

Proclaiming Easter from the Balcony

Thomas G. Long

Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey

"With Easter the laughter of the redeemed, the dance of the liberated . . . begins. According to Hippolytus the risen Christ is the 'leader of the mystic rounddance' and the church is the bride who dances with him."—Jurgen Moltmann¹

Disturbing Voices, Surprising Angles

One Sunday morning, several years ago, a neatly dressed man disrupted a worship service in a suburban church by standing up in the balcony and announcing in a clear, loud voice, "I have a word from the Lord!" No one will ever know what that word was, since his initial outburst prompted several alert ushers to spring like gazelles up the balcony stairs and to escort the man out the front doors of the church and into the street.

Ironic, isn't it? Week after week, those of us who preach stand in the pulpit and announce, implicitly or explicitly, "I have a word from the Lord." No one stirs in wary expectation, no alarmed ushers bound into the pulpit to drag us quickly into the street before we can stammer out whatever revelation stirs in us. But let a stranger stand up in the church balcony with a word from the Lord, an unexpected voice from an unexpected angle, and all decorum breaks loose. Now, in all probability, the fellow in that church balcony was a crank, running a quart or two low on reality. But maybe, just maybe, he was an Isaiah, with a true and disturbing word from the Lord, or perhaps he was an Ezekiel: half crank, half prophet, vision and eccentricity in an inseparable alloy. We'll never know. Whatever word was climbing over the ropes and into the sanctuary was pinned to the mat and silenced by an ecclesiastical half nelson.

The disturbing and embarrassing character of God's word, especially when it comes in unexpected ways—from the balcony, so to speak—serves as a theme of Peggy Payne's wry novel *Revelation*. Swain Hammond, the main character, is the Yale-educated pastor of the Westside Presbyterian Church in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Westside is a drifting, vaguely liberal, congregation full of "academics from the university community" and other "bright, interesting people," and Swain in their perfect match. The only problem, and the fact that propels the novel, is that Swain has heard the voice of God—in an embarrassingly literal way. In his backyard one day, as he is sipping a beer and lighting the charcoal grill, he hears God speak audibly for the first time. "The sound comes up and over the hill. He stands frozen and feels it coming. . . . Like a hugely amplified PA system, blocks away, switched on by mistake. ' . . . Know that truth is . . . ' "2 That's it: "Know that truth is . . . "; only those few enigmatic words, but their divine source is unmistakable, and Swain must now face his Sunday congregation with this new and unsettling

experience:

What am I going to tell them? He imagines himself in the pulpit, staring out at the congregation. He sees the horror waking on their faces as they understand him. He sees them glancing at each other diagonally across the pews. I'd be out. It would cost me the church. They'd gradually, delicately ease me out, help me make "other arrangements." I'd get shipped off to some church with a sign out front that tallies up the number saved on a Sunday, the kind of church that has buses. . . .³

"What am I going to tell them?" wonders Swain Hammond, and so wonders every preacher on those occasions when we discern anew the radical nature of our task. This is no doubt particularly true as we look out at the congregation on Easter morning. If there ever is an occasion when the preacher stands in the pulpit, shifting from one foot to the other, with a radical and confounding word from God, it is Easter, and there is something about such a word that embarrasses and scandalizes yet. "I am not ashamed of the gospel," Paul wrote to the Romans, but let's face it: no one, including Paul, says, "I am not ashamed" unless there are reasons why one just might be ashamed. No one says, "I'm not afraid of the dark" unless there is reason, hidden there in the shadows, to be frightened, and no one says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel" unless the gospel has potential for deep, red-faced, head-hanging embarrassment.

So, there they are, looking back at us. It is Easter, and the pews are more full than usual, and they are looking at us. We are standing in the pulpit, about to announce the call to worship, and we know by heart our ancient line: "Jesus Christ is risen!" We want to say it clearly and bluntly: "Jesus Christ, who was crucified and who was dead as a doornail, is risen!" This is the gospel in its most scandalous, world-confronting, logic-confounding form. They are waiting. It is Easter, and they are waiting. They are looking . . . at us. "I have a word from the Lord," we are supposed to say. "Jesus Christ is risen!"

What will they think? Maybe Barth was right when he said that what they want to know, these faces who look back at us from the pews, is the answer to the question, "Is it true?" Is it true that Jesus Christ is risen? Is it true, really true, that God is present? "What the people want to find out and thoroughly understand," Barth claimed, "is, Is it true? . . . So they come to us, entering into the whole grotesque situation of Sunday morning, which is only the expression of this possibility raised to a higher power."⁴

But, then again, we wonder if old Barth, for all his realism about the human plight, was on the mark. We wonder if it is only the product of a preacher's fondest imagination, or deepest anxiety, to think of a congregation ripe with expectant faces, all leaning forward to murmur in silent yearning, "Is it true?" We know that when we finally find the voice to say the words "Jesus Christ is risen!" no awestruck faces will swivel in our direction, no ushers, serving as bouncers for the pub of predictability, will drag us into the street for uttering such an outrageous claim. They will not even respond, "But is it true?" Instead, without a whisper of protest, they will intone, "He is risen indeed!" They will say "He is risen indeed!" as if they hadn't the faintest tremor

of doubt. If they have come this Easter with the question "Is it true?" on their minds, they have hidden it deep in silence, perhaps even from themselves. "He is risen indeed," they say without hesitation. This is Easter, and they have come to church prepared to say, "He is risen indeed!" But of course; *naturellement*; He is risen.

If the gospel embarrasses the Easter congregation, they remain silent about it, but "let us not be deceived by their silence," warned Barth. The question beneath all other questions, indeed the question beneath all seemingly confident affirmations, remains, "Is it true? Is it really true?" At one level that is an impossibly frightening question. What if they *are* looking at us on Easter and, despite their exuberant singing of the joyous Easter hymns, wanting to know, genuinely wanting to know, in their hearts, "Is it true?" What are we supposed to do? Prove it's true? We have no photographs of the Resurrection, no sworn statements from the guards at the garden tomb ["Me and Claudius was standing watch about 4:30 a.m., Captain, when the stone commenced to move. . ."]. We cannot scrawl a metaphysical equation on the board: $E(m)c^2 = \text{Resurrection}$. What are we going to tell them?

It seems to me that Easter preaching assumes its proper shock value as an unanticipated word of grace when two truths are given their due. First, we must recognize that the initial word of the resurrection comes, figuratively, from the balcony, and not from the pulpit. From the perspective of those who first heard it, the announcement of the resurrection was not the expected word, a word continuous with even their most hopeful calculations. Even the Jesus of Luke, who is most insistent on more than one occasion about the necessary sequence of coming events (Luke 9:21-22; 18:31-34), found his post-Easter disciples sadly confirmed in their conviction that Good Friday was the end of the Jesus story (Luke 24:21, 26). Those of us who preach to congregations of faithful people, gathered on the first day of the week after Good Friday, should climb (at least in our minds) not into the pulpit, but into the balcony. "I have a word from the Lord," we can say, and heads should swivel apprehensively in our direction, ushers should tense their muscles in alarm. This is not business-as-usual. No matter how many times we have heard it before, the Easter word is a dangerous, out-of-place word that shatters our world of expectations. It arrives at an oblique angle. That is why Moltmann says, "With Easter the laughter of the redeemed . . . begins." Laughter is never prompted by the expected, but by the surprise, by the unanticipated punch line.

The second truth that must fall into place is that the writers of the synoptic Gospels never attempted to answer directly the question, "It is true?" "Is it true?" is an exceedingly important question, of course, since the validity of the Christian faith rises or falls on the answer, but the synoptic writers do not try to answer it head-on. It's not that they avoid the question, either. What they do is to *replace* the question "Is it true?" with another question: "Where is it true?" If we stay where we are and pose the question "But is it true?", no convincing, persuasive reply can be given. The resurrection cannot be proven, but it can be experienced by those willing to move to new places of openness and obedience. The synoptic writers do not give arguments; they give maps and mission, places to go and things to do to experience the risen Christ.

Instead of logic, they give locale. Instead of proofs, they give place and purpose.

An Easter Walk Down Church Street

Perhaps we can see how these early evangelists posed the question "Where is the resurrection true?" by sitting in the pews of the churches of Mark, Luke, and Matthew on Easter and hearing their sermons. We can begin by visiting the oldest of these churches:

The Church of St. Mark

We are surprised here to find that, even on Easter, the pews are sparsely populated in the Church of St. Mark. This is a working-class, inner-city church, and the peeling paint and worn carpet bear witness to their meager budget. There are no mimeographed booklets in the narthex chronicling the local church history, no polished brass plaques on the walls of the Sunday school rooms. There has been too much pain, too much conflict, too much discouragement in their past to engender proud memory. The congregation is an anxious group. The city is decaying around them. The youth have all grown up and moved away. They are weak in membership, weak in resources, weak in vision. Once their faith was a source of hope and promise. Now they are not sure they can go on.

Their pastor is an uneducated man, as all their previous ministers have been. His speech, though sincere and heartfelt, betrays his rough and impoverished roots. He opens his Easter sermon by telling them of the three women who went to Jesus' tomb early in the morning. His raspy voice gains energy as he speaks of the stone mysteriously rolled away and the amazing presence of the young man, robed in white, who tells them, "You seek Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He is not here."

The preacher's eyes roam across the congregation. "Now where is Jesus?" he asks. No one stirs. "The young man at the tomb said to them that Jesus was not there. Where is Jesus?" he asks again, his voice booming now. "The young man told the women, and he tells us even today, 'He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you.' When the women heard this, they fled the tomb, for they were afraid. . . ."

With those words the preacher pauses, looks as if he is going to continue, but then sits down. The congregation waits, waits for him to regain his strength, waits for him to finish the sermon. But he sits in silence. Quietly it dawns upon the hearers: There are to be no more words. They, the hearers, must finish the sermon with their response. They must decide whether to gather their fears around them and to flee the decaying sanctuary or to journey out to Galilee, wherever that might be. They know only this: The risen Christ awaits them there.

It is well known that the oldest manuscripts of the Gospel of Mark end abruptly at 16:8. No sooner is the resurrection announced than the Gospel screeches to an unexpected halt with the words “. . . for they were afraid.” This means that the Greek text ends with a conjunction (*gar* = “for”), a closing that seems to demand something else, something more. Most students of the New Testament hold the opinion that this sudden and open ending is by literary and theological design; the reader is compelled to complete the text, to finish the story of Jesus. But how?

Luke Johnson has noted that this abrupt ending of Mark’s gospel is “surprisingly full of hope,” since it provokes the reader to a second reading of the Gospel story, this time with new eyes. The fear, the fleeing, and the betrayal of Jesus, followers are frankly acknowledged, but they do not destroy the story nor do they eradicate the steady purposes of God. The readers, like the frightened women at the tomb, maintains Johnson, are directed to “Galilee,” that is, back to the beginning of the plot, the opening of the story, where “Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God.” Now they, and we, are to read the story again, this time in the light of this new and astounding fact: Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, is risen. When we go, figuratively, back to Galilee and read the story again, we encounter Jesus once more, the Strong One who bound the demons of death and remained faithful to the will of God despite the faithlessness, fear, and misunderstanding of his followers. As Johnson says:

Because Mark forces us to reconsider all his story by the openness of his ending, we discover that not fear and silence but proclamation of Jesus continued the Gospel story, a proclamation announced by those who, however inadequate or even faithless, had come to be “in their right minds” by knowing the Stronger One lives.⁵

Where is the risen Christ? The Easter message at the Church of St. Mark is clear; the risen Christ is to be found in every “Galilee” where we continue to bear witness to the grace of a God who will allow neither the raging of demons nor the frailty of human flesh to thwart redemption, in every “Galilee” where we are called to say “the time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand,” despite our thinning numbers, decaying structures, and even our own weakness and doubt.

The Church of St. Luke

Across the street is the Church of St. Luke. Even as we walk across the parking lot toward the building, we can discern by the mixture of “town cars” and shabbier sedans that this is an unusual congregation. This is confirmed as we enter the noisy sanctuary, filled with all manner of folk, old and young, rich and poor, all races.

We have heard that this congregation was one of the first in the city to have a woman minister, and she is standing at the communion table to preach her Easter sermon. “Now we are a congregation that loves a good story,” she

begins. "When our children present the Christmas story at the annual pageant, it is one of the highlights of the year. Our adult church school class on the parables is one of the best attended, and our drama group's spring play is an eagerly anticipated occasion. We love a good story here, and today we have come to hear the best story of all: the story of the first Easter.

"But today we must realize that a story, even this story, amazing and beautiful as it is, is not enough. When the women left the empty tomb, they went to the apostles, and they told them the story. But it was not enough. It seemed to them an 'idle tale.' If we have only an empty tomb and a story, it is not enough. Easter is more than these, though. It is more than an empty tomb and a tale; Easter is a Presence. To say that Jesus is risen is to say more than the fact that he is alive in the memory of his followers, alive in their kindest deeds and best stories. To say that Jesus Christ is risen is to say that he is a living Presence in the church and in the world. And where do we encounter this Presence? In many places, but the place to begin looking is here." As she says these words, she points to the table.

She goes on to say that we meet the risen Christ at the Lord's table, but also at every table where the broken are welcomed and the hungry are fed. In eucharist and soup kitchen, Lord's Supper and pot-luck supper, wherever bread is broken and the human community is restored, there is the risen Lord.

Marianne Sawicki has observed that "Luke's story of the empty tomb is a story about where Jesus is *not* to be found, a story about how a story fails to bring people to the Risen Lord."⁶ Luke's message, she claims, is that Jesus is neither in the tomb nor in the narrative about the tomb. "These first evangelists," she says, "find that they cannot bring anyone to the possibility of resurrection through the mere telling of a story." What, then, is the Lukan understanding of what it means to be a witness to the resurrection? Sawicki points to Peter's sermon in Acts 10, in which he says, ". . . God raised him on the third day and made him manifest; not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, *who ate and drank with him* after he rose from the dead. . . ." (Acts 10:40-41). Robert Tannehill has also described the importance of the theme of eating and drinking in the Lukan resurrection narratives.⁷ The discouraged disciples trudging down the road to Emmaus recognize the risen Lord "in the breaking of bread." And this Emmaus experience "provides the link," maintains Tannehill, "between the meals of Jesus with his followers in Luke and the meals of the believers in Acts."⁸ It is also striking that, when the risen Christ appeared to the eleven, he interrupts their "disbelief for joy" with the seemingly incongruous question, "Have you anything here to eat?" (Luke 24:41).

So, the reader of Luke is reminded of the many meals in that Gospel, the frequent occasions of eating and drinking with Jesus, and moreover of the ethics of those meals epitomized in the command, "When you give a feast, invite the poor, maimed, blind, and lame. . . . You will be repaid the resurrection of the just" (Luke 14:14). When Mother Teresa was asked recently, by a reporter

for *Time*, about God's greatest gift to you, she replied, "The poor people." The reporter asked her how the poor could possibly be a gift. "I have an opportunity to be twenty-four hours a day with Jesus," she said.⁹ The first readers of Luke would have understood what she meant.

The Church of St. Matthew

We must drive a few miles to get to the Church of St. Matthew. It is away from the center of the city, out past the office parks and the fast food restaurants, deep in suburbia. The congregation is well-dressed, reasonably affluent, and they have struggled in recent years to achieve a 50-50 budget: one-half for local needs, one-half for benevolence. The newly hired youth minister has recently changed the time of youth fellowship to Thursday evening, since high school soccer matches and band practice are now held on Sunday afternoons. The church has been growing steadily, which is quite an achievement since members are constantly being transferred to new jobs in distant cities.

We arrive just in time for the anthem before the sermon, a magnificent rendition of the "Hallelujah Chorus" with brass accompaniment. The congregation shifts in the pews as the minister stands to preach. "I know that you have come today to hear the joyous news of Easter, to live once again the great mountaintop experience of our faith. And, yes, when Jesus first appeared to the eleven, it was indeed atop a mountain. But beware. This was not the mountain of religious ecstasy, but of obedience. This was not the mountain of warm piety, but of costly mission. This was not the mountain of Great Comfort, but the mountain of the Great Commission. If we go to the mountain where the risen Christ meets us, we will not hear him say, 'Blessed are you who have achieved,' but, 'Blessed are you who hunger and thirst after righteousness.' We will not hear him say, 'Blessed are you with comfortable sanctuaries and warm homes,' but 'Blessed are the poor in spirit.' We will not hear him say, 'You must be respectable in the world,' but, 'You must be holy, as God in holy.'

To meet the risen Christ on the mountaintop is not to be sent in splendid isolation into the secret places of our hearts, but rather to be sent into all the world, to people who need to hear the gospel, to prisoners who need to be visited, to the sick who need to be comforted, to the hungry who need to be fed. We do not have the strength to do all that we are commanded, but we have the promise that, as we go, Christ is with us to the close of the age. Easter is indeed a mountaintop experience, but it is a mountaintop from which we can see a world of pain and need to which we are sent to work alongside the risen Christ."

Jack Dean Kingsbury, one of the leading authorities on the Gospel of Matthew, has identified the church of Matthew as an urbane, well-to-do, Greek-speaking community, perhaps located in or near Syrian Antioch.¹⁰ Though

Matthew's Gospel is almost surely dependent upon The Gospel of Mark, there are many differences between them, and one of these concerns the treatment of the disciples. In Mark the disciples are presented mainly in a negative light, and they are consistently blind to Jesus' mission. In Matthew, the disciples, though not always faithful and perceptive, do have the capacity to comprehend the person and purpose of Jesus, and they are capable of ethical response and obedience. For example, Jesus' parable of the sower appears in both Gospels, but with different impact upon the disciples. In Mark, Jesus turns to the disciples, perhaps in exasperation, and charges, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?" (Mark 4:13). In Matthew, however, the parable is followed by a blessing: "Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear" (Matthew 13:16).

In short, the disciples in Matthew (and, by implication, the first readers of Matthew) are portrayed as strong, resourceful, and potentially obedient figures. Jesus has taught them the "secrets of the Kingdom," the commands of God's radically new age, and they are called to obey. The question is: Will they?

Matthew tells us that on the first Easter the disciples "went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them" (Matthew 28:16). But what mountain is that? We have not been told about such a mountain. Did Matthew suffer an authorial memory lapse, forgetting to inform the reader about the directions to the proper mountain? No. As the readers roll back through the Gospel, searching for this mountain in Galilee, they are finally taken back to that mountain in Galilee where Jesus taught the ethics of the kingdom (Matthew 5-7). Now, after the resurrection, the disciples are once again on this mountain, and they are told to teach all nations "to observe all that I have commanded you." In other words, to see the risen Lord is to roll up one's sleeves and go into all the world in response to the commands of the kingdom.

The Voices from the Balcony

"I have a word from the Lord," says the trio of surprising voices from the balcony. "If you want to see the risen Lord," says St. Mark, "go to Galilee, go toward the future opened up for you by the promise of God."

"If you want to see the risen Lord," says St. Luke, "go to the table. Go hungry to the table, and feed there with others who are hungry. You will be filled."

"If you want to see the risen Lord," says St. Matthew, "go first to the mountain of revelation, then go into all the world, showing mercy, making peace, granting forgiveness."

Is it true? Jesus Christ is risen! But is it true? Go to the place, and see.

NOTES

¹ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 110

² Peggy Payne, *Revelation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 12.

³ Payne, *Revelation*, 21.

⁴ Karl Barth, "The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching," in *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), 108.

⁵ Luke Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 169.

⁶ Marianne Sawicki, "Recognizing the Risen Lord," *Theology Today*, Vol. XLIV, No. 4 (January, 1988), 443.

⁷ Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 289-293.

⁸ Tannehill, 290.

⁹ As quoted by Edward W. Desmond, "A Pencil in the Hand of God," *Time*, December 4, 1989, 11.

¹⁰ Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 132-3.