

Growing Old and Wise on Easter

Thomas G. Long

Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia

In the second half of life, the necessity is imposed:

Of recognizing no longer the validity of our former ideals, but of their
contraries;

Of perceiving the error in what was previously our conviction.

Of sensing the untruth in what was our truth;

And of weighing the degree of opposition and of even hostility in what we
took to be love.

C. G. Jung ¹

As the story goes, late in his life the celebrated preacher Edmund Steimle was preparing a sermon on one of the lectionary texts for Holy Saturday, the day before Easter. The text from Lamentations 3 reads: "God's mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning." As he explored this passage Steimle quipped, "At my age, this promise of newness every morning is at best a mixed blessing. I have come to the point in life when I really don't want *anything* new in the morning. I want my slippers right beneath my bed where I left them the night before. I want my orange juice and bran flakes for breakfast, as normal. In my advanced years, I can do without a lot of newness, especially in the morning."

Easter, of course, is the ultimate morning newness. At dawn on the first Easter, the ages shifted, the world turned upside down, the old passed away, the new arrived, the ecstatic dance of the resurrection began, and no one's slippers were where they had left them the night before. But what does Easter with all of its promise of a new day have to say to those who are moving, in terms of earthly years, into the twilight? What does Easter say to all of us in our aging? What does this burst of divine energy, rippling across the ages, summoning people to unexpected mission and surprising witness and sacrificial work for the newness of God's reign mean for those who have already lived most of their days and who are thinking more about resolution than revolution?

One day years ago I was wandering through the galleries of the Musée D'Orsay in Paris and stumbled across a remarkable painting. It was Eugène Burnant's *The Disciples Peter and John Running to the Tomb on the Morning of the Resurrection*. The painting depicts the faces of these two disciples as they sprint toward the cemetery on Easter, and Burnant amazingly captures in their eyes a mixture of fear, shock, joy, and astonishment as they hurry toward the utter unknown. Peter and John are clearly not just running toward something new; they are also running away from something old, running away from a past in which dead meant dead and crucified people like Jesus are definitely dead, running toward...what?...God only knows what, toward some world hardly imagined.

What lingers with me most about Burnant's painting of these disciples, though, is how young they are. Peter and John look like college students who have just been told that the true meaning of existence can be found on the other side of campus. They are fresh-faced, flush-cheeked, running toward a whole new life stretched out before

them. The painting reshaped my perception of Easter. Now, when I see the biblical events of Easter morning in my mind I see youth — fresh dew-flecked lilies and young faces. I see doe-eyed Mary Magdalene, weeping her youthful, grief-drenched tears in the garden. I see the “other” Mary, to be sure old enough to be the mother of James and Joseph, but probably still in her thirties or early forties. I see the white-robed angelic presence at the tomb, and even Mark, who sprinkles details sparingly, insists on telling us that he was a “young man.”

All of which raises a question: where are the older people? To use the vocabulary of our time, where are the “senior adults” on Easter?

The Gospel of Luke has a fascinating response to that question. According to Luke, the “senior adults” are clustered at the beginning of the story of Jesus, but not present at the end. In Luke, those who are explicitly presented as older folk make their appearance early on in the story of Jesus, then exit the stage. There are the priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, who Luke tells us were both “getting on in years” (1:7). There is eighty-four-year-old Anna, a woman, says Luke, of “great age” (2:36), who spends her days and her nights in the temple praying for the redemption of Jerusalem. And there is Simeon, a spiritual man, a man “righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel” (2:25). His age is not given, but he is old enough to be preoccupied by thoughts of his own death (2:26).

All of these older people are connected in some way to the temple. Come to think of it, if we only had the first two chapters of Luke to go on, the temple would look something like a small-town Presbyterian church, with an aging clergy and a congregation of gray-heads like Anna and Simeon, praying for the restoration of the good old days and eager to pounce on a nice, young family like Joseph, Mary, and their new baby.

In sum, older people are highly visible and play crucial roles in the opening chapters of Luke, but they are absent at the end. They are there for the infancy of Jesus, but missing at the resurrection. They welcome the newborn Christ, but are nowhere to be seen on Easter. Now historically speaking, this absence of older folk in the Easter tableau is probably not an accurate picture. John, for example, mentions that Nicodemus, who once asked Jesus at the beginning of his ministry, “How can anyone be born after having grown old?” was present at the end as well (John 19:39). But Luke is making his own theological point, and these older folk—Zechariah and Elizabeth and Anna and Simeon—are theological symbols.

Zechariah and Elizabeth and Anna and Simeon are representatives of Israel’s hope. They are faithful, righteous, temple-going Jews who cling for dear life to the promise that God is about to do a new thing in the earth. They appear at the break point of holy history, and though they are limited—aged, barren, empty-handed, at times half-believing—they nevertheless stand at the beginning of the gospel story and point toward God’s coming salvation, which is now only a whisper in their ears. They are creaking people who come to a creaking religious institution to bend creaking knees to pray for what most people have given up on years ago. They pray for a baby; they pray for a Messiah; they plead for the deliverance of Israel; they beg for the consolation of God’s people. They hope; they hope against hope. Like John the Baptizer, Zechariah and Elizabeth’s son, they point toward a future they will not themselves fully see. Like Moses on Mount Nebo, they strain their eyes toward a promised land they will not themselves inhabit.

As it turned out, of course, their hopes were not in vain. The baby came and the Messiah came and Israel was redeemed and the people of God were consoled. Those of us who have read the end of the story and have heard the good news of Easter know all these things. But we also know that between these righteous people at the beginning of the story and the startling good news of the risen Christ at the end of the story come spit and fire and thorns and tears and nails and a cross. We know that true Jerusalem was restored, but not before the old Jerusalem was destroyed amid great lamentation. We know that a new temple was raised up, but not before the old was dashed to the ground so that not one stone remained on another. The future that Zechariah and Elizabeth and Anna and Simeon pointed toward did come to pass, but in a way and at a price that no one could have expected.

Take what Luke does with Simeon, for example. Luke tells us that when Simeon saw the infant Jesus he announced that this child would be “a light for the revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel” (2:32). Now what was Simeon thinking? Surely he had in mind the tradition that one day the Gentiles would stream to Mount Zion to praise Israel’s God (Is. 2:2) and that God’s glory would make Israel into a light that would draw all nations (Is. 60:2). In the Tel Aviv airport today there is a mosaic on one of the walls that quotes these biblical promises and portrays people flowing from the four corners of the earth to Israel. This is surely what Simeon imagined and hoped for.

What Simeon most certainly did not have in mind was Paul and Barnabus scrambling across the ancient world proclaiming the Messiah to people who never heard of Isaiah and did not know a kosher diet from a roasted pig. What Simeon did not have in mind were churches of believing but uncircumcised Gentiles claiming Israel’s Messiah as their own Lord. But in the Book of Acts, when Paul and Barnabus went to Jerusalem to debate the apostles and the elders about the whole matter of the Gentile mission, and Peter made a powerful and persuasive pro-Gentile speech, Luke tells us that James, the leader of the Jerusalem church, said, “Simeon has related how God first looked favorably upon the Gentiles...” Simeon? The man who made the speech was Peter, not Simeon. Sometimes he was called *Simon* Peter, but never elsewhere does Luke call him *Simeon* Peter. One biblical scholar ventured that Luke made “an intentional typographical error” to make it clear that the Spirit who spoke to that old man long ago in the temple—the same Spirit who prompted that aging Jew to hope that this child Jesus would be a light to the Gentiles—was the same Spirit now speaking to the church wrestling with the “Gentile problem.” In short, in that controversy among early Christians over including Gentiles, Simeon’s hope for a “light to the Gentiles” was indeed fulfilled, but in a way he himself could never have imagined.

In essence, then, Luke populates the opening chapters of his Gospel with aging folk who dream and hope, and everything they dream for and hope for comes to pass. However, all of their hopes are fulfilled in dramatically unexpected ways, and these older people are not present to see the consummation of their hopes. The fact that they are not present on Easter morning is, in one sense, the theological heart of the matter. They pass their hope on to another generation. Another generation gets to see what their eyes longed to see. Thus, Zechariah and Elizabeth and Anna and Simeon are people of faith whose hope is validated on Easter in ways they could not have imagined and in a time they do not live to experience. This being there and not being there, this

blend of continuity and discontinuity, points to some theological insights about Easter and aging:

1. *Easter provides the freedom to trust a future we do not control.*

An ethicist once defined sin as “the attempt to control that which should not be controlled and the refusal to control that which should be controlled.” One manifestation of sin is the attempt to control the future, the vain effort to arrange matters today so that nothing happens tomorrow outside our narrow range of expectations or against our little wills. In the world of parenting, this is called manipulating one’s children, forcing them to live our lives and not theirs. In the religious realm, the attempt to control the future is called “the sin against the Holy Spirit.”

In the world of law, one of the more interesting and exotic challenges faced by attorneys concerns the possibility of changing the terms of a solemn trust. Someone has died, and the will sets up a trust fund. Income is to go to “Billings Home for Children, so long as it remains a Lutheran orphanage” or “to Mansfield College to support its high ideal of educating young women” or “to my son Anthony, for as long as he remains faithful to the principles of the Christian faith.” But Billings is now a state school for the deaf, Mansfield College went co-ed five years ago, and Anthony is in Tibet studying to be a Buddhist monk. Now what? A voice from the grave says, “This is not the future I envisioned,” a hand from the cemetery reaches out to take back its money and its blessing, and the law must determine how much power over the living we should grant to the dead.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ makes it clear that God’s future is not what any of us envision. Zechariah and Elizabeth prayed for a child. They planned a future around a baby, a little boy, one who would study Torah and grow up to be a *tsadik*, righteous and respected, a son whose own children would sprout like olive shoots and bring great joy to Zechariah and Elizabeth. What they got, though, was John, who dressed like Elijah, ate locusts, and thundered from the banks of the Jordan, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” They wanted a child; they got a prophet. They wanted a son who would carry on the family tradition; they got a preacher who saw the gathering kingdom storm and who paid for it with his life in a Roman jail.

When Simeon and Anna saw the baby Jesus being brought by his parents into the temple, they envisioned the future. This child, said Simeon, would be the Messiah, “a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel” (Luke 2:31-32). He knew that the Messiah would generate opposition, but who could have dreamed that instead of the nations streaming to Mount Zion to praise God, the crowds would stream to Calvary to watch him die? This child, Anna said, would be “the redemption of Jerusalem” (Luke 2). Who could have imagined that this child would one day ride into Jerusalem on a colt, weeping over the coming destruction of the city because “you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God” (Luke 19: 44)?

To grow old and wise on Easter is to trust God’s promises so fully that we no longer resist a future we cannot anticipate, plan, and control. To grow old and wise on Easter is to know now that God’s future is better than the one we would have arranged. It is to have followed the paths of God for so long that we now know that around each bend there is a new and merciful surprise, and one more full of grace and wonder than we could ever have imagined, a future beyond our wildest dreams.

In the early 1970s, a certain theological seminary held a conference on the future. Alvin Toffler's book *Future Shock* was all the rage, and an impressive group of scholars was assembled to "do futuring." They gave well-documented addresses, speculating about the sweeping changes moving toward us in education, economics, community life, and technology. They envisioned the future and described it in dazzling detail. The closing address was given by the president of the seminary, who said in essence, "I am only a theologian, and I have no idea what shape the future will take. The only thing I do know is that the future will belong to a merciful God." Years later when this seminary president retired, he was cleaning out his office and ran across the files from this conference. He re-read the papers, reviewing now with hindsight all of the brave predictions of the future. "You know," he said, "I was the only one who was right!"

2. Easter provides the freedom to be humble about knowing God's will.

To grow old and wise on Easter is to relinquish the proud notion that we know God's will with crystal clarity. When Anna saw the infant Jesus, she proclaimed that this child would mean the redemption of Israel. Luke tells us that her words are echoed in sad disappointment by the two disciples trudging down the Emmaus Road: "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21). For them, the death of Jesus meant that God's will had not been done as they expected.

"Oh, how foolish you are," the risen Christ responds. "This is about God's will and God's way, not your will and your way. It was necessary that the Messiah should suffer." A sign of maturity in faith is the willingness to trust God even when we see God's will through a glass darkly. A sign of maturity in faith is the recognition that the Bible is a compass, not a road map; it sets the direction rather than providing a set of directions. To grow old and wise on Easter is to head out on God's path, even when we cannot clearly see our destination.

One of the many biblical stories to which the artist Rembrandt was drawn is the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22. In this story there is, of course, the terrifying command of God to Abraham to sacrifice his own son as a burnt offering. Over his life, Rembrandt depicted this story several times, and it is revealing to note the difference between how the artist portrayed this story as a young man and how he presented it in his old age. The young Rembrandt painted this story with dramatic intensity. Abraham has Isaac on the altar, the boy's head pulled back and the flesh of his neck exposed and vulnerable. The knife is drawn, and Abraham's arm is flexed and ready to strike. This is a man who is sure he knows God's will and is ready, by God, to do it. The angel who intercedes to stop the deed has to muscle the knife away from Abraham.

As an older man, however, Rembrandt returned to this story. This time, though, the artist depicts a sadness in Abraham as he prepares to do what he believes God has called him to do. He covers Isaac's eyes so that the boy will not see what is about to happen. His arm is not flexed with determination but limp with reluctance. Abraham's face is not fixed with fierce zeal but instead softened with grateful relief as the angel simply touches his arm gently and the knife falls away. Rembrandt had learned over the years that what we fervently believe in the heat of the moment that God demands does not always, in the end, turn out to be God's will at all. A Jewish saying has it that the proof of a true prophet is that when he prophesies doom upon the people he prays like mad that he is wrong.

3. Easter provides the freedom to grant a blessing.

It has been my observation that somewhere deep in the forest of life many Christians come to a fork in the path. Some head in one direction, traveling their last few days in bitterness, shouting at the world for its iniquity, wagging their heads over the sad plight of our time, cursing “what this world has come to nowadays.” Others, however, are given the gift of traveling the other way, the path of a cheerful confidence in providence. To become old and wise at Easter is to choose this second path. This is the path that knows that, even as I leave this world God does not leave it. This is the path that knows that a banquet table awaits at the end and that a house of music and dancing can already be heard in the distance. This is the path that sees a world full of miracles. This is the way of blessing, the path of gratitude.

I am convinced that it is the risen Christ who stands at this parting of the ways. If the good news of Easter is true, then the world is full of more wonder and grace than we can imagine and, in the words of the folk hymn, “How can I keep from singing!” If the news of Easter is not true, then life is a damned disappointment, and the only way to travel into that dark night is by slinging curses at those who line the path watching us go.

When Karl Barth was a young theologian, he and Emil Brunner engaged in a scholarly debate about a technical and methodological matter, the proper place of natural theology. At one point, Brunner published an essay on the subject that Barth found thoroughly objectionable, and writing from an apartment in Rome, Barth issued a sharply worded blast against Brunner. His response has become famous in the world of theology, and it carried but one severe word as its title: “No!” Brunner was deeply wounded by the harshness of Barth’s rejection, and the rift between the two old friends lasted a lifetime.

However, near the end of Brunner’s life, Barth sent him an urgent message: “If he is still alive, and it is possible, tell him, ‘Yes.’ Tell him that the time when I thought I had to say ‘No’ to him is now long past, since we all live only by virtue of the fact that a great and merciful God says his gracious Yes to all of us.”²

To grow old and wise on Easter is to lift our hands up to give a blessing as we go because “a great and merciful God says his gracious Yes to all of us.”

4. Easter provides the freedom not to fear.

If one had to put the whole gospel into a single phrase, it could well be, “Do not be afraid.” The angel Gabriel said it at the beginning of the gospel story, Jesus said it in the middle of the story, and the angel at the tomb said it at the end of the story: “Do not be afraid.”

What are we afraid of? Many things, of course. We are afraid to be alone and afraid to be together. We are afraid that we do not count for much and afraid that our responsibility is too great. We are afraid to love and afraid not to love. We are afraid that the truth will not be told and afraid that the truth will come out. We are afraid that we will grow old and weak and afraid that we will die before our time. We are afraid of the unknown and afraid of the terrible knowledge we possess. We are afraid of the dark and afraid of the light. We are afraid to be and afraid that we will one day not be. We are afraid.

To grow old and wise on Easter is to begin to lose one’s fear. To grow old and wise on Easter is not just to have our fears calmed but, more radically, to discover that all

our fears are but a clinging to the old world that is passing away. To grow old and wise on Easter is to know that all of our fears are really desperate attempts to save ourselves, to save our “selves,” and that the gospel promises that to lose our lives is, indeed, to save them.

Theologian Douglas John Hall describes such a discovery of confidence in his own experience:

I entered my seventieth year not long ago — the biblical age, as they say. ...I am in a position now that I did not occupy at age twenty-one: that is, I can say with a certain real confidence, I *have* seen the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.... [But now] this wonderful (if rather small and problematic!) body I live in and *am*; even these (now somewhat arthritic) hands that love to play the piano and write little yellow words on a computer screen; even this mind...full of its own unique memories... — all that is “me”...must come to an end, and sooner rather than later, now.

Resurrection is the ultimate declaration of God’s grace. It is not...natural. It is not...automatic. It is wholly dependent upon the faithfulness, forbearance, and love of God. And just for that reason — only that! — I am able, usually, to sleep at night, to continue playing the piano and writing yellow words and taking my aging body more or less for granted “in the meantime.” Because the only thing of which I can be at all confident when I think of my “not being” is that God will be.³

In Isak Dinesen’s remarkable story “Babette’s Feast,” a group of townspeople in a remote Danish village gathers for a fabulous meal prepared by Babette, a French maid who works in one of the village homes. No one knows that Babette was once the chef in the greatest restaurant in Paris. No one knows that she has poured out her life’s fortune on this one meal. As the story unfolds, it becomes apparent that Babette is a Christ figure and the meal is a symbol of the heavenly banquet. At dinner, one of the guests, General Lowenstein, feels moved to speak:

Man, my friends, is frail and foolish. We have all been told that grace is to be found in the universe. But in our human foolishness and shortsightedness we imagine divine grace to be finite. For this reason we tremble.... We tremble before making our choice in life, and after having made it again tremble in fear of having chosen wrong. But the moment comes when our eyes are opened, and we see and realize that grace is infinite. ...See! That which we have chosen is given us, and that which we have refused is, also and at the same time, granted us. Ay, that which we have rejected is poured upon us abundantly.⁴

Indeed, fear comes from believing that there is not enough to go around. Not enough time, not enough joy, not enough strength, not enough love, not enough nourishment, not enough me, not enough grace. We are afraid that the choices we have made will in the end take us to an empty hall and a bare table. To grow old and wise on Easter, however, is to hear and to believe the voice of the risen one, the one whom out of our fear we rejected, the one whom we crucified, now alive and saying, “Do not

be afraid. Grace is infinite. The banquet is set. You are home now. There is enough to go around.”

Notes

¹C.G. Jung as quoted in Bernard Martin, *If God Does Not Die* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1966), 9.

²Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 476-477.

³Douglas John Hall, *Why Christian? For Those on the Edge of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 172-174.

⁴Isak Dinesen, “Babette’s Feast,” in *Anecdotes of Destiny and Ehrengard* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 52.