

Easter Worship

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All Christian worship is Easter worship. That is, it is worship in the light of God's greatest act of redemption, the resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection would have no meaning if the cross had not preceded it, and that event would have been unintelligible without the life and ministry of Jesus leading to the cross. The work of redemption is all of a piece, beginning in the calling of Israel and culminating in the resurrection. Even there, it does not end, for the sending of the Spirit and the life of the church follow from the victory of the resurrection. However, if the center or turning point is the resurrection, then an unambiguous understanding of Easter is necessary if we are to participate in the full meaning of the rest of the church year. Easter is the Lord's Day of all Lord's Days. Therefore, the interpretation of Easter has an effect on how every Lord's Day is understood.

The problem

At first glance, it would seem that it is easy to understand Easter. We are celebrating the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. However, given the mindset of many in our congregations, what Jesus's rising from the dead really means is not at all clear. There are two particular problems that the preacher and planners of worship need to keep in mind.

The first problem is the complex relationship of immortality of the soul and the biblical meaning of the resurrection of the body. If all of us possess an immortal soul, what then does resurrection mean, for Jesus as well as for us? The second problem: Is the significance of Easter the news that there is life after death? For many contemporary Christians, that is the basic meaning of the Easter celebration. The character of this life after death—that is, immortal soul or bodily resurrection—is a subordinate issue to this prior one. But it is not an adequate understanding of what the church celebrates.

To clarify this, we need to remember the context of that first Easter. In Israel, at least among the Pharisees, there was already a belief in the resurrection of the dead—a bodily resurrection. The Sadducees did not believe this. But among a sizable part of the Jewish population of the time, belief in the final resurrection of the dead was strong. The resurrection of Jesus cannot be simply the resolution of a debate between these two parties. How did early Christians differ from Pharisees, who also believed that there would be a resurrection of the dead? The answer to that question brings us close to the heart of the astonishing news of Easter.

The central issue

The Pharisees believed that at the end of this era, when God would restore the kingdom to Israel, the dead would be raised. For those who were part of this tradition, what did it mean then that Jesus had been raised? It meant that the end of the era had come; the kingdom was beginning. If the kingdom has dawned, why then does the old world continue? Should it not have ceased? If the new age *had* come, Jesus is then the expected Messiah. If the kingdom *has not* come, if the old age is unchanged, then he is not the Messiah. Christians therefore not only believed Jesus had been raised from

the dead, they also believed that in his resurrection the new age had been announced and begun, although the old world continued.

What are we celebrating at Easter? The dawn of the kingdom, brought in by Jesus's faithfulness in the cross and the consequent victory over all that the cross means: death and the powers of evil. To reduce all of this to a message that there is life after death, regardless of whether immortality of the soul or bodily resurrection is meant, is to miss the whole eschatological sense that is at the heart of Easter. The liturgies of the early church stressed this eschatological thrust, and it is central in much of the contemporary liturgical renewal.

The Easter Eve Vigil

For the second-, third-, and fourth-century churches, the Easter celebration itself began on the Saturday night before Easter. This was not simply the culmination of Holy Week. It was the completion of a process that for many had taken years: preparation for baptism. With few exceptions, all baptisms occurred on this night before Easter Day, showing the close connection of baptism and Easter. Those who were baptized were baptized into the death of Christ so that they could also be raised with him. Nor was their rising from the dead only a future event, after their physical death. In some mysterious way, their rising from the dead occurred with their baptism. In baptism, they left behind their old life and entered into their new life. Granted, the old life and the old world with it, still lived on. The new life had begun, even as the kingdom had dawned, though neither was fully present. The new life was the mustard seed, the leaven in the lump.

It would be a mistake to think that this beginning of new life, this beginning of God's reign, was only in a hidden fashion, however. Both were visible in the life of the believer and above all in the life of the faithful. The church itself was a sign of the new age. The love members showed for each other, seen in very real terms of sharing what they possessed, in ministering to the sick and the dying, in the ability to risk everything, including life itself, to be faithful to this new life, even loving enemies who persecuted the church, all of this made the reality of the new life visible, not only to believers but to unbelievers as well. This new life was a major witness to the world.

Baptism was the entrance into this community, after a two- to three-year period of preparation and trial as a catechumen. The eschatological significance of baptism was visible in the first communion when the newly baptized received a chalice of milk and honey before the bread and wine, to show that by baptism they had been brought into the Promised Land.

Baptisms at Easter reminded all of the faithful of the meaning of their own baptism. The drama and the symbolism linked believers with the whole history of salvation. Many of the lessons still used for Easter Eve stem from these early services. The lessons rehearse the occasions in which water played a significant role: the creation story itself, the flood, crossing the Red Sea. The readings point to the new life begun when water is safely negotiated. From the prophet Ezekiel, the vision of the Spirit bringing new life to the dry bones parallels the Spirit bringing new life to those who are baptized.

After baptism, the candidates were anointed with oil, indicating that they were now part of the royal and priestly people of God. After this, they were joined to the rest of the worshipping congregation, ready for the first time, to be present for and

participate in the prayers of the people and the Eucharistic feast. When all have been joined to the congregation, the Vigil is over and Easter has begun.

Royal and priestly people

The resurrection of Jesus opens the age of the reign of God. Those who are part of this new age are therefore also part of the royal and priestly people of God. Within Israel, anointing with oil was the sign of the priest and the king. The risen Christ is the ultimate priest and king. Those who are part of his body, the church, are therefore also royal priests. They are this now, not only in the future. The early liturgies allowed them to live out this new role and prepared them to live it out in the world. What did it mean for the early church to live as royal priests? Why was that understanding lost? Should it be restored?

The eschatological understanding of Easter—that it had to do with new life now, and not only after death—was lost after the church became the dominant religion of the Roman Empire. There was less and less contrast between the new life of the Christian and the ordinary life in society. Perhaps it did not have to be lost, but it was eroded. That loss lies behind the sense that still prevails for many Christians in our culture that Easter has only to do with life after death. For the pre-Constantinian church, to be a part of the royal household of God was very important. It gave a status not conferred by society. In fact, being part of the divine royal household implied that all earthly social status was ultimately irrelevant. This is why Paul can so often write that for those who are baptized, the categories of race, gender, nationality, bondage, are overcome in this new, strange, eschatological community. When the church became part of the structure of the empire, these social distinctions returned, and with them, the new royal status of church members was lost.

This royal status affected not only the inner life of the community. It had also affected the relation of Christians to the government. Precisely because Christians claimed Jesus as Lord, they could not give any ultimate loyalty to Caesar. However, once the emperor was a Christian it became far easier to include loyalty to the state as part of loyalty to Christ. We are inheritors of that easily mixed loyalty. After the rise of modern nationalism, if there was a state church, then those who were part of it had little reason to oppose actions of the government. The specific church might well be part of one's national identity. In the United States, though there was no state church, Christians often viewed ultimate loyalty to the state and to Christ as quite compatible. For many Christians, the sense that they have supreme loyalty only to Christ as Lord is quite weak. Easter is the sign of that unparalleled lordship.

Once all the newly baptized were added to the congregation, they could engage in the prayers of the people. This showed that they were now part of the priestly people of God. They could intercede with God on behalf of others, including those who were not part of God's people—the emperor, their enemies, and those known to them who were ill. They could pray for others because they were now part of God's household, children of the royal family. On Sundays—and therefore especially on Easter—Christians did not kneel for prayer. On other days they could approach God as the mighty king, showing the deference that was proper. On the Lord's Day, they were to behave as royal children, entering into the throne room of their loving father. The Lord's Day, and Easter above all, was a celebration of the actual presence of the future, a foretaste of the reign of God. It is interesting that after Christianity became supported

by the emperor, Christians knelt for prayer even on Sunday. This is a sign of the loss of the eschatological character of the earlier worship.

In a congregation that does not celebrate the Easter Eve Vigil, how can all of these meanings be strengthened? The lectionary passages suggested for Easter morning are mixed in terms of how they emphasize the elements stressed on Easter Eve. The Gospel lessons in A, B, and C are all narratives of Easter morning. Interpretation of the event is not part of the narrative. The interpretive portions of the readings are more likely in the Epistle passages. Over the three years, readings from the Epistles that can be used instead of sections of Acts are from I Corinthians and Colossians 3:1-4. In years B and C, the readings are from different portions of I Corinthians 15. The whole chapter deals with the resurrection of Jesus assuring believers of life after death. It therefore supports the understanding congregations bring to the celebration, but without any additional perspective. The Colossians passage, however, scheduled for year A, clearly relates Christ's resurrection and our own baptism. It stresses that in baptism we have both died with Christ and been raised with him. This could be very helpful in expanding the congregation's understanding of Easter as well as of baptism. In all three years, these Epistle passages are suggested alternatives to Acts 10:34-43. This selection from Acts compresses the history of Jesus through the cross and resurrection. It stresses his lordship but there is little interpretation of the resurrection beyond this.

The Acts passage can also be used in the place of Old Testament readings. The Old Testament passages are from Jeremiah 31:1-6 (A), Isaiah 25:6-9 (B) and Isaiah 65:17-25 (C). The Isaiah passages have an eschatological character and therefore point in a needed direction. The task of the preacher would be to relate these visions of the coming reign of God to the events of Easter.

The psalter selection all three years is Psalm 118:1-2,14-24. It is a psalm of victory, and well displays the joy and triumph that belong to Easter. They point to the vindication of the faithful one, the stone that the builders rejected. In churches that do not use a responsive psalm in the morning service some of these verses can be used for the call to worship or other liturgical elements.

The yearlong significance of Easter

Contemporary congregations that celebrate the Easter Vigil have a dramatic means for seeing the connection between Easter and the sacraments. The vigil includes baptism and/or the renewal of baptismal vows for the whole congregation. The Easter service that follows at midnight includes the Eucharist. Both sacraments are therefore seen as rooted in the events of Good Friday and Easter. Such congregations are still uncommon in Protestant churches, though they are increasingly to be found. In a congregation that does not hold an Easter Vigil, how can the full sense of Easter be recaptured and maintained throughout the year?

The greatest means for the transmission of the sense of Easter throughout the year are the sacraments. This is true only when their connection to Easter has been clearly formed during the Easter season. Many congregations hesitate to celebrate the Lord's Supper on Easter for two reasons. First, it is thought to add to the length of the service, though with careful planning this is unnecessary. Second, some congregations view communion so tied to Good Friday it is inappropriate for the joyful Easter service. This is a misunderstanding, and needs to be dealt with. The Eucharist itself needs to be the joyful celebration of Christ's victory over death and sin, and not stress only his death,

as was typical earlier in this century. It should be the culmination of the whole of Lent and Holy Week. If this happens at Easter, it will be easier to recapture this understanding at other communion services during the year.

A brief form of the renewal of baptismal vows, or at least a strong mention that our baptism ties us to Christ's dying and rising, that it signifies the new life we are enabled to begin because of his resurrection, is in order. This significance can then also be reiterated whenever a baptism is celebrated during the rest of the year.

The danger in many of our churches is isolating Easter, celebrating a limited understanding of its significance, and then not connecting it with the rest of our life as the church, except funerals. If Easter is to have its full meaning, then it must be the touchstone for all the rest of the church's life and worship. Advent and Christmas should be seen in the light of Easter; Pentecost and Ascension are the direct result of Easter, and Christ the King would have little meaning without it. Even our gathering as a congregation on the Lord's Day happens because of Easter.

What is at stake in a congregation's Easter service is no less than the linchpin of the church year and the sacraments. If its meaning remains in isolation, dealing only with life after death, then the rest of the year will suffer. By the same token, we cannot ignore Easter the rest of the year and then expect to have a glorious celebration when the day finally comes. Easter must be prepared for the rest of the year, all things leading to and deriving from the great redemption signified by the resurrection of Jesus.

Where can a congregation make a beginning, so that Easter truly becomes the center of the church's life and self-understanding? Though one could begin anywhere, Ash Wednesday is the most appropriate. The pastor and worship committee that hope to deepen a congregation's life would be greatly helped by treating the Lenten season as preparation for a deeper understanding of baptism, culminating in the Easter celebration itself. Holy Week would then be a final preparation, including whatever special services the congregation normally has, but all pointing to what it means that we have died with Christ and been raised with him. As the Easter season continues, there can be continued stress on what the resurrection truly means. Pentecost can then show the work of the Spirit in our lives, both individual and as a community of faith. The Holy Spirit is power of that new life, already begun in us. The Lord's Supper and baptism as they are celebrated throughout the year, renews the eschatological context of who we are as the body of the risen Christ.

Were this the direction the leadership of a congregation took in planning Lent, Easter, and Pentecost, then there would be a basis for discussing how the witness to this new life in the midst of the wider community can best be carried out. The task, above all, is to recapture the full eschatological significance of Easter, and relate it to the entirety of the church's life.