

The Easter Sermon

Barbara Brown Taylor

Grace Calvary Episcopal Church, Clarkesville, Georgia

If preachers' knees get weak at the thought of Easter Sunday, it is not only the burden of doing justice to the resurrection. It is also the cultural and emotional weight of the day. Easter Sunday is the day we celebrate the central mystery of Christian faith. It is also the day the children come dressed like sugar confections, flanked by grandparents flown in from Idaho and Maine. It is the day the flower guild outdoes itself, the day the choir has anticipated for months. It is the day of the annual Easter egg hunt, the day the cooks in the congregation keep looking at their watches. It is the day everyone is supposed to be happy, lovely, and well-fed, which is somewhat at odds with the gospel.

Last year on Palm Sunday, tornadoes ripped through northeast Georgia. Homes and businesses were lifted off their foundations; pine forests were flattened; whole barns full of chickens were sucked up and swept away. The news from Alabama was worse, where workers pulled bodies from the ruins of a church. No one said it out loud, but it seemed the worst kind of betrayal on God's part. If anyone in the world should have been spared destruction, surely it was believers gathered for worship in God's house.

Where I live, the nightmare continued through Holy Week. People woke screaming from their sleep. Chain saws roared through the day and into the night. Local shelters pleaded for food, water, and clothes. I listened to one woman tell me what it was like to be woken from her Sunday afternoon nap by the sound of a locomotive wind tearing trees from their roots. She was eight months pregnant with her first child at the time and was sure they both would die. She had never known terror like that, she said, a panic so deep it would last for months, triggered by the least blow of wind. But she did not die. Every tree on her wooded lot was bent, broken or gone, but her house survived. Surveying the mess on Maundy Thursday, she put her hands on her hips. "Well," she said, "I always wanted a meadow."

I thought of her when it came time to write the Easter sermon. I thought of everyone who had literally been scared to—or by—death. I thought of the Alabama mother burying her child, the church members burying their dreams of safety, everyone whose trust in God had been dealt a body blow that Palm Sunday afternoon and I wondered: Does this ruin Easter? Or is this what Easter is all about?

One thing that occurs to me is that we have a hard time celebrating Easter properly because we are wholly unwilling to die first. If anything, we are tempted to celebrate Easter as a festive denial of death—the day on which everyone is supposed to be happy, lovely, and well-fed. Faith in God means we do not have to worry about death. Jesus has taken care of it. Jesus *will* take care of it. All we have to do is believe.

Some religious art supports this temptation. I remember studying one altar panel—was it Grünewald?—in which the risen Christ floated above his vacant tomb. He was dressed in flowing white and blue robes. His face was clean, his hair was neat, his hands and eyes were upraised in gratitude. His feet did not touch the ground; they were socked in a white cloud that separated him from everything on earth.

Years later I saw another version of the same event. In it a gaunt, wounded man

stumbled from the black mouth of his grave wearing nothing but a strip of linen around his loins. His bare feet were on the ground. His hurt places looked like they still hurt. He clearly needed something to eat, but there was such a look of stunned triumph on his face that I had no doubt he would live. I also had no doubt he had been dead. He had returned from some place so far and beyond this world that only God could have brought him back. It was not a rescue; it was a resurrection, and he looked like it had cost him plenty.

No one will ever know how he really looked, of course, because no one was there to see. The crucifixion was the public event, the one with all the eyewitnesses. The resurrection took place in private—a choice made by God that preachers might do well to respect. We can say too much about what we do not know for sure, violating the essential mystery of what happened between heaven and earth that morning. Like the others who followed the crucified one, we were not invited to his resurrection. All we have ever been given to consider are an open grave and some linen rags lying around—that and the dreamlike accounts of those who saw him later.

Maybe that is why Good Friday rings truer in some believers' hearts than Easter Sunday. Good Friday is verifiable, then and now. It is where we live, in the land of betrayal, corruption, violence, and death. Easter is a rumor by comparison. Someone said that someone saw him, only it didn't look like him, exactly, and before anyone could believe it was him he was gone. After Easter, he comes and goes like a rainbow on a bright day: now you see him, now you don't. Didn't our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road? It is the best kind of rumor, but one we can only test by dying ourselves.

Butterflies are popular symbols of resurrection, the fantasy being that a fuzzy caterpillar spins a sleeping bag around itself and emerges some time later as a glorious new creature. The reality is somewhat more gruesome. If you slice open a cocoon early in this process, you will not find a sleeping caterpillar with tiny wing buds on its back. You will find a bag of mush, because the caterpillar must utterly disintegrate before the butterfly can begin. The change is not a gentle, aesthetic one. It is radical and complete. The birth of the new creature requires the annihilation of the old.

Preachers who would like more coaching in this easy-to-say, hard-to-grasp equation may read Robert Farrar Capon's *Parables of Grace*. In Capon's view, death is all we can know of resurrection for now. The rest is faith, and all our efforts to resist death amount to our refusal of God's grace. "He will not take our cluttered life, as we hold it, into eternity," Capon says. "He will take only the clean emptiness of our death in the power of Jesus' resurrection."¹

Another fine resource for Easter is Reynolds Price's autobiographical work, *A Whole New Life*. Ten years after his diagnosis of spinal cancer—years of struggling to save his life the way he knew it—he says it would have been a great favor to him if someone had walked up to his hospital bed right at the start and said, "Reynolds Price is dead. Who will you be now?"

That person is dead as any teenaged Marine drilled through the forehead in an Asian jungle; any Navy Seal with his legs blown off, halved for the rest of the time he gets; any woman mangled in her tenderest parts, unwived, unmothered, unloved and shorn. Have one hard cry, if the tears will come. Then stanch the grief, by whatever legal means. Next find your way to be

somebody else, the next viable you—a stripped-down whole other clear-eyed person, realistic as a sawed-off shotgun and thankful for air, not to speak of the human kindness you'll meet if you get normal luck.²

I am not sure how you preach this sort of thing without getting crucified yourself. We hear a lot these days about the postmodern church, the idea being that Christendom is over and we can no longer behave in our old triumphal ways, but that is hard to tell in most churches on Easter morning. We work hard to celebrate the way we have always celebrated, even if that means setting our clocks back forty years, and part of the old triumphal message is that death cannot touch those who believe. To say anything else is to go up against the icon of Easter morning. To speak of the absolute necessity of death may strike some as profoundly distasteful, like speaking of Mary's contractions on Christmas Eve.

Easter Vigil services offer preachers on this theme a better chance to be heard. A properly held vigil begins in a dark, cold, empty church—a tomb, in other words. With the lighting of the paschal fire a small dawn begins to break, only the world does not know it yet. The first hour of the service is held by candlelight, with believers sitting in the dark listening to all the old stories—the flood, the sacrifice of Isaac, the escape from Egypt, the valley of dry bones. These are triumphal stories, but they are also full of death—the complete surrender of the known world in exchange for a new one of God's own making.

Then comes the baptismal covenant with its renewal of baptismal vows. If no one is being initiated at the vigil, it is still a good idea to have water on hand. Dip a branch of cedar in it and fling fragrant water on those present, reminding them of their own death and resurrection as members of Christ's body. Watch them flinch at first and then relax. Watch smiles creep over some of their faces. This can seem to last forever, this waiting in the dark, but when dawn breaks and someone shouts, "Alleluia, Christ is risen!" your heart can pound like you have rolled away the stone all by yourself.

The difference between the vigil service and the principal services of Easter morning has always struck me as the difference between the first century church and the church of Constantine. Once morning has broken, I climb out of the catacombs and into the cathedral where the banners are flapping and the trumpets are tuning up. It is helpful at this point to remember that I am a very small part of this ancient drama. All the fanfare suggests that my sermon must be huge, but it is not so. My job is more like that of the person who offers the toast at a wedding reception. The wedding is the point. My job is to address it as respectfully and succinctly as I can.

This is often a matter of simply telling the truth. There may be no better service a preacher can render on Easter morning than to resist hyperbole and fly close to the ground, saying the bare minimum about what we can know and what we cannot, about where knowing runs out and faith begins, about what is our business and what belongs to God alone. I recently read a book review in which the author was praised for "leaving all the right things unsaid so that the silence resounds," and it occurred to me that we could use more silence in our sermons these days. By silence I do not mean the literal absence of speech, although that might not be a bad idea. I mean fewer, more carefully chosen words, with less presumption in them. I mean greater respect for the mystery of God which passes all understanding, and deeper humility about our own relative size in the universe.

We live in a close-up age of engagement. The evening news brings us face to face with victims around the world. Televised trials turn us into jury and judge. Radio talk shows urge us to air our opinions. If we want to look at the rings of Saturn, we can. If we want to look at a strand of DNA, we can. Intimacy with our universe is a given. We invade each other's privacy as a matter of course, and we do not seem to stop when we come to God. We approach the Almighty like investigative reporters, speculating about things we can never know, like whose side God is on and when the world will end and why terrible things happen to faithful people. We have misplaced our sense of awe—our appropriate fear—of a God of enormous privacy. In the words of the prophet Jeremiah, we do not know how to blush (8.12).

In the temple in Jerusalem, in the old days, the inner sanctuary was known as the holy of holies, a place so charged with the divine presence that only the high priest could enter it. The room itself was empty except for a throne that was also empty. Two gold cherubim spread their wings over it, facing each other across the mercy seat. Once a year their solitude was broken, when the high priest came to make amends for the people on the day of atonement. Inside that room, he had only one job: to utter the sacred name of God. The problem was, it was all vowels and no one knew how to pronounce it. No one was allowed to try, for that matter, but as the high priest breathed in and out he could hear the sacred name on his lips. Yah-weh. I am who I am. I will be who I will be. God's perfect freedom, confessed with every human breath.

According to Lawrence Kushner, who tells this story, "Creation has at its center an empty throne in an empty room in which the unpronounceable Name is spoken once a year. And the sound of its name is the sound of breathing!"³ He adds a pungent detail to the story. Before the high priest goes into the presence of the Lord, the other priests tie a rope around his leg, so that if he is struck dead inside they can haul him out without risking destruction themselves.

We, meanwhile, crawl right into God's lap and start asking, "Why?" Perhaps Jesus himself has emboldened us, calling God "Abba" and telling us not to fear. There is still room for reverence. There are still times to leave all the right things unsaid so that the silence resounds.

The gospels teach us what those things are. For Easter Day there are two choices: Luke at the vigil and Luke or John at the principal service. As different as they are, there is a central emptiness to them both. In Luke, the resurrection proclamation is not about Christ's presence but about his absence. "He is not here," say the two men in dazzling clothes. In John, it is Mary who names both his absence and the limits of her understanding. "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they have laid him." This is how Easter dawns in the human heart. He is not here. We do not know where he is. The tomb is as empty as the throne in the holy of holies and the sound of God's name is the sound of our own ragged breath.

Preachers who wish to say more than this may do so at their own risk. It would not be a bad idea to have someone tie a rope around your leg first. On this one day a year, we go as near the mystery as we dare, only we must surrender all our presumption at the door. Great reverence is called for, great silence before the ineffable power and privacy of God. Our best words turn to ash in the presence of the resurrection and yet we are called to try, to keep reaching for ways to say what God has done.

In his *Four Quartets*, T. S. Eliot confesses his twenty-year struggle with words, words which tend to come to him too late.

...And so each venture
is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
With shabby equipment always deteriorating
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
Undisciplined squads of emotion. And what there is to conquer
By strength and submission, has already been discovered
Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope
To emulate—but there is no competition—
There is only the fight to recover what has been lost
And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions
That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.
For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.⁴

NOTES

¹ Robert Farrar Capon, *Parables of Grace* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1988), 182.

² Reynolds Price, *A Whole New Life* (New York: Atheneum, 1994), 183.

³ Lawrence Kushner, *GOD was in this PLACE & I, i did not know* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1991), 97.

⁴ T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1971), 31.