for earthly human life,  
     But with the Holy Spirit,  
     You receive from me *heav'ns* life,  
     Life shared with God, my Father.  
     This breath in you is power  
     To forgive sins in my name.  
     But if any, in contempt,  
     Despise proffered forgiveness,  
     Their sins against the Father,  
     Son, and Spirit are retained.  
     Peace I leave with you, *my* peace.  
     Henceforth do not live in fear.  
     Let not your hearts be troubled,  
     Neither let them be afraid!  
 Peter: We'll meet again next Lord's Day eve.  
     And Thomas will be with us then.  
 All: Despite a darkened world around  
     And terrors to dismay,  
     Christ's faith, and hope, and love abound  
     And light salvation's way.  
     Salvation's way is peace, truth, life,  
     Christ's Father's will obeyed,  
     Defeat of envy, hatred, strife,  
     Dark pow'rs of evil stayed.  
     Proclaim forgiveness far and wide  
     Declare sin's captives free!  
     Leave no one upon earth denied  
     Tidings of victory.  
     The vict'ry of the crucified  
     O'er death and hell in scope,  
     Is glad news ev'n for those who've died,  
     Is resurrection hope!

## ACT II – Scene 2

Thomas: I am alone and will to be alone  
As he, alone, by hate was crucified,  
Though I was certain we'd all share his fate:  
"Let us also go, that we may die with him,"  
I said, when Jesus started out for Bethany,  
A stone's throw from Jerusalem and pow'rs  
Arrayed against "the way, the truth, the life"  
He taught and lived, and counselled us to live.  
But my brave resolution now is mocked  
As he was taken, mocked, and crucified,  
He, himself, alone: "The hour is coming.  
Indeed it has come," he said, "when you will  
Be scattered, each one to his home, and you  
Will leave me alone." We left him alone.  
And now I am alone, alone and lost.

(a knock at the door)

Thomas: "Who is there?"

Peter: Peter

John: John

All Disciples: All your brothers, brothers of our Lord.

Peter: Peace be with you Thomas!

Thomas: Your greeting is a painful irony.  
How can we share a peace we have not got?  
We were scattered, as our Lord said we'd be,  
Each to his own home. He was left alone  
To face the pow'rs of darkness, fear, and death,  
Of sacred trust betrayed to keep the peace,  
Just as the world keeps peace, quiet as death.  
He bore the cross that seemed his destiny:  
The high priest made it clear, and argued well:  
Is it not better one man die  
Than the whole nation be destroyed?  
So our Lord died to keep the peace Rome's way.  
But peace with God, our soul's joy, we're denied.

Disciples: We've seen the Lord. "Peace be with you," he said.

Peter: The cross he bore was God's strange victory  
O'er death and darkness, fear, betrayal, guilt!

John: O Thomas, brother, you are not alone.  
With you we'll see our Lord again, and soon,  
The evening of the first day of the week  
Upcoming, and in dark Jerusalem.

Thomas: How can this be?  
Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands,  
and put my finger in the mark of the nails  
and my hand in his side, I will not believe!

### ACT II – Scene 3

Peter, John, Thomas, Disciples, Jesus

Peter: We meet again behind closed doors,  
Expectant now and not in fear,  
For in the darkness round about  
Light shines, the very light of life.  
We've seen the crucified alive,  
And so will see him yet again.

John: We'll see him as his love for us,  
Stronger than death, stirs love of him.  
He promised, "I will love them,  
And reveal myself to them."

Disciples:  
(but not  
Thomas) He was crucified for us  
Under Pontius Pilate.  
But the tree he died upon  
He made the tree of life.  
Hallelujah!

Jesus: Peace be with you.  
Thomas, put your finger here,  
See my hands, reach out your hand  
And put it in my side.  
Do not doubt but believe.

Thomas: My Lord and my God.

Jesus: Thomas, have you believed  
Because you have seen me?  
Blessed are those who've not seen  
And yet have come to believe.

Jesus to all  
Disciples: Blessed are those who come to believe  
Because of your testimony  
As to what you've seen and believed.

Jesus: Now you are my apostles  
Sent to tell the world God's love.  
For God so loved the world  
That he gave his only begotten Son  
That everyone who believes in him  
Should not perish but have eternal life.  
And this is eternal life  
That they may know the only true God,  
And Jesus Christ whom God has sent.

Duet, Jesus and Thomas alternating

Jesus: I am the light of the world.  
Whoever follows me  
Will never walk in darkness  
But will have the light of life.

Thomas: You are the light of the world.

Once I walked in darkness  
 All alone and in despair.  
 But now I've the light of life!  
 All Disciples: The light shines in the darkness  
 And the darkness cannot overcome it.  
 Jesus: I am the Word  
 That in the beginning  
 Was with God and was God.  
 Thomas: You are God's Word,  
 My way, my truth, my life,  
 Eternal life. What Joy!  
 All Disciples: The light shines in the darkness  
 And the darkness cannot overcome it.  
 Jesus: No one has ever seen God.  
 The only begotten Son  
 Alone has declared him.  
 Thomas: God, whom no one's ever seen  
 You reveal to me, Lord Christ,  
 Crucified and risen.  
 All Disciples: The light shines in the darkness  
 and Thomas And the darkness cannot overcome it  
 Praise the Lord!  
 Hallelujah!  
 Jesus: Soon I must ascend to God, my Father.  
 As before I said to you: "It is to your  
 Advantage that I go away, for if I do  
 Not go away, the advocate will not come  
 To you. I will send the advocate to you,  
 Even the Spirit of truth, and he will  
 Guide you into all the truth; for he will  
 Not speak on his own, but will speak  
 Whatever he hears from God, my Father,  
 And from me. He will glorify me,  
 Because he will take what is mine  
 And declare it to you.  
 Father, I have glorified you  
 By finishing the work you  
 Gave me to do. And now, O Father,  
 Glorify me in your own presence  
 With the glory I had in your presence  
 Before the world existed."

Epilogue: Concluding Hymn

O word of God, O life's true light,  
 Piercing the darkness, quick'ning sight,  
 Grant us, despite our doubt and fear,  
 A vision of God's glory near.

Condemned to die on Pilate's tree,  
A spectacle for all to see,  
You made of that curst tree's despair  
A fount of life and sin's repair.  
The Resurrection and the Life,  
Bestowing peace amidst earth's strife,  
You send your Spirit, Holy Dove,  
A flame of truth and steadfast love.  
Jesus, Messiah, God's own Son  
Whose vict'ry o'er the grave has won  
Deliverance from death, guilt, shame,  
Give life to us in your dear name.  
And let our glad songs ever be  
To God, The Holy Trinity:  
To Father, Son, and Spirit true,  
One God, to whom all praise is due.