

CHAPTER ONE

★ From Rags to Snitches

★ The Resurrection of J. K. Rowling

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She looked ordinary enough to be a mere Muggle, but as the woman moved respectfully but steadily closer to me in the church activities hall, I realized I was wrong. “I came to your lecture tonight to ask you one question. I could ask it now or at the end,” she said softly. Her smile was so warm I could feel it. She clutched a purse knitted by hand, her moccasins dated from the 1980s, and she didn’t seem to waste any time in her day on brushing her hair. She looked a lot like my image of Molly Weasley.

The church hall was festive for the lecture that night, titled “Harry Potter in Lent.” Church volunteers had set up four long tables for their potluck dinner, each with a Hogwarts House banner above it, and the tables were piled high with British-themed desserts. An eagle picture hung on the podium set up for me to give my lecture on theological themes in Harry Potter. I had brought dozens of handmade Chocolate Frogs with Wizard Cards I’d made with faces from the church community directory. At the entrance to the hall, I placed my Hedwig puppet in an antique birdcage I had found online. The birdcage sat on top of a trunk with Hogwarts stickers on it, under a large sign in the hallway for King’s Cross Station and a smaller sign for Platform 9¾. The church hall was lit by strings of electric candles hanging from the ceiling.

I usually bring decorations to any public lecture on Christian themes in Harry Potter. But this particular church had its own passionate Harry Potter fandom, a group including all ages from young children to retired seniors. They had worked for hours before the lecture to turn their activities hall into the Great Hall, and many had brought their own Harry Potter memorabilia to add to the decorations. As is often the case, individuals who were previously inactive or mostly unseen members of the church had vol-

unteered to help out with the Harry Potter lecture. Nearly every volunteer was wearing something that looked like old Hogwarts-themed Halloween costumes: House ties or scarves, Quidditch robes, and more than one pair of eyeglasses held together with tape. But these Potter fan volunteers had to be shown where the bathrooms, lights, or outlets could be found in the church. Harry Potter-themed events at church have a way of not only bringing new people into the church but also reinviting and reconnecting inactive members, often with their (young or adult) children in tow.

But back to the woman. She had approached me in a way that was both shy and bold. Her eyes were twinkling. I told her I would be happy to try to answer her question before the event started. The lecture was being recorded, and unknown to me, the recording had already started. So I have her words in digital form, though I can't imagine forgetting them. She took a deep breath and then said these words: "I don't go to this church—or any church, really—but my neighbor does. I saw the flyer about tonight from her church bulletin that was hanging on her refrigerator." Her crouching posture and nervous rocking back and forth told me she was somewhat apologetic about not being a churchgoer, but not much. She continued:

I am a total Harry Potter fan. I'm not a church fan. But I came here tonight hoping that you can explain to me *why* you think these books have changed my life. I know they did. I'm just not sure how, because I've read a lot of books in my life and not been so moved and changed by them. I've been a reader since I was four, and I'm seventy-one years old—my birthday was just last month. But very few things have ever moved me the way Harry Potter has moved me. I'll tell you this: these stories are too real to not be real. I don't believe in magic, but I'm here tonight to try to figure out what is different about these stories and why I'm different because I read them. So, that's my question before you even start talking: why does this story change people?¹

There is a holiness about her words that has stayed with me as I speak to groups small and large, whether they be youth groups, adult retreats, clergy conferences, teacher conferences, secular parenting groups, book clubs, leadership seminars, or Harry Potter Bible studies. No matter where I go, I remember this woman's conviction and her question: "These stories are too real to not be real" and "why does this story change people?"

The woman's words resonate strongly with me because for years of teaching Christianity, I have often said the words "the resurrection is too real to not be real." So I recognized what the woman was trying to say

about ideas that seem too good to be true and yet also so powerful in our lives that they can't be fiction. Keep in mind Harry's question to Dumbledore about the very nature of magic, life, and death in their final intimate exchange at King's Cross Station.

"Tell me one last thing," said Harry. "Is this real? Or has this been happening inside my head?"

Dumbledore beamed at him, and his voice sounded loud and strong in Harry's ears even though the bright mist was descending again, obscuring his figure.

"Of course it's happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?"²

Often we are drawn to accept certain ideas or narratives into our definition of reality, not as propositions or arguments, but rather as explanations for our lived experiences. Of all the ideas, claims, and parables in the Bible that are hard to understand or even to accept, the resurrection is an event and an experience that makes sense to me and my lived experience. I see its presence and power in my daily life—in seasons, in relationships, in joy, and in suffering. I have simply never experienced a death of any kind that did not unfold in some form of resurrection—of new life, new identity, or new freedom. Resurrection is not the erasing of pain or grief, but rather a birth through pain and grief, pointing and powering toward new life. Resurrection is too real not to be real. And the specific account of the resurrection of Jesus strikes me as sharing the shape of my own experiences of death and resurrection in the human condition. The Gospels never introduced to me the reality of life after death. Rather, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus affirmed and confirmed my own experience of liberation—in body and spirit—in all the areas of my life where I have accepted and passed through the limits, the losses, and the death inherent in human life and creation. When I have dared to embrace the promise of abundant life in Christ through many kinds of suffering and death in human experience, I have found every tomb empty, powerless over joy, and flooded with resurrection light. Resurrection is real to me because resurrection has happened to me. For me, the Gospels are not didactic as much as they are diagnostic. I do not believe I am unique in holding this conviction. I believe that at the core of every human person is both the hope and the expectation that we can and even will overcome death in all its forms. Grief is itself the evidence that death is a scandal to our imagination and our rational mind.

The reason the Harry Potter series is so powerful for teaching faith is that it is a story about resurrection, from the first page to the last word of

the epilogue. And in this way, the epic corresponds to the deepest longings and dreams of any person. The stories do more than engage us with a story about the life, death, and resurrection of any one character. They brilliantly portray countless examples of folks living familiar and relatable versions of daily life, though living in a world infused with both the natural and the supernatural. Rowling has intentionally written an epic in which there are sufferings, deaths, and explicit resurrections in the lives of many characters, and the result is that the truths in her books correspond and call to the truths in our own experience. In lectures and teaching, I have learned from many a Harry Potter reader that often a voice in their head whispers things like “Me too” when they read Rowling’s masterpiece.

It’s crucial to consider that Rowling’s epic is not just about the possible resurrection of Harry Potter after receiving a death curse from Voldemort in the Forbidden Forest at the end of the series. I want to be clear about this from the outset of this book: I do not believe Harry Potter ever died in the seven books, nor do I believe he was actually resurrected from the dead, as some have interpreted from the stories and specifically when Voldemort strikes him with the killing curse in the forest. These seven books are a resurrection story, but I do not believe they are a resurrection story about Harry Potter. If this were the case, then this epic is only a resurrection story about Harry, and that would not, in my opinion, explain the global appeal of these books and the millions of readers who say that the books affected them in unique and transformative ways. Such a narrow understanding of where and how resurrection happens in this narrative simply does not explain how these books are changing people’s lives.

Hidden in the Snitch

I believe these books change people’s lives because the resurrection at the core of this story is the real and lived resurrection of Joanne Rowling. Her story of resurrection in her lived experience is not fiction. It is the story and reality of her life. I have witnessed what happens to people when they experience the truth and grace in her life story, told through the narrative of Harry Potter.

The fact that these books tell the story of J. K. Rowling as much as the story of Harry Potter was not my first impression. The story was so compelling and engaging that I thought little of the author on my first viewing of the films or reading the series. I’d seen all the movies and read all the books more than once before I did any serious consideration of the life story and the spiritual journey of Joanne Rowling. But once I had sifted through documentaries and the awkward interviews (and gotten used to

Rowling's disconnection from, leaning toward disdain for, the press), it became clear to me that her actual life is woven into every chapter of the fictional books, the stories reflecting the dark depressions and miraculous resurrections she experienced as a child and young adult. And so powerful were those experiences and transformations in her life—coming from darkness to light in learning to deal with her depression, learning to deal with her independence as well as her need for other people, meeting with both success and failure—that the grace-full cycles of breaking, healing, and resurrecting in her life can be experienced by the reader. Her real resurrections—incarnate in Harry, Neville, Dobby, or Snape—arrest us because they remind us of our deep hope for our own. We love Harry Potter, not because Rowling wrote a great story, but because Rowling wrote our story with the ending we have longed for in our lives. How did I answer the question of the Molly Weasley-looking woman in the church hall? “When we read the truth, the truth will set us free.”

It is predictable in our consumerist culture that many people simply admire the life of J. K. Rowling, calling hers a “rags to riches” story. But the story that is most remarkable about J. K. Rowling is not the financial success, not going from being on public assistance and living in public housing to becoming one of the wealthiest women in Britain and the world, though thanks to Oprah and *Time* magazine, that’s the story many people know. The story I’m talking about is her personal experience of loss, failure, depression, and hopelessness, which did not destroy hope or creativity but allowed, perhaps forced, her to die to many things and find new life in writing the story of Harry James Potter. In a speech to Harvard graduates, Rowling put it this way:

I think it fair to say that by any conventional measure, a mere seven years after my [college] graduation day, I had failed on an epic scale. An exceptionally short-lived marriage had imploded, and I was jobless, a lone parent, and as poor as it is possible to be in modern Britain, without being homeless. The fears that my parents had had for me, and that I had had for myself, had both come to pass, and by every usual standard, I was the biggest failure I knew.

So why do I talk about the benefits of failure? Simply because failure meant a stripping away of the inessential. I stopped pretending to myself that I was anything other than what I was, and began to direct all my energy into finishing the only work that mattered to me. Had I really succeeded at anything else, I might never have found the determination to succeed in the one arena I believed I truly belonged. I was

set free, because my greatest fear had been realized, and I was still alive, and I still had a daughter whom I adored, and I had an old typewriter and a big idea. And so rock bottom became the solid foundation on which I rebuilt my life.³

For most of us, our greatest fear as human beings is death or one of the countless forms of death in our daily lives. Even Freud, haunted and left undone by his own thoughts of death, who wrote so many volumes to explain (and blame) all the fears in life that fashion human beings, spoke of the “painful riddle of death.” But Rowling makes peace with death in a way that Freud never did, “because [her] greatest fear had been realized, and [she] was still alive.” In more than one way, Joanne died. And yet she found that life was not a casualty of death. This resurrection transformed “rock bottom” into the solid foundation on which she “rebuilt [her] life.” Tens of millions of readers have been inspired to seek similar transformations in their lives because J. K. Rowling left her tomb with a typewriter.

Defeating Dementors

I’ll talk more about dementors in chapter 4, but a dementor is precisely the kind of character that is created by a person who has wrestled with real demons in her life. Who has not encountered something like a dementor at some point in life? I have lost count of the number of people—from children to adults in their eighties—who raise their hands in lectures or book groups to testify about their struggles against what they call the dementors in their lives.

One of my techniques to help group members flesh out these impressions is to have them each write down a list of their personal dementors—those things that suck the joy and every happy memory out of them—and make word clouds to project on the wall of the meeting space. Words leap out of the collections of daily dementors: *cancer, divorce, insecurity, loneliness, depression, failure*. One of my favorite ways to use these dementor word clouds is to collect them from different groups of people and show them to new groups, asking, “How old do you think the people are who made this dementor word cloud?” Folks are often shocked when I tell them that clouds speaking of *cancer, terrorism, and financial insecurities* are from eighth graders. Equally shocking to groups is when I read a list of dementors containing *insecurity, popularity, and awkwardness* and inform them that it’s from a senior citizens’ book group.

In years of talking to Harry Potter fans, I have never had a person say they haven’t faced dementors. Not one. Varied are the ways we suffer as

human beings, but Rowling's brilliance is inventing a potent and palpable creature that readers recognize and immediately associate with their suffering and struggle with death. Rowling's foul hooded joy-suckers put a particular face on our universal foes. "There is a whole burgeoning field of religion and popular culture . . . looking at these stories as a reflection of the spiritual or religious sensibilities of the culture," says Russell W. Dalton, an assistant professor of Christian education at Brite Divinity School in Texas and the author of *Faith Journey through Fantasy Lands: A Christian Dialogue with Harry Potter, Star Wars, and the Lord of the Rings*. Dalton goes on, "When stories become as popular as the Harry Potter stories, they no longer simply reflect the religious views of the author, but become artifacts of the culture, and they say something about the culture that has embraced them."⁴ "Reading Harry Potter is like reading the diary I never kept for myself," one senior citizen in Pennsylvania told me. A young adult said to me in a Bible study, "Harry Potter books are the soundtrack of reality." In many ways, the series stands before each reader as a Mirror of Erised; in Rowling's personal and resurrection-focused narrative, we see our own longings for a resurrected life.

We have all been in the valley of the shadow of death. But not all of us are able to climb out. We can become incapacitated. And that too was part of J. K. Rowling's experience. She was diagnosed more than once as clinically depressed. Just a few months after Rowling had begun to write the Harry Potter series, her mother died, and the event nearly crushed her. Her mother never knew anything about Harry Potter. But J. K. Rowling has said in many interviews since finishing the books that the death of her mother figures prominently throughout the series. Joanne's grief multiplied after her father abandoned his relationship with his daughters. Add to that grief a rocky start to finding a career, what she called "a brief and catastrophic marriage," and single motherhood on welfare—all by her midtwenties.

A Personality

C. S. Lewis once said, "If anything whatever is common to all believers, and even to many unbelievers, it is the sense that in the Gospels they have met a personality."⁵ He was trying to explain that for him, reading the Gospels was a different experience than with any other genre of literature. Page after page, parable after parable, he felt what he called "a personality" present in the text. He felt a person speaking to him, listening to him, persuading him, consoling him, rebuking him, inviting him, blessing him. He felt directly spoken to, not by the text, but by a person—Jesus Christ—speaking through it.

Many of the Harry Potter fans I talk to describe a similar experience of feeling known and addressed by a single person through the countless characters in the series. Since the book is written from the perspective of Harry, many people feel that they are developing the strongest and deepest relationship with Harry Potter. Others feel as if Dumbledore is watching and mentoring their reading of the story. But when I question readers about their frustrations with Harry or Dumbledore (for there are things to detest as well as to love about both of them), it is clear that there is a perspective or voice or person that comes through the text and guides the reader, beyond any one character we know by name, pulling us, touching our lives, coming off the page into our hearts.

I believe that this person is Joanne Rowling, whose agenda is potent and persuasive. She has said more than once that her books are different than the works of C. S. Lewis or J. R. R. Tolkien in that they are not intentional Christian allegories meant to convert or form hearts and minds into belief in God. I categorize Rowling's work as testimonial rather than apologetic. Rowling doesn't weave a story to teach the resurrection. Rather, her own experience of resurrection is so powerful that it rules the rhythm of the stories she tells. She is driven, not by the possibility of the reader's resurrection, but by the power of her own.

The Power of Love

Harry Potter helps people find, explore, and increase their faith because Rowling is not asking the reader to do anything other than witness the power of love above all else, even death. Throughout the series' more than four thousand pages, she crafts a community of contagious characters, some driven toward goodness and others toward darkness, and subjects them all to the power of love—specifically, sacrificial love that can conquer death. Her goal is the participation of the reader in the struggle between good and evil, not the persuasion of the reader to adopt Rowling's own convictions.

Like any student at Hogwarts or any adult witch or wizard contemplating sides in the war led by Voldemort, we can choose our path as we read the books. The lack of explicit religious claims, names, or norms in this series allows the reader to respond to the power of sacrificial love made manifest in the lives of characters without the allegorical aims found in authors like Lewis, Tolkien, Madeleine L'Engle, and others. Sirius Black says it best to Harry: "The world isn't split into good people and Death Eaters. We've all got both light and dark inside us. What matters is the part we choose to act on. That's who we really are."⁶

Words

"Words are the most powerful, inexhaustible source of magic that we have." —Dumbledore to Harry⁷

Of all the interviews and documentaries I've seen on the life of Rowling, my favorite is a British documentary called *J. K. Rowling: A Year in the Life*.⁸ In the documentary, filmed from October 2006 to October 2007, you watch Rowling typing the last lines of the epilogue to the *Deathly Hallows*. The independent filmmaker was a friend, so Rowling granted him unusual access to her private life. Many facts and personal stories from her life that now float around the internet or appear on the Pottermore website were first (and only) revealed in this forty-five-minute film. In one part of the documentary, Rowling is unexpectedly asked to do word association with the filmmaker. If the director is to be believed, Joanne did not know this particular sit-down would include word association. It makes for riveting viewing because it is clear as you watch that Rowling was speaking extemporaneously and with a rare authentic presence usually kept hidden when talking to journalists.

Consider carefully the questions the filmmaker asked her and Rowling's penetrating one-word answers. On screen, she takes no more than two to three seconds to offer her one-word responses. The one-minute clip is a tour de force, a peek into the vault of her deepest convictions. Here are his questions and her one-word answers:

Director: What is your favorite virtue? Rowling: Courage.
What vice do you most despise? Bigotry.
What is the vice you are most willing to forgive? Gluttony.
What is your most marked characteristic? I'm a trier.
What are you most afraid of? Losing someone I love.
What is the quality that you most like in a man? Morals.
What is the quality you most like in a woman? Generosity.
What do you most value about your friends? Tolerance.
What is your principle defect? Short fuse.
What is your favorite occupation? Writing.
What is your dream of happiness? A happy family.⁹

When you read this word list, it becomes clear that the Harry Potter series is as much an autobiography of Rowling as it is the epic story of the Boy Who Lived. Without trying, Rowling's one-word answers to these probing and poignant questions outline many of the major themes of her books and highlight many of the aspects of her central characters. In the

seven-book series, we see the depth and breadth of Rowling's storytelling soul. In this list of single words, we glimpse the fingerprint of that soul at work in her one-million-word epic.

Brokenness and Death

*"His job was to walk calmly into Death's welcoming arms."*¹⁰

One of the more arresting quotations of C. S. Lewis is this: "Die before you die, there is no chance after."¹¹ This statement captures so many ideas and invitations we find in the New Testament and reminds us of so many promises that if we are willing to die in this life, we will be resurrected in this life. We find abundant life when we decide, as Galatians 2:20 says, that "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." This is, in a sense, the central message of the New Testament and the central message of Jesus Christ: that if we follow him—if we are willing, in his words, to die to ourselves—we will come to abundant and eternal life in him. We can, as Paul says in Romans 13:14, put on Christ.

But we cannot have this death and new life as long as we continue to trust or to serve things other than God. C. S. Lewis is correct that the gospel is an invitation to new life while you are alive—to become a new creation even as you walk the world in the flesh. For guidance in this resurrected living, we are given the narratives of Jesus after his own resurrection, when he walks to Emmaus or has fish and fellowship with his followers on a beach.¹² He is seen in the flesh, and through Thomas we are invited to touch the wounds in his hands and experience a resurrected person in the world.¹³

In the Christian faith, we believe that these postresurrection narratives teach that Christ offers us his life—a life that doesn't end at the crucifixion or in the tomb. Christ shows up on the other side of death to walk with us, talk with us, feast with us, and incarnate the message that we can be resurrected in this life, freed from "death's sting."

This is precisely why Harry Potter is not a Christ figure. I part company with many people who have interpreted the series by saying that Harry is a Christ figure. I say he is not a Christ figure because if that is true, he becomes less of a role model for any of us. If he were anything near perfect as his Father in heaven is perfect, then he would not be a good example of a normal person trying to live a faithful life. Harry does Christlike things. Dumbledore does Christlike things, and for this reason he too is often

labeled a God-figure by interpreters of the series. But both Harry and Dumbledore also do humanlike things, including cruel and selfish things. They both have in their history manipulation, lying, and pride leading to the suffering of others. For all these reasons, I would never describe Harry as a Christ figure. But what is so much more exciting, inviting, and inspiring is that Harry can be Christlike, as can we. One of the reasons these books work so well in inspiring acts of faith, hope, and love in readers is that the central heroes of the stories are as broken as they are blessed.

Despite Harry's brokenness, he chooses to follow love to the moment when he can kiss the Snitch and say, "I am about to die."¹⁴ The whole series to that point is the process of Harry learning what it means to die to himself. He finally decides to reserve nothing for himself or for revenge, to withhold nothing from his friends or family, but instead to walk straight into death knowing that others would live. Harry's drama is the drama of every baptized Christian. We are sealed on the forehead in baptism into the gift of self-sacrificial love that makes abundant life possible for us. How do we become people who, like Harry, take responsibility for fighting evil and protecting the common good? How do we fight evil without becoming evil? How do we become people capable of laying down our lives for others? When faced with death, which of the Three Brothers will we be?¹⁵

No one forces Harry to die. Rowling doesn't force the reader to agree that death is the only path to freedom for Harry or the world. Rather than be explicit about her own Christian convictions, she gently shows her hand and heart in the words of Dumbledore when he speaks to Snape about the need for Harry to give up his life to Voldemort:

"So the boy . . . the boy must die?" asked Snape quite calmly.

"And Voldemort must do it, Severus. That is essential."¹⁶

The Seeds of Faith

Occasionally I have led workshops or clergy conferences where it was my challenge to help church folks evangelize or develop faith formation programs in their communities. A favorite opening activity of mine is to break up the gathering into small groups and hand them each a paragraph describing a nameless person. You might call this a case study exercise. I challenge the groups to read the description and discuss how they might minister to the person. What kind of sermon, rituals, or social justice initiatives might speak to her? For what is she longing? What might her struggles be—socially, economically, and spiritually? What might push her away? What kinds of liturgies might reach out to her and engage her heart?

If she came to visit their church on a Sunday, would she even stay through the end of the first service? Here's a sample of the paragraph I hand out:

A woman in her forties arrives to your church on a Sunday. She was born into a hardworking, middle-class family with educated parents. In her teens, her mother was diagnosed with MS and died slowly throughout her teenage years. Her mother eventually died when this woman was in her early twenties. She is now, and has been for a long time, estranged from her father, who was mostly absent during her adolescent years. She grew up without any religion practiced at home, but from the age of ten she hung around the Anglican church on her street and presented herself for baptism when she was only eleven. Her faith has come and gone through her college years and since, though she continues to attend church as often as she can. An early and short marriage, a miscarriage, and more than a year of living on welfare and in public housing as a single mother eventually stabilized into a fruitful romantic and economic life in a second marriage. She had two additional children. She is creative, progressive, and skeptical. She has worked for nonprofits and schools, caring deeply about social justice action. She is a writer.

I watch small groups go to work to set up ministry plans or analyze their church programing and liturgies, all with an eye to share the gospel and offer discipleship to the hypothetical woman. Folks often put together wonderful plans to reach out to this woman. Many realize through the exercise that they don't have social justice activities that would inspire or engage her. They realize they don't have formation programs that would address both her intellectual curiosity about faith and her childcare needs. They wonder how on earth they could get a woman like this to commit to their church or faith community. It is always a crowd silencer when I finished the activity by saying, "And by the way, this is a real person and her name is J. K. Rowling."

Rowling wrote fantasy stories and read them to her younger sister, Dianne, as they grew up. Her childhood home in Tutshill, Wales, was named Church Cottage and sat alongside a graveyard near the Forest of Dean. At age nine, she started working on Saturdays for one British pound a day, cleaning the pews of St. Luke's Anglican Church.

When I first discovered this piece of information about her Saturday hours in an old church, I smiled and thought of the priest or staff at that church. They obviously did not need a nine-year-old girl and her seven-year-old sister to clean their pews, but they saw two young souls who had moved to the neighborhood and were looking for something to do,

people to know, and relationships outside their home. I believe the church that hired those two children to do simple work was up to something—a sacred scheming to introduce or engage their spiritual curiosity.

You can go to the church to this day and find that the two of them signed their names in the guest registry every week. We know that J. K. Rowling would sit in the pews in the colorful streams of light coming through the stained-glass windows. We know from her that she played and maybe even prayed among the dusty candles and tired wood structures of an old and small neighborhood church. Joanne was curious about Christianity and its sacraments, though her family did not share this curiosity.

Called by Name

How many children seek out a priest for baptism at such a young age? I have always thought it significant that magical children in the Harry Potter series get their Hogwarts letter at age eleven—the same age at which Joanne received the baptism she passionately sought. A fruitful connection for teaching faith can be made between J. K. Rowling's baptism and receiving a Hogwarts letter. The letter doesn't make one magical, nor does baptism make a person into the image of God. Our sacraments do not create our identity, but they name and feed our identity and direct us toward our destiny to be one with God as Christ is one with God. At Hogwarts, the name of each magical child is written, on the day they are born, by a magic quill into a book of names, housed at the Ministry of Magic. The Hogwarts letter is no more and no less than a ritual to deliver and declare that fixed identity to the person who is already magical. The letter begins the journey to learn how to develop one's identity. This is as good a definition of a sacrament as you can find.

The first chapters of *The Philosopher's Stone* demonstrate the truth that one's identity is only named by the letter and not created by it.¹⁷ Vernon Dursley did not understand this, trying to save Harry from wizardry by destroying every letter. You can stop the letter, but you can't stop the invitation that calls a person to live and learn into their true identity. The letter is the baptism into the wizarding world.

In many of the retreats or lectures or classes I've taught about Harry Potter and theology, I always try to begin the gathering by having a Hogwarts letter written to each person in the room. I've developed my own Hogwarts stationary. I use the same color ink as in the movies. I found a font for Professor McGonagall's handwriting. Each person who comes into the lecture hall, parish, retreat center, or classroom has the opportunity of receiving a Hogwarts letter. And I use wax seals as well. I can't tell you how many

times I have stayed up late in my living room preparing for a lecture, class, or retreat, burning the candle, melting the wax, and putting the Hogwarts seal on the back of each acceptance letter. I do this because I always intend, as the classes unfold, to let people know that in baptism we say that you are sealed as Christ's own forever. And I make the connection between being sealed with oil at baptism and receiving a Hogwarts letter, something that lets you know who you are and what is ahead for you, with a wax seal. In time and through study, Rowling learned the meaning of the ritual of Holy Baptism: that we lose our lives in the water only to rise up from it into the life of Christ and into his body, the church. Death is drowned in the water of the open font—ever a symbol of the open grave. Perhaps not at eleven years old, but in time, Rowling came to know that the font is a sign of dying to self and rising in Christ. Harry's Hogwarts letter on his eleventh birthday symbolizes Rowling's own journey into the font whose welcoming waters whisper that the last enemy to be defeated is death.

Resurrection

Many people say the Harry Potter series is primarily a story of the battle between good and evil. J. K. Rowling has made comments like this herself. This observation is true but imprecise. I believe these stories also play out the battle between two worldviews in Western civilization: immortality versus resurrection. In a first-world superpower, we play with and peddle in immortality all around us. As the baby boomer generation marches on in years and into retirements that are lasting longer than those of any generation before it, we are drowning in commercials for pills to combat every sign of aging. Anyone in ministry knows that people of all ages in our faith communities are often terrified by death, despite our sermons, creeds, hymns, prayers, or liturgies. As a high school chaplain, it never ceased to amaze me that some of my twelfth graders had never been to a funeral. Some families go to great lengths to shield their children from experiencing death. When I was a child, families in our community brought pets into their home with the precise aim of teaching children to handle building relationships and dealing with death in childhood. Nowadays you can pay to clone your favorite pet.

When we think of Voldemort, we think of someone who does spectacular acts of cruelty and murder. But at the core of Voldemort's life is not necessarily a desire to hurt other people. His enemy is death, and he does and dares anything to avoid it. Voldemort is the embodiment of the quest for immortality at all costs. This makes him both terrifying and tragic. He is the extraordinary version of a desire in all of us to somehow avoid our

inevitable descent in body and mind as we approach our death and the deaths around us. Voldemort does not seek the Deathly Hallows to use them in life, but rather to empower him over death.

Contrast that drive for unending life with the sacrificial love of Lily Potter or Harry Potter, who decide that they would rather die than live if it means that the lives of others can be protected or saved. Voldemort would rather kill than die. So the battle rages on between Voldemort, driven by the desire to escape death, and Harry, driven by the desire that others might live. Harry's very existence is preserved until becoming an adult only because he is bathed in his mother's sacrificial blood. Harry was made an orphan by an act of love; Voldemort was made an orphan by lack of love. Harry was raised with the reality that his life was so precious that others would die for it; Voldemort was raised with the reality that his life was so worthless that others would disown it. Harry is able to face death in ways Voldemort cannot because he comes to understand the ongoing and ever-present love and care of the people who died for him at key points in his life, as in the graveyard or the forest when he sees visions of his parents pledging their presence in the battles with Voldemort. When holding the Resurrection Stone, Harry sees his parents, Lupin, and Sirius in the Forbidden Forest before giving himself up to Voldemort, and he asks, "Why are you here, all of you?" His mother's answer teaches the communion of saints in three words: "We never left."

A Choice to Live

I have always been taken by the fact that Rowling began writing Harry Potter stories not because her life was falling into place, but precisely at the time when her life was falling apart. She describes herself as having been deep in spiritual and psychological darkness, but her passion for writing the story in her heart about a boy who went to wizarding school allowed enough light in her life to start a flame. Rowling explains her climb out of depression as a combination of fear, adrenaline, and hope. Having failed, in her estimation, at many endeavors in her young adult life, Joanne felt there was nothing else she could do but write. She wasn't sure anyone would ever publish her book, but she decided to write for herself. She made a choice to live, to find the words for the story in her heart. She believed writing her story might begin to heal the brokenness in her life. This is the beginning of the resurrection experience. Through hope, however faint, death in any form can be faced, endured and defeated by resurrection. Rowling wrote her way to new life, and I believe that there is a residue of her resurrection on every page in the Harry Potter stories.

"I Open at the Close"

In one of the most significant scenes for those interested in Christian theology or for those wanting to share or teach faith with Harry Potter, we see Harry walk into the Forbidden Forest during the last Battle of Hogwarts. He pulls out the Snitch, kisses it, and says, "I am about to die." And at that moment, the words written on the Snitch become clear to him in a way they had not been before: "I open at the close."¹⁸ And the Snitch indeed opens. The Resurrection Stone appears to him—a resource and reward for his vow to die for others. This moment of receiving resurrection power from a decision of sacrificial love is a powerful symbol for those of us that want to use Harry Potter as we share and teach the Christian faith. Harry's willingness to die unlocks the Stone, which makes possible the experience of seeing those who loved him to death. But his experience of that great cloud of witnesses is limited. Harry realizes that full communion with them comes only after death. So he drops the Stone and puts his faith in resurrection over immortality.

In Harry's dramatic walk toward death, one might miss the subtle message of the Stone buried in the Snitch. Consider the Snitch as a handful of gold, something highly prized for its value. We are all Seekers of peace and safety and often look to material goods that promise wealth or security. Who among us has not sought after a golden Snitch in the form of some promise of safety or wealth in the material world? But in contrast to that drive to gather and gain, consider the message of the buried Stone. Even if we try foolishly to seek safety or freedom in the empty but sparkling trinket treasures of the world, we can nonetheless find resurrection buried in the heart of all things. Where can we find the freedom and new life of resurrection? Rowling answers: even in idols unworthy of our search, God plants the experience of resurrection. No matter where or what we are seeking, God finds and feeds our longing to overcome death.

Every Easter we hear the gospel story of the faithful women going to the tomb to clean and properly bury the dead body of their leader and Lord. Since my childhood, I have pictured these women walking and weeping at sunrise, waking from the Sabbath having to face the reality of death. I see them falling down on their knees in exhaustion and confusion when they see that the stone sealing the tomb is rolled away. The first time I read the passage of Harry's Snitch opening to reveal the Stone, I began to reimagine this familiar gospel narrative. What if those women had looked up at the tomb and seen something written above the entrance, carved deep into the stone? What do you think it would say

that might explain what happened there? I know what I think should be written: “I open at the close.”

NOTES

1. Attendee at “Harry Potter for Lent” lecture series, Meade Memorial Church, Alexandria, Virginia, March 2016.
2. J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (New York: Scholastic, 2007), 723.
3. J. K. Rowling, “The Fringe Benefits of Failure, and the Importance of Imagination,” Harvard Commencement Address, June 5, 2008.
4. Michael Paulson, “The Book of Harry,” *Boston Globe*, August 16, 2009, http://archive.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2009/08/16/how_the_boy_wizard_won_over_religious_critics/.
5. C. S. Lewis, *Readings for Meditation and Reflection* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 20.
6. David Yates, “Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix” (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2007), film, 01:15:40.
7. David Yates, “Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part 2” (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2011), film, 01:34:57.
8. James Runcie, “J. K. Rowling: A Year in the Life” (Glasgow, UK: IWC Media, 2007), film.
9. Ibid.
10. *Deathly Hallows*, 691.
11. C. S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold* (New York: HarperCollins, 1956), 291.
12. Luke 24:13–35; John 21:4–14.
13. John 20:24–29.
14. *Deathly Hallows*, 698.
15. Ibid., 406–9.
16. Ibid., 686.
17. J. K. Rowling always intended for the first book to be called *The Philosopher’s Stone*, but the American publisher came up with the title *The Sorcerer’s Stone*. In this book, I use Rowling’s intentional title, calling the first book of the series *The Philosopher’s Stone*.
18. *Deathly Hallows*, 698.