

## *Easter 1993: Texts for the Season*

Gail R. O'Day  
Candler School of Theology, Atlanta, Georgia

The jubilant proclamation of Easter Sunday, "Christ is risen; he is risen indeed," marks the end of the Lenten season of preparation and the watching and waiting of Holy Week. Together the church rejoices when Mary announces, "I have seen the Lord" (John 20:18), and raises its voice to exult, "The strife is o'er, the battle done, the victory of life is won; the song of triumph has begun. Alleluia." But the Easter proclamation that ends one season also marks the beginning of a new season, the Easter season, in which the Christian community is called to reflect on the "now what" of the Easter proclamation.

### *The Easter Season*

The Easter season lectionary texts are specifically designed to guide the church in this reflection. Continuing a tradition that dates back to the fourth and fifth centuries, there is no Old Testament reading for the first lesson in the Easter season lectionary. Instead, a reading from Acts serves as the first lesson. This is not a Marcionite move, as if somehow the Old Testament has become irrelevant or inappropriate for the Easter church. Rather, the use of Acts as the first lesson reflects the very specific focus of the Easter season: the formation of the post-resurrection community. To give body to that focus, readings from the New Testament's only narrative about the formation and growth of the church are given a place in the lectionary. Indeed, the Easter season (Years A,B,C) is the only time that Acts' story of the church appears in the lectionary.

The other lessons in the Easter season lectionary are also distinctive. Readings from 1 Peter supply the epistle lesson in Year A, and this is the only time 1 Peter appears in any of the three lectionary cycles. The gospel lessons in Easter are readings from the Gospel of John in all three years (with the exception of the reading for the Third Sunday of Easter which traditionally comes from Luke 24).<sup>1</sup> The Gospel of John does not have a year of its own in the lectionary as the other Gospels do, but instead is read in conjunction with the major festivals of the Christian year.

The Easter season lectionary thus asks the preacher to interpret the Christian story through texts singled out for that season. Because most of these texts occur infrequently in the lectionary, they may not belong to the preacher's working textual repertoire. A good beginning point for moving through these slightly unfamiliar texts is the recognition of their interrelationship. The three Easter lessons form a tightly interlocked unit: the reading from Acts provides a glimpse into the story of the early church; the epistle lesson from 1 Peter provides theological reflection on the life of the church from the perspective of one early Christian community; and the gospel lesson enables the church to hear the voice of Jesus address what it means to live as a community of his believers. Which of the three texts takes the lead in determining the focus of the sermon may vary from Sunday to Sunday, but the preacher's interpretive task will be helped if he or she remembers the general focus that ties all three lessons together: what does it mean to be a post-resurrection community?

## *Texts for the Season*

The Acts lesson for the *Second Sunday of Easter* (Acts 2:14a, 22-32) is the middle portion of Peter's first sermon. In both its content and form it is an appropriate beginning point for the season initiated by Easter Sunday. Its content is the core proclamation of the early church, a recital of the story of salvation enacted by God through Jesus. Its form, a sermon, is an appropriate beginning point for the season, because the text that brings the church the good news of Easter is itself an act of proclamation. This text reminds us that the resurrection can be experienced anew through its proclamation.

In vv. 22-24 Peter recounts the central events of Jesus' life and ministry: Jesus demonstrated God's presence in him through the signs and wonders he performed (v.22); Jesus was crucified (v.23); God raised Jesus from the dead (v.24). The last event, Jesus' resurrection, occupies the remainder of the lesson. Peter appeals to two witnesses to the truth of the resurrection. First, in a form consonant with the preaching of the synagogue, Peter cites Scripture (vv.25-28; Ps 16:8-11) and then comments on it (vv.29-31). Peter appeals to the witness of David and the Psalms to show how God's victory over death through Jesus' resurrection was both anticipated in and is a fulfillment of Hebrew Scripture. Second, Peter appeals to the testimony of those who witnessed the resurrection (v.32).

The Acts lesson thus concludes with the Christian community's experience of the risen Jesus, and it is this experience on which the other lessons comment. The epistle lesson (1 Pet. 1:3-9) is a joyful meditation on the new life the resurrection makes available to those who believe. The gospel lesson (John 20:19-31) narrates two resurrection appearances (vv.19-23; 24-29). Importantly, the epistle and gospel lessons both emphasize the experience of those who believe and know the risen Christ without having seen him (1 Pet. 1:8; John 20:29). These two lessons thus point the way to opening up the experience of the resurrection beyond the first generation of believers.

The response to Peter's sermon is the subject of the Acts lessons for the Third and Fourth Sundays of Easter. On the *Third Sunday of Easter* the focus of the lesson (Acts 2:14a, 36-41) derives from the question, "What should we do?" (v.37). Those who heard Peter's sermon knew that the message that Peter proclaimed called for action and response. Peter's answer to the crowd's question is threefold: repent, be baptized, receive the Holy Spirit (v.38). Each of Peter's exhortations in v.38 carries with it the call for a decisive change in human identity. Repentance involves a turning away from the things of the past (cf. v.40). Baptism signifies the acceptance of a new identity grounded in "the name of Jesus Christ." This new identity carries with it the promise of forgiveness, of a new beginning. Finally, the gift of the Holy Spirit guarantees that the promises of new beginning in baptism will be sustained beyond the present moment into the future (v.39). The believer lives out his or her baptism with the support of the Holy Spirit. In v.41, the baptism of "about three thousand souls" is explicitly linked with Peter's preaching. The power of the proclaimed word to bring the experience of the risen Jesus to those who did not "see" him is thus highlighted in this text.

The epistle lesson (1 Pet. 1:17-23) supplies the theological underpinnings for the exhortations to new identity and existence in Acts 2:38. Jesus' death and resurrection give the Christian community a newfound confidence in God, because God's long-planned redemption of the world has been enacted through Jesus (vv.19-20). The

gospel lesson (Luke 24:13-35) provides a vision of the possibilities for the community's life with the risen Jesus. The ways in which Jesus made himself present to his disciples on the road to Emmaus—in the teaching of Scripture (vv.25-27) and the breaking of the bread (vv.28-35) remain available to every post-resurrection community of faith.

Indeed, the life of the post-resurrection community is the explicit focus of the Acts lesson for the *Fourth Sunday of Easter* (Acts 2:42-47). The baptism with which the previous Acts lesson ended (2:41) marks one's entrance into a new community. Acts 2:42 and 46-47a describe the worship life of this community, because at the heart of the community's life, and determinative of its identity, is the praise of God (v.47). In 2:43-45 the community lives out the identity it has acquired in worship. In v.43 the apostles perform signs and wonders (cf.2:22), an indication of the power of the Holy Spirit at work within the community. The apostles' acts are followed in vv.44-45 by another "sign and wonder"—the sharing of possessions and the distribution of goods according to need. The post-resurrection community thus enacts a new way of being in the world. The community's worship and acts of social welfare function in this lesson as Peter's preaching functioned in the previous two Act lessons: as witness to the presence of the risen Christ in the world. The efficacy of the community's witness is seen in the daily addition of new souls "who were being saved" (v.47).

The gospel lesson (John 10:1-10), too, focuses on the life of the community through its metaphors of shepherding. It comes at community life from a different angle from the Acts lesson, however. While the Acts lesson focuses on the community's actions, John 10:1-10 focuses more on the presence of Christ within the community to keep the community together and out of danger. The epistle lesson (1 Pet. 2:19-25) combines these two approaches to community life. Verses 19-20 focus on the behavior expected of members of the community, but vv. 21-24 make clear that the warrants for this behavior lie in the example of Christ. The community knows how it is to act because Jesus has been there before it. Moreover, as in John 10:1-10, the community's salvation is explicitly attributed to the "Shepherd" (1 Pet. 2:25).

The gospel lesson provides a good starting point for the *Fifth Sunday of Easter* (John 14:1-14). This lesson, from the beginning section of the Farewell Discourse (John 13:31-17), contains Jesus' words of comfort to his disciples on the eve of his death and departure from them. Jesus anticipates his disciples' need and fears and addresses them directly. The wonder of these words, and the reason this text is such an appropriate lesson for the Easter season, is that Jesus speaks here with the confidence of one who knows the victory is assured. The confident voice of the risen Jesus echoes in this text, painting a picture of the life of the post-resurrection community. The disciples have a new relationship with God because of Jesus (14:6-7, 9, 13-14), and this relationship will be determinative of their future (14:1-4, 13-14). Jesus has brought God to them in a way never before possible (14:6), has shown them God in a decisive new way (14:9-11). The disciples have a hard time grasping Jesus' words (14:5,8), in part because they do not yet know the whole story. The fullness of Jesus' promises and assurances offered here can only be known after the crucifixion and resurrection.

The Acts lesson (7:55-60) and epistle lesson (1 Pet. 2:1-10) approach Jesus' promises from a different perspective. Stephen's death in Acts 7 intentionally echoes the crucifixion narrative of Luke 23:32-49. Like Jesus, Stephen commits his spirit at his death (v.59), but unlike Jesus, Stephen commits his spirit to "Lord Jesus," not

to God (Luke 23:46). In Luke 23:43, Jesus speaks of his presence in Paradise, and in Acts 7:55-56 Stephen sees the triumphant Jesus in heaven. These details in the story demonstrate Stephen's confidence in Jesus' victory, even at the moment of Stephen's own death, and underscore the truth of the resurrection promises. 1 Pet. 2:1-10 focuses on the changes in the community's life as evidence of the truth of Jesus' promises. The community has "tasted the kindness of the Lord" (v.3), are now "a spiritual house, a holy priesthood" (v.4). They have changed from "no people" to "God's people" (v.10) because of God's acts in Jesus (vv.6-8).

The gospel lesson for the *Sixth Sunday of Easter* (John 14:15-21) continues Jesus' words of assurance to his disciples. In addition to promises of his own abiding presence and return to them (vv.18-20), Jesus promises his disciples that God will give them the Advocate, the Spirit of truth who will never leave them (vv.16-17). The Spirit's presence in the community of those who love Jesus (vv.15,21) is one of the decisive marks of the post-resurrection community. It is through the Spirit that the risen Jesus is known and remains available. Because the Spirit dwells with the community, the new relationship with God begun at the Incarnation does not end with Jesus' death and departure from his followers, but is endlessly available. The post-resurrection community's relationship to Jesus will change, because Jesus is no longer physically present to them, but God's gift of the Spirit ensures that the relationship is maintained.

The Acts lesson (Acts 17:22-31) and epistle lesson (1 Pet. 3:13-22) focus on other avenues through which the post-resurrection community is related to God and Jesus. Acts 17 is an idiosyncratic text in the book of Acts, because it cast Paul's proclamation in the language of philosophical discourse instead of the cadences of Hebrew scriptural tradition. In this lesson, Paul presents the gospel in ways that would be appealing to Stoic and Epicurean philosophers in Athens (17:18). As a result, Paul's sermon is primarily about God and God's governance of creation, not Jesus. The sermon ends with a reference to the resurrection (although Jesus remains unnamed) as evidence of God's righteous sovereignty in the world. 1 Pet. 3:13-22, by contrast, is singlemindedly Christocentric. As in 2 Pet. 2:19-25 (Fourth Sunday of Easter), the lesson first addresses the conduct of those who "in your hearts reverence Christ as Lord" (3:13). For the author of 1 Peter, the community's identity and behavior are decisively changed by the death and resurrection of Jesus (3:18-19, 22). The predominant sign of this change is the sacrament of baptism, which marks each community member's salvation and new relationship with God (vv.20-21).

The gospel lesson for the *Seventh Sunday of Easter* (John 17:1-11) forms a powerful conclusion to the Easter season. In John 17, Jesus stops speaking to his disciples as he has throughout the Farewell Discourse (13:31—16:33) and speaks instead to God in prayer. The last act of Jesus' ministry is to entrust his life to God (vv.1-5) and his disciples to God's care (vv.6-11). Jesus' prayer for his disciples is evidence that his love for them extends beyond the limits of his own life (cf.13:1). He asks God to keep his followers in God's name, so that they may remain one body (v.11). Jesus also prays for those who come to faith through the words of these first disciples (17:20-21), and so Jesus' prayer includes those beyond the first generation. The mark of the post-resurrection community, at whatever place and time, is that it knows itself as the people for whom Jesus prays, the people whose faith and future Jesus has placed in God's care. The risen Jesus is thus known to the church through his prayer on its behalf.

The Acts lesson (Acts 1:6-14) tells the story of Jesus' ascension. The risen Jesus

speaks to the apostles in 1:7-8 and offers guidance for their lives without him. First (v.7), the future rests in God's hands. Second (v.8a), Jesus promises them the gift of the Holy Spirit which will empower them. Third (v.8b), with the power of the Holy Spirit, they will bear witness through all the known world, from what is close at hand (Jerusalem) to what is far away ("the end of the earth"). The life of the post-resurrection community, then, is not to be spent in idle speculation about the future (v.11), but as Spirit-empowered witnesses to the gospel in the present.

The epistle lesson (1 Pet. 4:12-14, 5:6-11) can be read as the benediction for the Easter season. 1 Peter never shirks from naming the community's sufferings and ordeals, and this text is no exception (4:12-14). 1 Peter knows that the life of faith, even as the Easter people, will be a life marked by struggle, because the gospel of Christ is not always welcome (5:8-9). But because 1 Peter is unshakably convinced of the reality of the Easter triumph, this letter also resounds with words of confidence and exultation: "And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the power forever and ever. Amen" (5:11). Christ is risen; he is risen indeed.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A helpful resource for the preacher in obtaining an overview of all three lectionary cycles and the distribution of texts among them is *The Revised Common Lectionary: Consultation on Common Texts* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992). This book contains an introduction to the use and construction of the lectionary, the texts for Year A, B, and C, and indices that chart the use of texts according to the Sundays of the Christian year and the books of the Bible.