

## The Good News (and Who's Listening) in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*

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*In reading The Things They Carried, by Tim O'Brien, one is likely to notice that the book's stories of the Vietnam War often allude to the New Testament. What exactly is the author hoping to accomplish with these connections? This essay proposes that in creating characters reminiscent of Jesus, Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, O'Brien means to illustrate the power of stories to save those who are open to receiving their truth.*

I will not attempt here to claim fiction writer Tim O'Brien as a Christian writer, or make of his great collection of stories about the Vietnam War, *The Things They Carried* (1990), a Christian allegory. He and his work are much more complicated than that. I will argue, though, that if you read the stories closely you will hear O'Brien invite us to think about the relation of his stories about Alpha Company in Vietnam in 1969 to certain New Testament stories, and I hope to demonstrate how such thinking reveals a number of interesting and meaningful connections. Further, I want to take seriously the claim his narrator makes in the first sentence of the last story of the collection that "stories can save us" (255).

I begin with that old question, what's in a name? Or two names, Jimmy Cross and Martha. Or three: let us add Mary. In the title story for this collection of connected short stories, we meet, in the first sentence in the first story of the book, "First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross," who "carried letters from a girl named Martha, a junior at Mount Sebastian College in New Jersey. They were not love letters exactly, but Lieutenant Cross was hoping..." (3).

Whatever O'Brien's intention, it strikes me as nearly impossible for a reader not to wonder if there is a connection between a character

named Jimmy Cross in a story called “The Things They Carried” and Jesus, who in each of the four Gospels carried and died on a cross. (Yes, we might also ask ourselves what’s in a pair of initials, J.C.). Jesus, according to the Gospels of Luke and John, knew, and in John’s Gospel it says he knew and “loved” a woman named Martha, who figures prominently in two New Testament stories about love, one of them about love, death, and resurrection. In Luke’s Gospel the story of Martha and Mary comes at the conclusion of Chapter 10, which begins, eerily enough, if you are tracking O’Brien back into the New Testament as I am, with Jesus sending a group of his followers out “as sheep among wolves” carrying “no purse, no bag, no sandals” on a healing and evangelizing mission, from which they all return amazed at their success (Luke 10:1–20 NRSV). This stands in stark contrast to the story of Alpha Company, who set out more in the guise of wolves than sheep, grossly overloaded and largely doomed to failure. Though they too are evangelists of a sort, and ultimately they too are on a mission of healing. The narrative of Luke 10 circles back from the story of Jesus’ disciples to Jesus himself engaging in dialogue with a young lawyer about eternal life and love, which Jesus concludes by narrating the story of the Good Samaritan to explain to the lawyer who his neighbor is. Indeed, this is rich territory in Luke’s Gospel, where in the chapter just previous Christ admonishes his followers to “take up their crosses daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). Having concluded the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus is described as arriving at a village where a woman named Martha receives him into her house. Martha has a sister named Mary, “who sat at Jesus’ feet and listened to what he was saying.” Martha is described as being “distracted by her many tasks,” and when she admonishes Jesus to scold her sister Mary for not helping her, Jesus defends Mary and upbraids Martha. “Martha, Martha,” he says, “you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen that better part, which will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:38–42).

The “better part” Mary chooses is to be present to her guest, to attend to him, to listen to him. There is, in fact, a Mary in Tim O’Brien’s book, besides Martha the only other prominent adult female character in any of the stories. Mary Ann Bell, the sweetheart referred to in the

title of the story about her, “The Sweetheart of Song Tra Bong,” is in many ways Martha’s polar opposite. Mary’s situation is tragic and richly complicated, and I don’t intend to explore it in detail here. I bring her up because like the Mary in Luke’s Gospel, Mary Ann Bell listens. She attends. Like a bell, she reverberates when she is struck, by what she sees and hears and experiences. After the medic Rat Kiley tells her incredible story, he discloses to his skeptical auditors that he loved her, that they all did at the remote medical base where she unexpectedly arrived one day to be with her boyfriend from Cleveland, with whom she stayed until the incubus that was Vietnam swallowed her up—Rat loved her and says they all loved her because “she was there” (123). Physically, intellectually, and emotionally, she was there. But back to Martha: is the biblical Martha and her story or stories connected to the Martha that Jimmy Cross would love?

We meet Jimmy Cross and Martha in the first story, “The Things They Carried.” The story is technically, formally an ingenious work of short fiction that introduces most of the characters of Alpha Company and many of the most important conflicts to afflict them through the sometimes hypnotic recitation of a long catalog of everything they packed in their rucksacks, everything they carried, physically, emotionally, spiritually, into, across, and out of Vietnam. Into this catalog or litany O’Brien weaves fragments of the story of Jimmy Cross and Martha with the story of the death of Ted Lavender, the first member of Alpha Company to die in the book, from a sniper wound on an afternoon when the company is exploring and exploding Vietcong tunnels. As will become typical in these stories, the death comes without warning, it happens without drama, there is nothing heroic or picturesque about it, and it seems to serve no larger military or moral purpose. It couldn’t be more banal, more pointless, more pathetic. What connects these two story strands is the fact that Jimmy Cross, the platoon leader, will blame himself for Lavender’s death, in large part because he was thinking about Martha rather than attending to his men.

The problem with Jimmy Cross’s Martha, like Luke’s Martha, is that she is too “worried or distracted,” or as another earlier translation of Luke puts it, too “careful.” She signs her letters “love,” but Jimmy Cross concedes to himself that it is just a way of signing letters. Sitting in his

foxhole rereading his letters from Martha, Jimmy recalls how once in a movie theatre when he touched her knee through her skirt, she recoiled and looked at him sadly. Jimmy Cross fantasized about throwing Martha over his shoulder, carrying her to her dorm room, tying her in her bed, and touching her knee all night, but he never did it, which fills him with regret. He's too careful, she's too careful, and his need to be brave, to love and to be loved, to be taken in and attended to, is frustrated. In the episode that leads to the death of Ted Lavender, while Lee Strunk, the man who drew the short straw, is still underground exploring and preparing to blow up a Vietcong tunnel, Jimmy Cross fantasizes about being buried alive with or even in Martha:

Kneeling, watching the hole, he tried to concentrate on Lee Strunk and the war, all the dangers, but his love was too much for him, he felt paralyzed, he wanted to sleep inside [Martha's] lungs and breathe her blood and be smothered. He wanted her to be a virgin and not a virgin, all at once. He wanted to know her. Intimate secrets. Why poetry? Why so sad? Why that grayness in her eyes? Why so alone? Not lonely, just alone . . . it was the aloneness that filled him with love. He remembered telling her that one evening. How she nodded and looked away. And how, after, when he kissed her, she received the kiss without returning it, her eyes wide open, not afraid, not a virgin's eyes, just flat and uninvolved. (12)

In *The Things They Carried* we meet this sort of failure to connect, this failure to risk love, this failure to touch or be touched, this failure to be penetrated by another's love and life and story and suffering, over and over again. One failure of attention breeds another; and men die, physically, emotionally, spiritually. Lee Strunk does actually crawl out of that tunnel, "grinning, filthy, and alive," and for a moment a reader may feel relieved. In the margins of my dog-eared text I've written the word "Lazarus" next to the passage that follows. Lazarus was Martha and Mary's brother, who in the Gospel According to John had died while Jesus was away, whom Jesus would miraculously raise from the dead. The reader can judge for herself if there is a connection between the two stories or if I'm just overreaching:

Lieutenant Cross nodded and closed his eyes while the others clapped Strunk on the back and made jokes about rising from the dead.

Worms, Rat Kiley said. Right out of the grave. Fucking zombie.

The men laughed. They all felt great relief.

Spook city, said Mitchell Sanders.

Lee Strunk made a funny ghost sound, a kind of moaning, yet very happy, and right then Ted Lavender was shot in the head on his way back from peeing. He lay with his mouth open. The teeth were broken. There was a swollen black bruise under his left eye. The cheekbone was gone. Oh shit, Rat Kiley said, the guy's dead. The guy's dead, he kept saying, which seemed profound—the guy's dead. I mean really. (13)

In the story of Lazarus in Chapter 11 of John's Gospel, Jesus gets a message from Martha and Mary that their brother Lazarus is sick, but instead of going immediately to Bethany to attend to him, Jesus delays two days. When he finally arrives Lazarus has been dead and buried for four days, and when Martha hears he is coming she goes out to meet him. Her first words to Jesus are "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." What sounds like a profession of faith also has the ring of accusation to it. They go back and forth, and it sounds more like theology than grief and love to me. Jesus keeps talking like Lazarus is not really dead, and then he talks as if he is. It is confusing. Jimmy Cross, in the episode under consideration, also stands accused of not being there; he accuses himself, actually, of not really being fully present for his men. "Lieutenant Cross gazed at the tunnel. But he was not there. He was buried with Martha under the white sand at the Jersey shore. They were pressed together, and the pebble in his mouth was her tongue" (12).

Let us turn from Martha to Mary for a moment, who is identified in John's Gospel as the Mary who anointed Jesus with oil and bathed his feet with her hair. In John's Gospel Mary comes to Jesus after Martha returns home, to tell Mary Jesus has sent for her. Mary rushes out to meet Jesus, falls at his feet, and tells him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." The passage continues:

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him."

(John 11:1–37)

So what does it all add up to, if we take this excursion out of O'Brien's text to the Gospels of Luke and John? What if Lee Strunk is reborn again? Ted Lavender still dies: Ted Lavender isn't asleep, as Jesus says about Lazarus. Ted Lavender is "really" dead.

From Kiowa, the only overtly Christian character in the book and the most sympathetic but not for that reason, we learn how deeply affected Jimmy Cross is by the death of Ted Lavender. That night while using the New Testament he keeps packed in his rucksack for a pillow, Kiowa reflects on Jimmy Cross's "capacity for grief" and confesses that he "wanted to care as Jimmy Cross cared" (18). Ironically, Jimmy Cross will the next day burn his love letters and photos from Martha in an attempt to steel himself: the narrator reports how "he would not tolerate laxity. He would show strength, distancing himself" (24). He would "dispense with love" (25). The contrast with Jesus in the story of Lazarus couldn't be starker.<sup>1</sup>

But this irony leads back to the way in which O'Brien's claim in the first sentence of the last story can and ought to be taken seriously: that is, "that stories can save us." And I need to get to "the good news" I promised in my title. First, the sentence states that stories "can" save us. It doesn't say they do save us, have saved us, or will save us. But there is hope that they can. Ted Lavender is not, as Rat Kiley says, "really dead." He seems so, but that's what O'Brien calls elsewhere a "story-truth" (203–204). Ted Lavender is words on a page. So is Rat Kiley. So is the narrator Tim O'Brien. But the story truth of Ted Lavender's absurd death in Vietnam has the capacity to put us there and to make us feel something: loss, the terrible absurdity of war, the awful things that men do to other men. In the Gospel passage from John, Jesus is troubled when he goes to see where Lazarus is buried; Mary's weeping troubles his soul. It puts him there. Lazarus rises again on the tide of Jesus's tears. Over and over, the problem O'Brien creates for himself and for his whole platoon of storytellers is how to make something present to the auditor, or to a whole group of auditors, sometimes a character or group of characters within a story, sometimes the reader whom O'Brien as narrator-in-chief will occasionally address directly. The task is to get that auditor to listen, to pay attention, to feel something, to open themselves up to the experience of another person's sto-

ry, to open themselves up to another loss and pain, or to the possibility of love: all this through the salvific agency of a story. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus attempts to save a lawyer's soul with the story of the Good Samaritan. That's what O'Brien is about. He is the major evangelist in this collection, and the creator of other minor evangelists—they all tell and listen to and critique the telling and receiving and failure to tell and receive the truth of stories. All of them, in league with O'Brien, are trying to save our souls, not just our bodies, our lives, our souls, with stories. I find that good news, even with the promise now unfinished, unrealized, and often repudiated.

## Note

1. Even more ironically, Ted Lavender's death and Jimmy's failure to love or be loved by Martha, are only two of the crosses Jimmy Cross will carry in *The Things They Carried*; an even greater cross will involve his responsibility for the death of Kiowa, the most important death in the book, not on a cross but in a shit field, a brilliant recasting of Golgotha if there ever was one. It is a death that haunts not just Jimmy Cross, but the whole platoon, especially a soldier named Norman Bowker, who died by his own hand believing he could have saved Kiowa, and the narrator Tim O'Brien, whose incautious action may have inadvertently killed him. In another paper I hope to explore what invitations O'Brien issues to us to think of that death alongside the death of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels, both deaths recorded through a variety of accounts, and how O'Brien makes that death and other deaths recorded in *The Things They Carried* redemptive.

## References

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