

Dislocated exegesis: Reading the Bible in unexpected places

by [Lauren F. Winner](#) in the [April 5, 2011](#) issue



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It is a bright, cold Holy Thursday morning, and I am standing outside an immigration detention center that is creepily located in a suburban office park in Cary, North Carolina. Unmarked white vans pull up to unload people who have been newly detained by officials of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

I am here to participate in a foot washing and a demonstration on behalf of detainees, who are frequently, as ICE executive director James Pendergraph indelicately put it in 2008, made to "disappear." As my friends and I gather, a white van pulls up. A man is taken out and led into the building. He looks at us. He looks down. He looks like Jesus to me.

As we start the foot washing, the police tell us to leave. I feel queasy, but I stand with the others under threat of arrest. Hours later, the police change their minds and tell us that we can stay as long as we want—so, of course, we decide it is time to go home. Before we leave, we gather for a moment of prayer.

Patrick takes out a Bible and begins to read. To my surprise he's not reading from Isaiah or Ezekiel, not reading a passage about liberating the captives or returning desperate people to their homes. He is reading 1 Corinthians 13, a passage I usually hear at weddings or see on a piece of cross-stitch.

"Love is patient; love is kind. . . ." Usually, when I hear this passage my ears tend to go deaf. The sentiments seem trite. I feel like I could be reading a Hallmark card. But here at the ICE center in Cary, the passage is confounding. I try to listen to Patrick, to stay in his firm syllables, but I am struggling to place what I hear, to understand what this hackneyed passage about love has to say about the detention center, where the central white object is not a wedding dress but a van for rounding up people.

And then, in the confusing space of the detention center parking lot, I begin to hear the words. I begin to hear that what St. Paul meant had nothing to do with Valentine's Day; that when Paul said love, he was not speaking about a feeling or even a way of treating the people close to you; that when Paul said love, he was speaking about the identity of a man who was once arrested on Holy Thursday.

Later, a colleague told me that what we were doing with the Bible at that detention center had a name: "dislocated exegesis." This is the practice of reading scripture in unexpected places, in places that might unsettle the reading you were likely to bring to the text. My colleague is in the habit of taking a Bible and a group of students, for example, to a bank and reading Jesus' words about money.

Dislocated exegesis makes intuitive sense to me: where you read changes how you read. Safely within the blush-colored walls of my house I might be able to keep some readings out. So I have begun an experiment: once a week, in some place where I find myself, some place other than home or my office, I carve out half an hour to read one small biblical passage. I do this most often alone but sometimes with friends from school or church.

As with every other spiritual practice with which I have any acquaintance, my dislocated reading does not always produce startling insights or some sort of spiritual uplift. Sometimes I don't get much further than an elementary question like, what can this promise of healing mean here in this oncology unit? Sometimes I get a little further. Sometimes I hear new things.

Once, outside an insurance building in Hartford, the insurance capital of the world, I read Jesus' unsettling instructions: "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. . . . Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?"

On an airplane I read God's description of lifting up the children of Israel on eagle's wings.

At a friend's wedding populated by my ex-husband's best friends, I slipped away from the hors d'oeuvres and punch bowl and read near the end of Revelation, "And he saith unto me, Write, Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb" (19:9, KJV). I have a feeling I am going to see these same friends at that marriage supper, too.

After listening to a presentation at church about how pollution makes its way through the Eno River all the way to the Pamlico Sound, I sat by the Eno and read about Namaan, the leper, "restored [to] the flesh of a young boy" by a sevenfold immersion in the river Jordan.

Outside the Bank of America Corporate Center in Charlotte, the tallest building in the state, I read about the Tower of Babel.

At my father's house, the Shabbat candlesticks right behind me, I read the resurrection scene in John: the disciples are in the upper room with the door locked "for fear of the Jews."

This practice of dislocated exegesis has meant, among other things, that I have started carrying a Bible around with me. This is not something I ever pictured myself doing; alas, I don't think of myself as a serious Bible reader, let alone a Bible toter. In novels, if you meet a Bible-carrying character, you know the novelist is economically telling you that the person is a bore, or a hypocrite, or seriously pious—or all three. I am sure I am a hypocrite; I like to imagine I am not a bore; and I take piety as a goal that I am far from achieving. Yet here I am, carrying around a Bible, alert for dislocated-exegesis opportunities. A friend of mine, who knows how uncomfortable I am with this, recently showed up with a box wrapped in shiny blue paper. Inside was a crocodile-embossed Pepto-Bismol-pink Bible cover with handles. It is tackier than whatever you're picturing. "From the Trendsetter line," said Dina with a grin.

I am sitting in a bakery, eating a bagel and reading John 6, Jesus' proclamation that he is the Bread of Life. When I've read these words in the past my thoughts have gone either to the Eucharist (that is, I snippily wonder how Christian communities who take communion only a few times a year make sense of "The one who comes to me will never go hungry, and the one who believes in me will never be thirsty"). Or else I've thought about actual feeding—for this isn't just any metaphor Jesus is

concocting, it is a metaphor that should make those of us who want to offer Jesus to the world give actual bread. On very rare occasions, after thinking these things, I actually have done something in response—hie to a Eucharist; drop off loaves of bread at a food pantry.

But I don't think I've ever read this passage while eating before, and this morning I am having a very simple, animal-hunger experience. I arrived at this bakery at around 11 a.m., not having eaten since dinner. I'd inhaled half of my bagel in about 45 seconds. I was relieved to chew, to swallow. And then I read about the Bread of Life. For a moment in this bakery in suburban Connecticut, I understand how famished I am, how hollowed-out hungry I am to feed on Jesus.

It won't last. I will forget before I finish my chai. I will go on about my day as though I hadn't, for a few intensely felt seconds, heard a rumor of reality: how deep the hunger, how nourishing the food.