

*Jeremy B. Jones*

## THE RESURRECTION OF RAY JONES

I once dreamt my grandfather was resurrected on his carport. He didn't make a scene; he simply rose from a rusty metal chair on the edge of the concrete and shuffled over to us. Grandma barely noticed. She kept right on about the birds and the cousins and the breeze rushing through and into the clouds as we sat, facing, at the old picnic table. I scooted down the bench to make room, and the land behind Grandma—the weedy hill climbing to my house, the hayfield stretching to the apple orchard—was regenerated. Granddaddy's coming to life instantly regrew beans strung for acres and potatoes buried in family dirt and corn rowed like flimsy men in the wind. The garden had grown over since Granddaddy died a decade ago, but his new-life stroll from the metal chair to our wooden bench relit the land. I reckon he'd been sitting there, dead, overlooking the fields, and eventually decided it was time to do something about it—about all the dying.

I don't know why death is a metal chair in my gray matter, but Granddaddy looked comfortable dead. He wore old khaki pants, spotted in dirt, and a flannel shirt tucked in at his thin waist. His hands rested on his knees, and the wind swept his white hair—I remember wondering why he hadn't bothered to wear a hat as he passed.

Once revived, he poked into our conversation occasionally, softly adding a joke or asking me about the St. Louis Cardinals. He seemed the same, which is the thing about dying: you don't age in the minds of those you've left. I couldn't answer his questions. I wasn't speechless because he'd sat dead for years on his carport, only to rise one summer afternoon. Rather, it all felt right, which then felt strange. The thin white clouds and the steady sun and a resurrected grandfather seemed true. Then my mind set to work and held my tongue. My head processed the rationality of the scene, the death and the life; the dream washed away, and I awoke.

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Somewhere in my head, the chorus of "Michael Row Your Boat Ashore" seems to always float around. I'm a twenty-four-year-old man, yet, at odd moments, songs from my childhood Sunday school class flood my head and strike up the band. In this Sunday school class, taught by my favorite teaching duo, Minnie and Millie—M'n'M, we called them—we sang songs like "Deep and Wide" and "The Wiseman Built His House Upon the Rock." The foolish man built his house upon the sand. There were hand movements. There were also stories and readings and coloring activities, but I remember the songs the most.

Minnie and Millie rode to our small southern Baptist church together every Sunday morning. Minnie drove until she was ninety-two, firing up the engine to her boxy red car after the service while everyone cleared out of her way. She has been dead a few years now, and Millie died a month back. Still, those songs spin along in my head when I wake

in the morning or as I'm fading into sleep. They're stuck in there.

I always liked the song about Zacchaeus. This short man—*Zacchaeus was a wee little man and a wee little man was he*—was a tax collector who climbed a tree to see Jesus over the crowds, to see what all the fuss was about. His tenacity or curiosity or ingenuity was rewarded when Jesus spied him clinging to a sycamore tree, and called out: *Zacchaeus, you come down from there, for I'm going to your house today.* The throngs of people surrounding Jesus quickly grew bitter; Zacchaeus was a sinner, a cheater, no one fit for a lunch date with Jesus. Jesus spoke: "The Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost."<sup>1</sup>

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I dangled from all species of trees in my boyhood. From my house, the quickest path to Granddaddy's cut through the woods, immediately splicing a giant patch of rhododendron. The rhododendron of my native Appalachia isn't a bush in a yard, but something of a tree cave—a sprawling cluster of limbs growing vertically and horizontally and wildly. I would disappear inside. I sat on limbs until the forest forgot about me. The birds abandoned their chirps of danger, and the squirrels and rabbits emerged to scramble beneath me. I spied on invisible enemies and watched ants parade deliberately along the undergrowth.

*I sat on limbs*  
UNTIL THE FOREST  
*forgot about me.*

Once I had climbed down, I tried to continue my camouflage, my stealth. Further into the forest, and near the final stretch of trail leading to Granddaddy's house, waited the beagles. Granddaddy kept them for hunting, and so they lay ever-aware, ears pointed, asleep with eyes open.

I lightened my steps and carefully maneuvered around dead twigs. I darted from tree to tree, waiting for any sign that I'd been seen or sensed or smelled. I controlled my breathing and

<sup>1</sup>Luke 19:10

New Revised Standard Bible. Wayne Meeks, gen. ed. New York: Harper Collins, 1993.

crawled when needed, working my way always towards the old shed standing beside the dog pens.

Eventually, I reached the backside of the wooden shed, and all that awaited me was an open piece of land in clear view of the dogs. I could see the roof of my grandparents' house and the corn swaying in the field and the beehives standing at the edge of the garden, but the only way to get to them was in a blurring sprint. I gathered my energy, readied my short legs, and took one quick glance toward the beagles before exploding through the open area. Eyes dead ahead, I didn't stop running until I was on the carport, climbing the concrete step to the backdoor. One dog bayed, but only one, and I imagined the other dogs not believing the lone barker—the one who cried wolf...or rabbit...or boy.

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I can't be sure that my grandfather was resurrected. He may have only been revived. He may have been like Lazarus—brought back to life, only to die again. This isn't true resurrection but rather a treating of symptoms, a resuscitation.

Lazarus may have been glad not to be resurrected. He may have been glad for his eventual death after being raised from the tomb, thankful to leave the world and old age and pain when his time was right. But Jesus, I learned from Minnie and Millie, was resurrected for good. He came back after death and hopped a cloud to keep living.

I couldn't stay asleep long enough to know whether Granddaddy died again or caught a cloud going up. He smiled like he knew, but he didn't say. Maybe he was happy like Lazarus. I was happy like Zacchaeus, happy to have a good view.

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I remembered Zacchaeus last Easter. In Antigua, Guatemala, I scaled light posts and clung to window-sills to try to catch a sight of Jesus over the masses. I tried to channel the boyhood balance I possessed in the rhododendron. I searched for the best perches, the clearest views. Over the blanket of people and the clouds of burnt incense and the dirgeful brass music, I set my eyes on the processions. Ambling through the city's cobblestone streets on Good Friday was a parade of Guatemalans dressed as Romans, robed priests swinging smoky lanterns, and immense wooden floats. Upon one float, Jesus half-stood, frozen, as he bore his cross on his back. Blood streamed down his skin as twenty adolescent boys bore him beneath, carrying the scene through the full streets. Jesus stood fifteen feet tall, stooped and scarred.

In my boyhood church, I learned quite a bit about resurrection. I heard a lot about Jesus. Less about the Jesus who was pained and sweating and suffering through the streets of Antigua, but more about the Jesus before death and after resurrection. I learned stories of healing and miracles. Crumbs to loaves, water to wine, blind to sight. I learned of someone magical—a white, bearded man with empathetic eyes. He was strong yet compassionate, brave yet patient. He was the man who evaded—defeated—death. He could've escaped from the tomb if they had shackled his dead body in chains. He could have gotten out had the whole thing been under water.

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At 16, I began having trouble seeing Jesus. As a boy, I had the help of picture books and cartoon posters and decades-old paintings. I could close my eyes and see him there. But in my adolescence, I had trouble calling that man to mind. I couldn't fix a picture in my head. I needed something truer. That image of Jesus—the misplaced hippy in antiquity, the meek, disheveled man who could defy gravity—simply wouldn't stick in my brain anymore. He felt like a color portrait of George Washington in a history book, and if he were to be all of the things that the people said in church—infinite love and mercy, an uncontainable, life-changing force—he couldn't continue as blond-bearded, blue-eyed chap from yesteryear, floating around like a cartoon in my head.

Of course, none of this was conscious to me at the time. I thought the debate was over the realness of Jesus—of God. But in its barebones, I believe it was really a search for an image to hold in my head, someone to see when I pondered God. Had the pictures at church been more historically framed—a man with olive skin and brown eyes—I still would have found myself with the same dilemma. The issue wasn't one of factual depiction and representation; though, it took me until college to find this out. The issue was over who Jesus was. Is.

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Granddaddy died not long after I turned sixteen. On the way back from a basketball tournament in the mountains of Madison County, my family received a call from my uncle saying it wouldn't be long. Granddaddy passed shortly after we arrived to the hospital, his heart worn and tired, never fully recovered from an earlier attack. I took my shiny new driver's license and set out from the hospital. I didn't know where I was going. I didn't know *why* I was going, but *going for a drive* seemed like something people did in such moments, so I drove.

I saw a friend as I crawled through the Bi-Lo parking lot. He asked about the basketball game; I told him we'd won; he asked about the trophy; I said I couldn't remember how big it was. I didn't mention my grandfather. I drove awhile longer before turning towards home. After that night, Granddaddy became a story. Someone told about but never seen.

*The more I learned,*  
**THE BLURRIER**  
**THE PICTURE BECAME.**

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I only heard the story of the gun and Tommy Pace once, but I like Granddaddy in it. I like his role, his calm. Well before I'd come along, when my daddy was a boy of 16, Tommy Pace came by Granddaddy's house looking for a fight. Mostly he was looking for my uncle Steve, who had been to lunch with Tommy's girlfriend the day before. Tommy raced his car down the dirt road, dust covering the apple orchard, and parked right in the middle of the front yard.

Steve walked out to meet Tommy, and Dad says he saw it from the window. He pulled the curtain as Steve caught Tommy's fist across his jaw. Steve stood for a moment and simply turned around to walk back to the front door. Dad ran for a gun. He grabbed one of Granddaddy's hunting rifles from above the bed, and rushed towards the front door.

I like to slow this all down. I don't know how these events played out, but I can see them all in my head—Granddaddy, Uncle Steve, Dad. Granddaddy rises from his chair; Uncle Steve opens the door with one hand, his other holding his jaw; and Dad, a ready minuteman, bounds toward that same door to charge outside with the gun.

When this trinity converged, Granddaddy sent Dad and the gun back to the bedroom. He consoled Steve and called Tommy's daddy to say he'd send him the bill once Steve had his teeth straightened out. In the meeting of a peaceful spirit, a turned, bloody cheek, and a vengeful guardian, Granddaddy won.

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In college, I majored in religious studies. One of the first courses I took was New Testament. It was no Sunday school. There were days when I wished the professor wouldn't show, but instead a red car would vroom through the door, and Minnie and Millie would pop out with cookies and songs and smiles. *There's a fountain flowing deep and wide.* Deep and wide.

But in that class, I was able to find the closest thing to a factual Jesus—Jesus of Nazareth. He was a historical man, flesh and bone, and he was what I thought I needed to stuff into my gray matter.

The class taught me the science of the New Testament and thorough historical critique. It also taught me that historians rarely agree. The more I learned, the blurrier the picture became. The Jesus in my head seemed to be an ever-changing amalgam of the fair-haired Jesus from Minnie and Millie and Jesus the Nazarene. I found myself somewhere between Sunday school and scholars. Between science and magic.

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Jesus appeared to many of the disciples after Mary Magdalene discovered the empty tomb. Often they didn't recognize him. At first. He chatted with two of the disciples on the road to Emmaus; they walked a long while before realizing. He shot the breeze about fishing with Peter and some others on the shore of the Sea of Galilee; once his advice landed them a boatload of fish, they recognized him.

Somehow, despite the locked doors, he appeared one afternoon in a house where the disciples

<sup>2</sup> John 20: 21

New Revised Standard Bible. Wayne Meeks, gen. ed. New York: Harper Collins, 1993.

were meeting. “Peace be with you,” he said. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”<sup>2</sup>

But Thomas wasn’t there, and when the disciples came to him, he found the story too far-fetched to openly accept. He had seen Jesus crucified. He knew dead men stayed dead. He told them he wouldn’t believe unless he saw Jesus’ pierced side and the holes the nails had left in his hands; he was too old for ghost stories.

A few weeks later, Thomas walked with the other disciples back to the house. The doors were locked but again Jesus appeared. He allowed Thomas to put his finger in the holes the nails had left. Jesus encouraged him stick his whole hand in the puncture of Jesus’ side. Thomas did, and after having his hands in Jesus’ wounds—in his body—Thomas believed. Jesus asked him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”<sup>3</sup>

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Near the end of my college career, I had a fuzzy epiphany sitting in a contemporary Christian theology class. More than epiphany, it was something of a realization, something I believed but didn’t know. During a discussion about Jesus of Nazareth and Jesus the Christ, I caught three images rushing into my head. They’re comical looking back, but in the moment, they showed me what had been swimming around in my brain for years.

In a flash, I saw Granddaddy shooting a basketball “granny-style”: a color photograph in which his eyes were blue like the sky’s insides; and his body, stooped and turned away from me, working the land. The images came from obscure and distinct moments, but they flew into my head together.

I only saw him shoot a basketball once. I had stayed at his house alone; there were no cousins for running through the creek or building forts, so I shot basketball in the gravel driveway. As he walked out the back door on his way to the shed, he clapped his hands for the ball. I suspiciously lobbed him the tattered ball. He stood on the edge of the carport, a distance from which we often awarded a shot four points. He caught the ball and immediately lowered it between his legs. The shot was a casual toss from no-man’s-land.

It went in cleanly. A rush of net and the ball falling onto the gravel. In my head it did, anyway. In reality, the shot may have air balled, may’ve rolled into the woods. A historical search may prove this, but it doesn’t matter to my memory. He threw up a shot on a day I was lonely.

The photograph that flooded my head was one from his later life—likely taken a few years before he died. It shows only his face and head full of white hair backed by bright, blue sky. He is smiling a genuine, candid smile, and it seems that he is smiling beyond the camera. His blue eyes look through the photo and past the viewer, giving it a strange three-dimensional feel. I can see him now with his long face and long ears, his hair parted to the side. The photo is stacked somewhere under Grandma’s TV, but in my head it’s perfectly filed away—the soft blues of the sky and his eyes and the sharp white of his hair.

I can’t track the last image, the image of his working body, to any particular moment. He spent most of my childhood in the garden. He was a fixed element—we had no need for a scarecrow—so I reckon the image is a composite from a lifetime. While we smashed ants with

<sup>3</sup> John 20:29  
ibid

a hammer on the carport or dragged baseball gear down from the attic, he worked the land. He always came down at lunchtime, washed his hands in the white sink—turning it brown—ate, talked, sat, and eventually set out back up the hill. Often it was detailed work: tying line for the half-runners, gauging the ripeness of a tomato. Other times the work required a bit more force: running the tiller along the rows, hoeing clods of dirt into fine bits.

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In the theology class that day, I saw these three images as though they were superimposed. They were stacked yet translucent and moving. In that moment, I realized that they were what I make of my grandfather, or what my mind makes of him. I didn't understand it all at once, but on that day I recognized that in some small fashion my head had been equating my grandfather with Jesus for some time, probably since Granddaddy's death.

I knew my dad's father wasn't the Messiah. I didn't think him to be a savior, but I did apparently think of him as love and peace. After death, Granddaddy became those things. He robbed honey from bees and heaven from hell. He tended seeds and hearts. He reshaped fields and a church. He smiled at second chance.

A white-haired, blue-eyed orphan from the mountains of North Carolina is no historical Jesus. I need the history; I need Jesus of Nazareth to conceive of Jesus Christ. But I also need my grandfather to believe in Christ. The vision of a granny-shot, a smile, and working hands has given my brain some space between the science and magic. It has allowed my head to reach into Jesus' wounds and believe.

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I recently adopted a dog. He and I have been walking through the woods of my childhood. We've been traveling those paths—now grown up and over and barely recognizable—that lead to my grandparents' house. An unknowing eye would never see the trails in the woods. They now seem undergrowth and nothing more, but my dog immediately smelled and distinguished the ways Granddaddy used to walk—that we all used to walk. He took off ahead of me through the woods, showing me a way I'd forgotten. I followed. I cleared the rhododendron and hurdled some fallen trees to finally catch up with him. He stood at the top of the hill in the empty beagle pens, his ears perked. He sniffed and sniffed, and I wondered if he was finding anything.

**Jeremy B. Jones** writes: "I'm currently at work on a book about the "confused" identity of my native southern Appalachia. My work appears or is forthcoming in several literary magazines, including *Quarterly West*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Relief*, and *Killing The Buddha*. Recently, one of my essays was named a "Notable Essay of 2008" in *Best American Essays 2009*. I received my MFA in nonfiction writing from the University of Iowa, and I now teach writing at Charleston Southern University in South Carolina. Some of my work can be found at [thejeremybjones.com](http://thejeremybjones.com)."