



## The 2010 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture † Hope

---

### Introduction

Hope. It's a catchphrase on our bumper stickers. It's a buzzword on the lips of our leaders. It's the youth sitting in our churches and the futures we dream for them, but still we ask: what is Hope? We see the word everywhere from ad campaigns to refrigerator magnets, but in an era of constant war, unending poverty, and pervasive indifference, we want to know: where can we find Hope?

The 2010 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture explore the radical theological and missional significance of Hope and the practical implications for our youth ministries. These lectures look at Christian Hope through the eyes of two current practical theologians and educators, a world-renowned university minister and author, and an ordinary radical.

The hope in the world, ubiquitous though it might seem, may be running out, but we do not despair. Because it's also the journey of the cross. It's the mystery of the empty tomb. It's the God who stands in the gap of a broken world and holds us in a divine embrace as we pray, "Our Hope, Lord, is in you."

The Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture are designed to foster original scholarship pertaining to youth and the contemporary church. The lectures are delivered as a series at the Princeton Forums on Youth Ministry and are published annually. Lecturers include scholars who are not directly involved in the practice or study of youth ministry but who can bring the fruits of their respective disciplines to bear on ministry with the young. May these lectures inspire you in your ministry with young people.

Faithfully,

Dayle Gillespie Rounds  
Director, Institute for Youth Ministry  
Princeton Theological Seminary

---

### 2010 Lectures

Kenda Creasy Dean	"Ascension Deficit Disorder: Youth Ministry as Laboratory for Hope"
Rodger Nishioka	"The Uniqueness of Christian Hope" "Hope as Cruciform"
The Reverend Peter J. Gomes	"The Christian Hope for a New Generation"
Shane Claiborne	"Becoming the Church We Dream Of"



## Hope as Cruciform † Rodger Nishioka

---

Hope as cruciform. I begin with a poem by Theodore Roethke, *In a Dark Time* (1964).

In a dark time, the eye begins to see,  
I meet my shadow in the deepening shade;  
I hear my echo in the echoing wood—  
A lord of nature weeping to a tree,  
I live between the heron and the wren,  
Beasts of the hill and serpents of the den.

What's madness but nobility of soul  
At odds with circumstance? The day's on fire!  
I know the purity of pure despair,  
My shadow pinned against a sweating wall,  
That place among the rocks—is it a cave,  
Or winding path? The edge is what I have.

A steady storm of correspondences!  
A night flowing with birds, a ragged moon,  
And in broad day the midnight come again!  
A man goes far to find out what he is—  
Death of the self in a long, tearless night,  
All natural shapes blazing unnatural light.

Dark, dark my light, and darker my desire.  
My soul, like some heat-maddened summer fly,  
Keeps buzzing at the sill. Which I is I?  
A fallen man, I climb out of my fear.  
The mind enters itself, and God the mind.  
And one is one, free in the tearing wind.

This poem was quoted by Dr. Jerome Groopman, author of *The Anatomy of Hope: How People Prevail in the Face of Illness*. Groopman is a professor at Harvard Medical School who, in his work with terminal AIDS and cancer patients, attends to the very ill and dying.

I heard an interview with him on National Public Radio's *On Point* program, where he was discussing the difference between hope and sunny optimism. Groopman said that optimists like to feel that everything is going to turn out fine. Everything is going to be great.

But true hope, he said, is different. It sees all the problems, all of the obstacles and pitfalls, and the opportunities for failure. Still, even seeing all that, people with hope gird themselves and envision a path to a better future and then work for it. They mobilize themselves. The main reason that true hope is so powerful, he said, is that it's "clear-eyed."

In his remarkable book, Groopman weaves together moving tales of his patients with thoughtful reflections on the nature of medicine and the possibility of hope in patients with extremely serious diseases. Most of the patients in these stories have cancer, with often-fatal consequences. He starts off with the case of a devout Jewish woman he met when he was a medical student. She lacked the will to fight her breast cancer because she believed it was a punishment from God. Eventually, too late, her doctor convinced her to accept the treatment that might have saved her life.

In other cases, Groopman tells stories of oncologists who themselves get cancer. Some insist on painful experimental treatments, in full knowledge that the chances that it will provide a cure are slim. Sometimes, they are driven by hope, but in other cases, by desperation. In other cases, the afflicted doctors give up the fight against cancer prematurely, as if they are unable to summon up the hope they tried to give to their patients. Finally, Groopman tells his own story, not of cancer, but of a disabling back problem that threatened to significantly curtail his life. He tried several different therapies, but they didn't seem to help, and even made the problem worse. Finally, he himself gave up hope in his own recovery, and just tried to live with the progressively worsening problem, with his life becoming ever more circumscribed. It was only through meeting a specialist who confronted him with his own refusal to hope that he came to find a cure. This personal experience gave him further insight into the ways that fear can overcome hope.

Groopman's discussion of hope fits in very well with a great deal of other work on the mind-body connection. While he is skeptical about the overblown claims of some alternative medicine that the right attitude can in itself end serious disease, he does explain some of the evidence that one's mental attitude can have a powerful impact on the course of one's recovery. Hope can have both direct and indirect beneficial effects in fighting disease. Therefore, it is an essential element in treatment; so it is very troubling that specialists are not given more training in how to enable their patients to become hopeful, to see both their disease and the possibilities for health more clearly.

That is what I think Roethke means when he writes, "In a dark time, the eye begins to see." To begin to see is to view the world not with some Pollyannaish optimism, but with a reality that is based on hope. The challenge, of course, is not to fall into despair—Roethke's midnight that comes even in the midst of broad day or "pins one's shadow against a sweating wall."

Moltmann discusses this very human danger of falling into despair when he writes, "if the Christian faith is dependent on the power of hope for its life, and if reason is dependent on hope for its attentiveness, then without hope, faith crumbles, and reason becomes cynical and unreasonable."<sup>1</sup>

He reminds us that while human arrogance is named as the original sin—human beings wanting to be like God—that is only half the truth. The other half is resignation, which is much more widespread, especially, I worry, among young people. The temptation today is not so much that we want to play God. It is much more that we no longer have any confidence in ourselves or humankind or even God, so we simply fall into despair. Despair and arrogance are symptoms of hope's decline. They cannot prevail against hope, but they can seriously hinder it.

In what might seem at first counterintuitive, Moltmann argues brilliantly that the Christian response to despair is to understand hope in light of the cross. This is what I mean in saying hope as cruciform. He reminds us all that a theology of resurrection and hope is only made possible through a theology of crucifixion. This is so important, it must be repeated. *A theology of resurrection and hope is only made possible through a theology of crucifixion.* I have to confess that this is a struggle for me, especially as a Protestant Christian.

A few weeks ago, I was in Millbrae, California, a few miles from the San Francisco International Airport, in a place some of you know—Mercy Center—a retreat center that used to be the North American mother house for the Sisters of Mercy. As the order has declined in number and is aging, they have converted much of the facility into a conference center. Typical of Roman Catholic retreat centers, in every sleeping room is a crucifix. When I entered my room, Jesus was hanging on the cross above the pillow on my bed. As I glanced at the Lord, I noted that this particular artist's rendering of our Lord's sacrifice was rather graphic. The crown of thorns was pronounced, as were the nails in his hands and feet. Further, there was blood dripping generously from all of his wounds. Clearly, this artist wanted the viewer to feel the pain and suffering of Jesus. I got it. I thought to myself that Mel Gibson would like this portrayal of God on the cross.

I confess that I did what I usually do. I took our Lord off the wall and put him in a drawer. I always do that when I visit Roman Catholic retreat settings. It is not that I deny Jesus' crucifixion, it is just that I do not feel the need to dwell on it. I consider myself to be more of an Empty-Tomb-type believer. That is why I put Jesus in the drawer. But, I was attending the conference; I was also reading Moltmann's work, *The Crucified God*, in preparation for these lectures. Moltmann makes plain the connection between Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

For him, resurrection faith is faith in the crucified one; and hope that overcomes the world, that can hope against despair, is born in the community of the crucified one. "The resurrection of Jesus does not relativize the cross so that it becomes a past datum of history or a transitory stage on the way to heavenly glory, but qualifies it so that it becomes an eschatological saving event because only it says who really suffered and died here. So the crucified Christ has not changed into a risen and glorified figure. Rather, his resurrection qualifies the one who has been crucified as the Christ, and his suffering and death as a saving event for us and for many. The resurrection does not evacuate the cross but fills it with eschatology and saving significance."<sup>2</sup>

Moltmann seeks to make his theology of hope more concrete. Typically, he explains, Christians claim hope from the cross through one of two assessments of the cross.

1. The cross is a source of hope because Christ died for the sins of the world.
2. The cross is a source of hope because its true meaning is found in the resurrection.

To be sure, Moltmann places the crucifixion and the resurrection in a mutually informing relationship whereby each gives the other greater meaning. The view of the cross, then, is not either/or but both/and. More centrally, however, he finds the cross a source of hope because God is revealed in the event of Christ's abandonment. Moltmann's concern for this theological point is not so much soteriological (salvation) but rather divine ontology (being), specifically the proper relationship between the Father and the Son. He wants to ensure that the cross, actually, concretely, centrally, and vitally affects God. In the event of the cross, God is located in suffering and suffering is located in God. God is not simply some distant deity sitting comfortably among angels and cherubs who sing praises to God twenty-four-seven. Rather, in the event of the cross, God is present in the very midst of godforsakenness. As such, God is the God of the forsaken. Since the suffering and death of Jesus is in God, then God does not remain unaffected, but suffers the death of God's own son. Therefore, and note this because it is at the heart of Christian hope founded upon the cross of Jesus, there is no suffering that in history is not God's suffering.

Moltmann goes on to say that when God suffers, God allows himself to be crucified and is crucified, and, in this act, God consummates his unconditional love that is full of hope.<sup>3</sup> Moltmann argues that hope, if it is Christian, must be grounded in the cross. It must be cruciform. Christian hope knows that all suffering is in God, and in God's faithfulness is suffering. Through the cross, God proves that God is not an apathetic deity, detached, despairing, unmoved. God is the suffering God, the crucified God. God is not only distantly future; God is present in suffering today.

If you know Andrew Root's work in his book *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry*, then Moltmann's hope as cruciform should have some resonance. Root argues for a new kind of relational ministry with young people where the goal is not using a strategy of gaining influence in their lives so we can coerce them to do what we think is best for them, but rather *place-sharing*. He defines place-sharing as when we place ourselves fully in the reality of the other, refusing to turn away even from its darkest horror. Just as Jesus incarnate, crucified, and resurrected was fully our place-sharer, so we, too, as Jesus's disciples, must ourselves become place-sharers, suffering with and for young people.

There is obviously much challenge here. Root's theory is not to be understood as Sigmund Freud's *counter transference*, where we take on the identity of the young person in an unhealthy way. Rather, it is an understanding of relationship where we are to stand with young people in their suffering. This is the clear-eyed perspective that Groopman talked about. It is helping young people see in the darkest of times while we remain with them. It is significant that Root does not call us to be place-takers, but rather place-sharers.

Chap Clark writes in his book *Hurt* that abandonment is the defining issue for contemporary adolescents. He argues that external systems and internal systems, particularly healthy, meaningful adult relationships, are no longer experienced by the vast majority of American adolescents. Consequently, they feel a profound sense of abandonment, and of loss, and many believe they are left to suffer alone. If the bleak picture Clark paints is accurate, then Root's call for place-sharing has much to offer us. Further, Moltmann's view that hope found in the suffering God, the God of Jesus on the cross, speaks volumes

to the desperate need for young people to know and experience a God who does not leave them alone to their own sadness and despair, but instead, through the meager yet faithful ministry of adults, accompanies them and brings them to a life of hope through the grace of God.

In a letter to a friend, Thomas Merton wrote:

Do not depend on the hope of results. You may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results, but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself. You gradually struggle less and less for an idea and more and more for specific people. In the end, it is the reality of a personal relationship that saves everything.<sup>4</sup>

By the way, I took Jesus out of the drawer.

1. Ibid., 93.
2. Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 182.
3. Ibid., 248.
4. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters by Thomas Merton*. William Shannon, ed. (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1985), 144.

## Bibliography

Borowsky, Iris Wagman, Marjorie Ireland, and Michael D. Resnick. "Health Status and Behavioral Outcomes for Youth Who Anticipate a High Likelihood of Early Death." *American Journal of Pediatrics* Vol 124. (No. 1 July 2009): 81–88.

Clark, Chap. *Hurt. Inside the World of Today's Teenagers*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004.

Merton, Thomas. *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters by Thomas Merton*. William Shannon, ed. New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1985.

Moltmann, Jurgen. *A Broad Place. An Autobiography*. Margaret Kohl, trans. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008.

Moltmann, Jurgen. *Hope for the Church*. Theodore Runyon, trans. Nashville: Abingdon, 1979.

Moltmann, Jurgen. *In the End—The Beginning: The Life of Hope*. Margaret Kohl, trans. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004.

Moltmann, Jurgen. *The Crucified God*. R.A. Wilson and John Bowden, trans. New York: Harper & Row, 1974.

Moltmann, Jurgen. *Theology of Hope*. James W. Leitch, trans. London: Bloomsbury Street Press, 1967.

Root, Andrew. *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry: From a Strategy of Influence to a Theology of Incarnation*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2007.