The Reverend Mr. Shegog’s Easter Sermon:
Preaching as Communion in Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*

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“April Eighth, 1928,” the fourth section of William Faulkner’s novel about the decline of an old Yoknapatawpha family, begins with Easter Sunday dawning “bleak and chill” (*SF* 265). Dilsey Gibson, the Compson family servant, emerges from her cabin, and the reader sees her as if for the first time: a “big woman” once, now she is gaunt, her body “consumed until only the indomitable skeleton was left rising like a ruin or a landmark above the somnolent and impervious guts” (266). At the heart of this chapter, Faulkner places his account of an Easter service held at a worn-looking church at the end of a dirt road. Of course, first impressions can mislead. Among the chief surprises is an African-American preacher from St. Louis: the Reverend Mr. Shegog. Through the author’s portrayal of what takes place in this church, the reader learns something more important about Dilsey than her physical appearance. In this service, on a day when the Compson family is flying apart, she receives her orientation.

Over the last forty years, literary scholars have focused considerable attention on the final section of *The Sound and the Fury* and on the Shegog sermon in particular. A number of studies provide careful analyses of the distinctive language of the sermon. Attentive to such elements as meter, intonation, and repetition, Bruce A. Rosenberg, for instance, examines the Shegog sermon as an effective literary presentation of an oral genre. Looking at influences on Faulkner’s composition of the sermon, Robert E. Fleming notes parallels with James Weldon Johnson’s *God’s Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*. Victor Strandberg draws attention to the author’s use of the biblical technique of inversion, which offers readers the opposite of what they expect: a crucified messiah, an undersized preacher who turns out to be a brilliant orator (“Faulkner’s
Poor Parson”). Joseph R. Urgo demonstrates how the structure of the sermon mirrors the structure and presentation of the novel.\(^1\) Analyzing Shegog’s voice, Stephen M. Ross considers how this voice operates as a powerful force in its own right, how Faulkner separates voice and speaker, and how sound and sight often contrast with one another (“Rev. Shegog’s Powerful Voice”). The point of the sermon, Ross finds, is not the “communication” of a “message.” Rather, the meaning of the sermon lies in the “satisfaction and fulfillment” that the voice brings about: the engendering of a communion beyond the need for words (16). In his analysis of the language and function of the sermon, André Bleikasten also finds that what really matters is not the message that the sermon conveys but “the collective ceremony of its utterance” (The Ink of Melancholy 141).

In a discussion that is sensitive to the actualities of the African-American religious experience, Thadious M. Davis asserts that Faulkner’s “crude literary representation of Negro dialect” lacks “the biblical grandeur” both of his own writing elsewhere and of black preaching; “it does not create the illusion of strong emotion as effectively as his descriptive passages” that surround the sermon. As a result, Shegog’s verbal effort might confuse readers and cause them to “believe that the Compsons’ alienation from the represented black world of faith is justified” (124).\(^2\) In a recent essay in the Mississippi Quarterly, William Dahill-Baue examines the use of “Black English” in novels by Faulkner and Toni Morrison. He observes that by having Shegog abandon his more formal delivery in favor of black dialect, which “draws his congregation into a communal space of identification where barriers between selves are broken down and all are bound together by their common voice and suffering,” Faulkner is in fact “subverting the idiom (as well as the historical actions) of the master.” The novel’s author is representing Shegog “as a Signifying Monkey,” and so is using the black dialect “not as burlesque but as a demonstration of the transformative powers of language.” In this depiction, then, Shegog becomes a “complex, realistic” character who resists “stereotype and simplification.” Playing “with language’s power to overturn expected meaning,”
Shegog “thereby overthrow[s] the binding shackles of social codes” (466–476, 469, 473).

Affirming the possibility that Faulkner’s approach to the fourth section was informed by his reading of J. G. Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, Philip D. Castille sees the Reverend Mr. Shegog awakening a “spiritual renewal” in Dilsey—“a renovating vision of the power of life over death”—and this springtime rebirth enables her “to break free from the Compsons and to renounce her years of resignation and denial” (423, 424). Alexander J. Marshall III, on the other hand, focuses on images of destruction and loss. Drawing on the work of Lacan, Derrida, and other literary theorists, he argues that the sermon’s language effects a subversion of our usual understanding of Easter. Faulkner, he says, uses wasteland images to present a sermon that moves toward silence and the death of the Word: “Reverend Shegog’s sermon recapitulates in reverse the narrative strategies of the novel itself, from the cold, rational ‘white man’s language’ of Jason to the irrational language of Quentin to the meaningless yet meaning-full moan of Benjy. The sermon is an eloquent example of transcendent, nonverbal communication in a world of verbal impotence” (187).

In this essay I attempt not so much to correct as to complement and to add to the extensive work that has already been done on the Shegog sermon. Informed by historical and theological as well as by literary-critical perspectives, the present study builds on an awareness of the cultural-linguistic history of African-American preaching. The core of the interpretation that follows is grounded in the somewhat paradoxical claim that, in the tradition of the church that Dilsey attends, a sermon is properly understood to be both word and sacrament—two functions of Christian worship that many would take to be distinct if not separate. This interpretive approach ought to produce fresh insights into such features of the sermon as its setting (use of sacred space), its relation to time (a time-binding event), its manner and content, its effect, and perhaps even its role in the book. Witness to “the first and the last,” Dilsey participates in an event that may usefully be perceived as a sacrament. A liturgical
reading of these pages, therefore, should increase our appreciation of the riches of this section of Faulkner’s novel.

In the congregation to which Dilsey and the rest of the Gibson family belong—a church whose denomination is not specified but which all internal and external evidence suggests is Baptist—the Lord’s Supper would be a rare event, celebrated at most on a quarterly basis and possibly only biannually. Hers is not a sacerdotal church with an altar in the most prominent position but a word-centered church, in which the pulpit is the main focus of everyone’s attention and the preacher is an exalted figure. In 1928, on Easter Sunday, the vast majority of the world’s Christians—including Roman Catholics, Greek and Russian Orthodox, and Anglicans—would have celebrated the resurrection of Christ by participating in a service of holy communion. But in a Baptist church, like Dilsey’s, worshipers would not remember Christ’s resurrection by holding a service of the Lord’s Supper; rather, they would proclaim their Easter faith through praise, prayer, and—most of all—preaching.

To gain a better understanding of *The Sound and the Fury*, however, we should be careful not to distinguish between these two ways of celebrating Easter so sharply as to mark them off completely one from the other. In the Shegog sermon, verbal witness and sacramental grace coinhere. In Shegog’s preaching, Christ is risen in the kerygmatic Word, alive within the body of believers through the ministraions of an otherwise unprepossessing black clergyman. In this moment of *kairos*—of time out of time—worshipers may experience the divine reality contemporaneously in meaning-filled past, ecstatic present, and blessed future. Much like a celebration of the Lord’s Supper, Shegog’s preaching becomes a time-binding event. It not only re-presents the *illud tempus* when Christ taught and suffered and rose again—that is, the sacred time of Christian origins, which Christians understand to be the hinge of history; it also offers a proleptic experience of eternity (Eliade ch. 2). Forming a close parallel to a celebration of the Eucharist, the Shegog sermon evokes dynamic remembrance of the crucified and risen Christ (*anamnēsis*), even as it invokes love, hope, joy, and peace—what one congregant calls “de comfort en de unburdenin”
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(292)—gifts traditionally associated with the coming of the Holy Spirit (*epiklēsis*).

The center of this Easter celebration, the mystical drama which is the sermon by the visiting clergyman, provides a ritual occasion for communion: communion of the worshipers with Christ and with one another. In his comments on this episode in the novel, John T. Matthews notes that “[b]ands of Christian believers have regularly practiced the ritual of the Eucharist, the sharing of bread and wine in symbolic celebration of Christ’s broken body and shed blood. Though Dilsey’s congregation does not literally celebrate the Eucharist, or communion, during this service, its effect can be seen in the moment of fusion they enjoy” (*The Sound and the Fury* 83).

A vehicle of grace, the sermon is thus powerfully sacramental; and so a reading of this sermon as a liturgical event would seem a natural move to make. But first let’s be clear about our authorization to proceed. Attempting to view this Easter service through the lens of liturgy is not an effort to impose a hegemonic Catholic imagination on the text, to make an “anonymous Catholic” of Shegog or of Faulkner. That a preaching service should bear remarkable affinities with a Eucharist is no accident. What legitimates this interpretive move and keeps it from being an arbitrary imputation of foreign values is not only the connotations and denotations of the text itself but also the fact that it is a reading-out that is firmly rooted in the Protestant understanding of the efficacy of the preached Word. Ostensibly “non-liturgical” churches—including those that incorporate the folk religion of rural communities—can have a heavy investment in sacramentality and ritual.

The theologian who began the Reformation, Martin Luther, taught Protestant Christians how they were to hear and receive the gospel—the good news proclaimed in the words of Christ and in the words about Christ. They were to meditate upon and thereby to participate in the gospel in a sacramental way. Through the preached Word, the Reformer said, God makes God’s power and righteousness known as the saving word of forgiveness and new life. The words that Christians spiritually ingest are themselves sacramental signs:
means of conveying to believers the divine reality of Christ and his gifts (Stjerna 43).

Especially in the antebellum slave community, the spoken words of black preaching carried special import. Because the slaves—and, for decades after the Civil War, many of their descendants in the rural South—were largely illiterate, “their world,” a scholar of African-American culture has pointed out, “remained a world of sound in which words were actions.” This context helped to make preaching an unusually powerful force: to speak of the heroes of the Bible “was to give them a substance, a reality, to make them literally come alive” (Levine 158). Consequently, in black preaching, as one student of the genre has said, “[h]istory was brought forward, and the past was reenacted as the people identified with persons and events in the biblical narratives” (Duke 82).

Within the Free Church tradition, in the first half of the twentieth century, a Scottish Congregational minister named P. T. Forsyth developed a theology of preaching that became particularly well known and influential. In his Beecher Lectures at Yale in 1907, Forsyth explicitly affirmed that “[t]he sacrament which gives value to all other sacraments is the Sacrament of the living Word” (7). While the preacher’s role is not “sacerdotal,” he said, it is “sacramental.” The preacher is “a living element in Christ’s hands . . . for the distribution . . . of Grace” (80). More important than the words of the minister is the divine action that takes place within the life of each believer: “In true preaching, as in a true sacrament, more is done than said” (81). Through the work of the preacher, Forsyth believed, “a deed [is being accomplished] in which the Redeemer is the chief actor” (82). By means of the mediating reality of proclamation, the preacher “prolongs Christ’s sacramental work,” and worshipers have an opportunity to participate in “the sacrament of the Cross” (82). Christ’s saving work on the cross “re-enacts itself in us. God’s living word reproduces itself as a living act. It is not inert truth, but quick power” (82). In this way, “[e]very true sermon . . . is a sacramental time and act” (83). The “center of gravity” of this sacramental act, Forsyth said, lies not in material elements such as bread and wine but rather in “the site of Christ’s real presence,” the
community of believers (83-84). Christ is truly present, then, in the sacrament of the Word, through which God acts anew to transform God’s people.

Faulkner did not need to read weighty theological treatises by Protestant Reformers or books on preaching by Nonconformist theologians to have a strong sense of how Baptist preaching was supposed to work. He knew well enough how participants in such a service as Dilsey attends were to listen for the Holy Spirit to address them over the shoulder, as it were, of their own preacher. And certainly in his own, analogous domain, the priestly realm of the literary artist, he would have been thoroughly familiar with the ever-present, always elusive goal of expressing transcendent truth and beauty in earthly forms.

Faulkner recognized the difficulty of articulating “the old verities . . . the old universal truths” through the recalcitrant medium of words (“Address” 120). Human language, the mean instrument that the writer is “doomed” to use, is, he told a young English instructor in 1950, “about the damndest clumsiest frailest awkwardest tool he could have been given” (Blotner 1305). But alongside his awareness that language is a frail and clumsy instrument, he maintained with his creation Shegog a core belief in the sublimity of the word. Indeed, as Victor Strandberg observes of Faulkner: “The artist, he thought, is (like the orthodox priest or prophet) a point of contact between the divine and the human” (“Faulkner’s God” 132). In attempting to make this contact, Faulkner and Shegog embrace, as it were, both the via positiva, which relies on words and images, and the via negativa, which accepts the brokenness of all human discourse.

The deputy of God’s power—the preacher who brings the Word—must often have seemed a weak vessel for bearing the divine grace. Indeed he might be “undersized” and “insignificant looking”: “‘En dey brung dat all de way fum Saint Looey,’ Frony whispered.” Dilsey observes the same figure, but, possessing deeper faith and a wider historical perspective, she is prepared to be more patient than her daughter: “I’ve knowed de Lawd to use cuiser tools dan dat,” she assures Frony (293).
What Dilsey indicates that she has experienced in her own life is consonant with a core theme of Christian history. The apostle Paul, author of the earliest books in the New Testament, speaks of the way in which God uses what is foolish for God’s wisdom and what is weak for God’s power, both on the cross and in the kerygma (1 Cor. 1–2). Preachers, Paul says, do in fact bring a “treasure,” the grace contained in the gospel of Christ, but they carry this gift in “earthen vessels,” which are the limitations of their own persons, including the manifold imperfections of their preaching (2 Cor. 4:7). But God can use even the efforts of jackleg preachers to enable the words of human beings to become the Word of God (1 Thess. 2:13).

The worship scene that Faulkner describes in the final section of The Sound and the Fury manifests the left-wing Protestant juxtaposition of sacrality and spareness. On the one hand, the church service takes place not only in sacred time but also in an almost fantastic setting: in “a scene like a painted backdrop.” The road beside which the small church building rests comes to an abrupt halt: “the road appeared to stop short off, like a cut ribbon.” The entire scene resembles not an actual church building and its setting in a real, earthly place but rather “a painted cardboard set upon the ultimate edge of the flat earth, against the windy sunlight of space and April and a midmorning filled with bells.” It is a scene—this “weathered church lift[ing] its crazy steeple” into the sky (292)—which is fitting for the liminal experience within the church of the vertical dimension of transcendence.

On the other hand, the interior of this church is an aesthetic disappointment: the beauty and holiness of worship are hardly suggested by the “sparse flowers” or by the “battered Christmas bell, the accordion sort that collapses,” over the pulpit (292). The spareness of this setting need not be wholly attributed to the poverty of the congregation, however. In this Protestant community, what’s desired is not incense, bells, statues, votive candles, and richly embroidered vestments; all of that would be seen not as aids to worship but as distracting bric-a-brac. Here what is sought is clean lines, simplicity, spiritual realization. And material objects can get in the way of that.
In a church such as Dilsey’s, then, what makes the somewhat shabby surroundings sacred is not matter and rite and furnishings but rather the amazing grace that quickens faith and love in this community of forgiven sinners. The holiness of the church resides not in the physical building but in the spiritual quality of the body of Christians gathered in this place, apart from the world, at the end of a road. This understanding reflects the Protestant emphasis on the church structure not as the holy house of God—the more Catholic view—but as the meeting house of the holy people of God.

A “meagre figure,” Shegog begins his sermon with his voice “level and cold” (293). As one literary scholar has noted, “We find this vocal tag, ‘level and cold,’ employed frequently in Faulkner as a mark upon the discourse of any speaker not participating in a shared or sharable voice. To speak in a level and cold voice is to speak only for oneself, at but not with others” (Ross, Fiction’s Inexhaustible Voice 40). An intelligent and practiced preacher, Shegog may intentionally incorporate a distancing device in the first part of his delivery. His homiletical approach is not extraordinary for evangelical preachers, black or white, who were always taught, as the popular injunction had it, to “start low, go slow, rise higher, catch fire, wax warm, quit strong.” In the second and third parts of his sermon, the visitor pulls in his listeners—sparking their interest, then drawing them to the glowing hearth of his oratory.

In examining Shegog’s pulpit message, we should not suppose that Faulkner gives us the entire sermon verbatim. Indeed, this sermon, in its reported form, seems disjointed. Shegog probably would have preached for at least forty-five minutes on this Easter Sunday, and Faulkner does not give us enough words for a sermon of that duration. Instead, he provides the sermon’s principal elements and, as elsewhere, allows his readers to fill in the scene and develop their own sense of the whole. He supplies the most complete transcript when the congregation itself starts paying close attention to what their preacher is saying (Ross and Polk 182).

In addition, at least some of the seemingly disjointed quality may be taken to go back to Shegog’s original version. Not only is the homiletical form that he employs thoroughly different from that
of, say, the arid, essay-type sermons of eighteenth-century Britain; it is also a form that anticipates the involvement of the congregation. Theirs would be an audible and emotional response, to be sure, but an intellectual dovetailing with the work of the preacher, as well. When Shegog cites crucial episodes in salvation history or important texts from the life and teaching of Jesus or graphic images from the apocalyptic literature, he can appropriately expect his congregation to know what he’s referring to.⁶

For his auditors this sermon is part inspiration and part moral encouragement, but it is primarily an identity avowal. Just as for Christians in liturgical churches who recite creeds that contain only the barest sketch of the lineaments of their faith, so for the members of Dilsey’s church, the key phrases and allusions suffice. The scraps of scripture are reminders—highlights in shorthand—of a complete narrative, which each listener already knows.⁷ And it is within this larger story that each Christian finds his or her identity. Shegog’s purpose, then, is not to convey new information but to reestablish his hearers in the faith by enthusiastically working with them to see their own mundane stories—their lives in ordinary time, in everyday places—in the light of this narrative of eternal salvation. He brings a word to fortify them on their individual journeys as they strive to continue on the Way.

Tramping “steadily back and forth beneath the twisted paper and the Christmas bell,” Shegog declares his message: “I got the recollection and the blood of the Lamb!” (294) He will repeat this statement several times, interweaving it with snatches of biblical testimony. This theme of “recollection”—anamnēsis—is central to Shegog’s sermon and to Christianity. By remembering where they came from, Christians know who they are and where they are going. Through anamnēsis, Christians are able to experience the past in the present, partaking—whether spiritually by means of the preached Word or physically by means of sacramental wine—of the saving blood of the Lamb. Standing at the foot of the cross, they enjoy here and now the benefits of Christ’s passion. Shegog bids his hearers meditate upon—imaginatively to receive through recollection—the blood of Christ shed on Calvary. The “blood of
the Lamb” is a synecdoche for a larger reality and its meaning. With this divine economy of salvation Shegog’s hearers would, of course, be familiar: the once-for-all sacrifice that atoned for sin, restored friendship between God and human beings, and thereby opened up new life to the children of God, making authentic humanity and true virtue possible.

The preacher’s dramatic declaration concerning “the blood of the Lamb” is also a way of urging his listeners to keep in mind the Last Days. His words advert to the time when, according to the author of the book of Revelation, the robes of the faithful will be made “white in the blood of the Lamb.” Shegog’s use of this phrase points as well to the decisive moment when the old serpent, Satan, will be “overc[o]me . . . by the blood of the Lamb” (Rev. 7:14; 12:11). As he goes on to develop this theme of recollection, testing, and ultimate triumph, Shegog enables the members of his congregation to stand apart from—to experience ek-stasis in relation to—their workaday lives, measured by chronos. If his hearers respond to his words, then they can enjoy already, in dramatic compresence, a taste of the messianic banquet of the Endtime. In this way his sermon offers them a deeper sense of the significance of their ordinary lives—of their self-descriptions, of their choices and actions—here and now.

Preaching to his listeners’ hearts, not just their heads, Shegog has modulated his voice, so that it now has “a sad, timbrous quality like an alto horn, sinking into their hearts and speaking there again when it had ceased in fading and cumulative echoes” (294). As he speaks, his being undergoes something akin to transubstantiation, his inner essence transmuted into a supernaturally charged voice while his physical appearance remains the same humble exterior. In suggesting what this transformation is like, Faulkner employs a simile borrowed not from sacramental theology but from medieval demonology: “With his body he seemed to feed the voice that, succbus like, had fleshed its teeth in him” (294).

Through the instrumentality of his transformed self, Shegog becomes an agent of communion: “[T]he congregation seemed to watch with its own eyes while the voice consumed him, until he was nothing and they were nothing and there was not even a voice
but instead their hearts were speaking to one another in chanting measures beyond the need for words. . .” (294). This experience is reminiscent of the apophatic way of the mystics: the ladder of spiritual ascent rises beyond the realm where human language can avail. In Shegog’s congregation a kind of mystical union takes place which necessarily transcends the limitations of finite words. The sermon becomes a medium of communion; and it does so, as Noel Polk says, “when language breaks down completely, and [the assembled Christians] need not rely on it for the communication of their deepest beliefs: Jesus, in this frame, is in effect a signified which cannot have a sufficient signifier” (173). Shegog will go on preaching in words, for the via positiva is also necessary for spiritual wisdom and progress, but in this ritual moment communion takes place along the via negativa.

Even the vehicle of communion becomes “nothing.” Shegog’s preaching is the product of one who sees himself in Pauline terms: “I, yet not I, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). Indeed, in the midst of this verbal sacrament, the preacher appears to act almost in persona Christi: his “whole attitude [became] that of a serene, tortured crucifix that transcended its shabbiness and insignificance and made it of no moment. . .” (294-95). As he preaches, “a long moaning expulsion of breath rose from [the congregation], and a woman’s single soprano: ‘Yes, Jesus!’” In terms signifying the sacrificial life, Faulkner depicts the thoroughgoing nature of Dilsey’s participation in this event: “Dilsey sat bolt upright, her hand on Ben’s knee. Two tears slid down her fallen cheeks, in and out of the myriad coruscations of immolation and abnegation and time” (295).

His voice becoming more Negroid, Shegog raises his hands and proclaims, “I got de ricklickshun en de blood of de Lamb!” The members of his congregation “just sat swaying a little . . . as the voice took them into itself” (295). In his preaching, phrases of biblical shorthand tumble out in quick succession. Past, present, and future, abstraction and concrete detail, historical scene and parabolic moral—all cascade in close proximity to one another down the torrent of Shegog’s delivery. The rapid switching back and forth across time catches up the listener in a centripetal movement.
experienced as near contemporaneity. The preacher guides the flow of his oratory by keeping his eye on a steady light: the Word, present at Creation, incarnate in a man, coming again in glory to judge the quick and the dead.

Shegog’s focus on the Word—“I sees de light en I sees de word” (295)—reminds us again of the sacramental quality of this preaching, through which a minister “in a shabby alpaca coat” (293) communicates divine things. The author of the Fourth Gospel, whom Shegog is quoting, draws upon the tradition of the biblical prophets when he speaks of “the Word [that] was with God” (John 1:1). The Incarnation of God is, in St. John’s phrase, “the Word . . . made flesh” (1:14). This incarnate life is the ultimate revelation: the most complete means of communication possible this side of Paradise. In the Christian understanding, Jesus not only brings a word from God but is himself the Word that he brings: the last and greatest of the prophets, the perfect realization of the work of the Hebrew prophets. Christ is the ideal for all Christian preachers. In their preaching, the apostles and their successors down the centuries witness to this Word at the center of time. Their words participate in the Word of Christ, interpreting this decisive revelation, incorporating Christian people into its life and meaning. That as a preacher Shegog should hold fast to this Word is not surprising, therefore.

Then, referring both to the time when the Egyptians held the Israelites in bondage and to a popular Negro spiritual, the visitor says, “Dey passed away in Egypt, de swingin chariots” (295). Soon afterwards he intensifies this tyranny-and-exodus theme by pointing to the terrible event recounted in the Gospel of Matthew which became known as the slaughter of the holy innocents (2:13-18). In his telling, Shegog links the first-century tribulations of one mother, Mary, to the twentieth-century trials of all the mothers in attendance:

Look at dem little chillen settin dar. Jesus was like dat once. He mammy suffered de glory en de pangs. Sometime maybe she helt him at de nightfall, whilst de angels singin him to sleep; maybe she look out de do en see de Roman po-lice passin . . . . I . . . sees Mary jump up, sees de sojer face: We gwine to kill! We gwine to kill! We gwine
to kill yo little Jesus! I hears de weepin en de lamentation [Matt. 2:18] of de po mammy widout de salvation en de word of God! (296)

In focusing attention on the subject of oppression/liberation, Shegog stands squarely within the long tradition of black preaching. “Personalities such as Moses, Pharaoh, Mary, and Jesus,” a scholar of homiletics has observed, “. . . were genuine persons” in the black church setting. A leitmotif of African-American preaching has been the presence of suffering and redemption in the interlocking stories of the ancient Hebrews, of Jesus, and of blacks themselves. “The sufferings of Israel and those of the black community were fused, so that both, as it were, inhabited the same time and place” (Duke 82). On this Easter Sunday, the visiting preacher works to make the exodus experience of emancipation through Christ palpable to his fellow sojourners, who share with him a burdened history.

To prepare his hearers for the future judgment, Shegog urges them to heed the lesson contained in the story of Dives and Lazarus: “Was a rich man: whar he now, O breddren? Was a po man: whar he now, O sistuhhn?” (295). Most in his congregation would remember how, during his life on earth, Dives, a rich man, had always ignored Lazarus, a poor man covered with sores. When both died, Dives was sent to torment in Hades, and Lazarus was carried away by angels to be with Abraham (Luke 16:19-31).

By means of this story, the visiting preacher’s sermon incorporates an emphasis on communion as mutual responsibility: participation in Christ means communion with those who make up the Lord’s body. This service, like more formal liturgies, is an event which, in its dramatic summary of the way of the Christ, displays not only a symbol of faith but also a norm of conduct. Accepting an invitation to identify with Christ entails a willingness to offer oneself—in unity with Christ—on behalf of one’s fellow creatures.

Every tired Christian, Shegog declares, will say at the end of his or her life, “Let me lay down wid de Lawd, lemme lay down my load” (295). But Shegog is aware of Jesus’ admonition in Matt. 7:21, “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is
in heaven.” Therefore the preacher inquires of those present, “Den whut Jesus gwine say, O breddren? O sistuhn?” And he repeats the question that conveys the urgent demand and holds the essential requirement for entering the kingdom: “Is you got de ricklickshun en de Blood of de Lamb” (295)?

Shegog’s allusion to the story of Dives and Lazarus is a way of affirming that the true recollection of Christ’s sacrifice requires a consistent obedience to God’s will, and obedience entails how one treats “de least of dese” (296; see Matt. 25:40). The lively reception of the Word does not mean simply feeling “spiritual” or momentarily uplifted. Hence this Easter service becomes both an act of worship and a pattern for daily existence, the two sides held together through participation in and obedience to the way of Christ. Perhaps again having in mind the Revelation of St. John the Divine (7:4-8; 14:1-3), the visitor exhorts his auditors to have faith and to practice charity by suggesting to them that the saints in heaven may be limited in number: “Case I aint gwine load down heaven!” (295)

Before Shegog speaks of resurrection and glory, he paints a scene of suffering and abandonment. Jesus is subjected to the mockery of those who call out, “Ef you be Jesus, lif up yo tree en walk!” (296). Does Shegog (or Faulkner) here confuse two quite different New Testament passages, one a taunt quoted in the Passion narrative and the other a command uttered by Jesus during a healing miracle (Matthews, Play 109; Ross and Polk 183)? In fact it seems more likely that the preacher is artfully combining allusions to these two different situations as a way of dealing more vividly with two references in Matthew 27, one to Jesus saving sinners and the other to the Messiah saving himself: “He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him” (v. 42). In Shegog’s version the jeer sounds even more derisive than in the original: “Ef you be Jesus, lif up yo tree en walk!” Moreover, in Matt. 9:5-6, just before Jesus tells the healed man, “Arise, take up thy bed,” he states that he will perform this miracle in order to demonstrate “that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins” (9:6). Shegog’s homiletical emphasis is on the cross of Christ and its power to forgive sins, heal transgressors,

The Reverend Mr. Shegog’s Easter Sermon
and free captives. A quoted word of mockery—modified for extra spin—which deftly conlates allusions to taunting, to saving, and to healing/forgiving could be rhetorically effective, especially given the added irony of this gibe in relation to the events of Easter.

Sunday’s exaltation is arrived at only through the ignominy of Friday and after the emptiness of Saturday. Shegog recalls not only “de wailin of women” but also “de weepin en de cryin en de turnt-away face of God” (296). Calling to mind Christ’s taking on human sin, his estrangement from the Father, and his cry of dereliction from the cross (Matt. 27:46), Shegog links the forsakenness of the Son and the possible abandonment of sinners: “I says to you, when de Lawd did turn His mighty face, say, Aint gwine overload heaven! I can see de widowed God shet His do. . . .” When the visiting preacher declares, “I sees de darkness en de death everlasting upon de generations” (296), his vision of Golgotha is complete.

Finally, Shegog delivers a summary burst of pulpit oratory: “I sees de resurrection en de light; sees de meek Jesus sayin Dey kilt me dat ye shall live again. . . . Breddren, O breddren! I sees de doom crack en de golden horns shoutin down de glory, en de arisen dead whut got de blood en de ricklickshun of de Lamb!” Repeating a phrase from an earlier description, Faulkner reveals Dilsey’s response to what she has heard: “Dilsey sat bolt upright . . ., crying rigidly and quietly in the annealment and the blood of the remembered Lamb” (297).

As she walks home, “through the bright noon,” Dilsey tells Frony, “I’ve seed de first en de last” (297). With this assertion she is, first of all, simply describing her experience of participating in this Easter service, which climaxes in the dynamic recollection of the blood of the Lamb, made present in the preached Word. She has seen what the Reverend Mr. Shegog has seen and evoked: “Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last” (Rev. 22:13). She too was there. And seeing is believing: she will go on putting her trust in the meaningfulness of this eternal narrative for her own life.

When Dilsey tells her daughter, “I seed de beginning, en now I sees de endin” (297), she is thinking, too, of the final disintegration