

Stammering Mystery, Dancing Joy: The Many Languages of Easter Worship

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It's an old story, but still one of my favorites, from the "Metropolitan Diary" feature of the *New York Times*. It seems that the music librarian of a nearby community college had borrowed a score of Handel's *Messiah* from the Brooklyn Public Library. What he didn't know was that the transaction never appeared on his library record, and the library had been searching for the missing music the whole time he was in possession of it.

The day he returned the score, placing it in front of the librarian, he was astonished to hear the joyful cry go up: "The *Messiah* is here! The *Messiah* is back!" Every head in the library snapped up at the breaking of the silence and turned to look at the desk, wondering what this pronouncement could mean. And perhaps more than a few felt their hearts leap into their throats, half expecting to see a glimpse of the risen Lord.¹

Easter's coming, and chances are that those of us who stand up in pulpits that day will not have the privilege of announcing the return of Jesus. In fact, what we do have to say is neither new nor unexpected, and it is not likely that we'll evoke the surprise of that first Easter—or even of that moment in the Brooklyn Public Library. This is why many pastors (myself included) approach the task of preaching and presiding on Easter with no small amount of trepidation. What can we say that hasn't been said before? How do we whomp up enough excitement and jubilation to make Easter worship great? Of course the question actually goes deeper than that, and we know it: How do we preach what we cannot prove and do not fully comprehend? How do we celebrate in worship what is, at the heart of it all, a mystery?

Proclaiming the Mystery

The truth is, of course, that there is nothing new to say. The task before us on Easter Sunday is not to preach with novelty, but to tell the familiar story. We certainly can't explain the resurrection. All we can do is stand to proclaim what we have seen and heard: that the Lord is risen, and is among us.

Proclaiming the mystery of Easter is something like gazing at the sun—looking at it directly only yields blindness. Not even the most skillful preacher can make sense of the story of Christ's disappearance from the tomb; the wise ones don't even try. At one level, preaching the mystery of the resurrection means leaving behind rational discourse and bursting into song. Even that golden-mouthed preacher, St. John Chrysostom, seemed to think so; consider these words from what is widely accepted to be one of his Easter sermons:

Hell was in an uproar because it was done away with.
It was in an uproar because it is mocked.
It was in an uproar, for it is annihilated.
It is in an uproar, for it is now made captive.
Hell took a body, and discovered God.

It took earth, and encountered Heaven.
It took what it saw, and was overcome by what it did not see.
O death, where is thy sting?
O Hades, where is thy victory?
Christ is Risen, and you, o death, are annihilated!
Christ is Risen, and the evil ones are cast down!
Christ is Risen, and the angels rejoice!
Christ is Risen, and life is liberated!
...To Him be Glory and Power forever and ever. Amen! ²

Clearly, this is not a carefully reasoned, measured argument designed to convince us of the defensibility of the resurrection. It is poetic speech that seeks to express the inexpressible within the limitations that words impose. Perhaps this is the sort of speech that serves us best for Easter preaching. For in the end, we cannot be persuasive; all we can do is tell the story once again, marveling at it, singing out our wonder and our praise. There may be other Sundays when we wrestle with the questions of faith or probe the deep questions of theology. But not on Easter. As preacher Thomas Nelson puts it, "For one fabulous day it is all about wonder and joy. Dang, it is good that we have Easter if for no other reason than it gives us one day to be absolutely sure. Let the smell of those darn lilies and the inevitable blare of the guy with his trumpet plug our senses to everything that isn't joy."³

There are those Easters, to be sure, when we flirt a little more closely with the unknowable, and on these days we also must fall back on poetic speech. In her sermon, "The Unnatural Truth," Barbara Brown Taylor does just that when she reflects on the text in which Jesus cautions Mary not to grasp him (John 20:1-18):

The only thing we cannot do is hold on to him. He has asked us please not to do that, because he knows that all in all we would rather keep him with us where we are then let him take us where he is going. Better we should let him hold on to *us*, perhaps. Better we should let him take us into the white-hot presence of God, who is not behind us but ahead of us, every step of the way. ⁴

One can hardly speak of such profundities without resorting to the language of poetry. The medieval mystics knew it and, if we're paying attention, we know it, too. We simply do not have the words required to explain what it means to let ourselves be grasped by God. We cannot dissect the meaning of God's presence with us, nor conjugate the resurrection; we can only paint it with whatever means we have at hand.

This is just as true for liturgy, of course, as it is for preaching. Easter is not the day for long litanies read aloud or prolonged pastoral prayers (one might argue that no Sunday merits those, but that's a topic for another day). This is a day to erupt in praise! Perhaps that is why we rely on a single word—"Alleluia!"—on Easter more than on any other day. It "sounds less like a meaningful word than the babbling child," says Balthasar Fischer. In fact, we don't think about what it means as much as we enjoy what it does—the word gives us a pure expression of joy and praise. As Fischer explains, "alleluia" is a word that has been passed down for centuries, untranslated from the Hebrew, that means "Praise the Lord."

But the translation does not explain why the church chose and retained this word from the Hebrew language of prayer in order to express her Easter jubilation, even though in later centuries her own children did not understand the meaning. I think the church meant to say: “In the presence of the mystery that we celebrate on Easter, the mystery of our redemption, our usual intelligible vocabulary is inadequate; when faced with the superabundant mercy of God we can only stammer in amazement like children.” That is how it is with us Christians: As we gaze at the Sun that has risen high over the darkness and cold of our Good Friday, all well-chosen words are useless. We can only stammer out our Alleluia of wonder and jubilation.⁵

Fischer is right. Perhaps the chief directive, then, for employing words on Easter should be “use sparingly.” Our liturgical language should be lean and lively and poetic every Sunday— but especially on this Great Sunday; on this day we leave behind verbosity and allow the spoken word to be the handmaiden of every other form of proclamation. This is the day to laugh out loud, to sing and dance and wave colors, to splash the baptismal water, break the bread and pour the wine. Because even our best speech is inadequate, our worship requires us to use languages that have no words. These are what Don Saliers calls “the hidden languages of worship”—sight, touch, movement, sound.⁶ We proclaim the mystery not only with our lips, but with every part of our being—enacting the mystery and the joy with our very bodies, our whole worshipful selves.

Enacting the Mystery: The Sacraments

This, of course, is not a new idea. With Augustine, Calvin considered the sacraments visible words—proclamations of the gospel that we can see and hear and taste and touch. One might say the sacraments are the Word we do rather than the Word we speak (although Calvin wouldn’t have considered these mutually exclusive categories, and neither do we). The sacraments, he said, were given to us not because God needs them, but because we do. They nurture us in faith, show forth the good news, and provide for us a way to profess our faith and participation in the gospel. In short, the sacraments speak to us—and allow us to speak to God—in ways that words cannot.

Perhaps it should not surprise us, then, that among early Christians the sacraments were a vital part of Easter worship. While practices varied throughout the church, by the fourth century it was common to baptize at Easter, and Paul’s interpretation of baptism as dying and rising with Christ (Romans 6) was widespread.⁷ Baptism was often celebrated at the Easter vigil, a service that began in the pre-dawn darkness and continued until the break of day. A fire was kindled outside the church, and from it the paschal candle was lit, symbolizing Christ’s movement from the darkness of death to the light of life. The Exsultet, a hymn of praise, was sung, and stories from scripture were told, recalling the history of salvation. Then there was baptism, after which the whole congregation shared in the eucharist, with the newly baptized communing first.⁸

Churches in our time that have rediscovered the Easter vigil have also learned something about the power of ritual and symbol. (See the *Book of Common Worship* for an order of worship for the vigil.)⁹ Worship begins at night, with a service of light.

As in the ancient services, a new fire is kindled outside the doors of the church. The paschal candle—the light of Christ—is lit from this fire, and one by one the people light their own candles, watching the flickering of individual flames grow into one great illumination. Light splits the darkness, new life springs from the old, and the people begin their procession into the church.

This kindling of fire and the gradual spreading of light create an experience that words cannot convey. The people gather ‘round, attracted by the warmth and beauty of the fire, but also aware of its wildness and danger. As Nathan Mitchell explains,

The vigil begins, as it were, with an act of ritual arson. We light this fire not because spring nights are chilly, not because our pagan ancestors greeted the equinox with bonfires on hillsides, not even because our forebears in faith were led by “a pillar of cloud by day, a pillar of fire by night”—but because *kindling a fire is a daring, dangerous and destructive thing to do*. The world as we know it has to be torched.... The fire is to the vigil what the Big Bang was to the universe: an explosion so uncontrollably vast in its magnitude, so awesome in its energy, so fierce in its power to destroy and create, that light and radiation from it are still not spent these billions of years later.¹⁰

The primal force of fire expresses, in a way that words alone do not, that an untamable mystery has taken hold of us. Death has been conquered, sin has been defeated, and the powers of evil have been driven out, just as light forbids darkness to prevail.

After the lighting of the fire, the reading of scripture, and the singing of songs, there is baptism, reaffirmation of baptismal vows for the whole congregation, or both. It’s hard to miss the symbolism here. Easter is the day of resurrection, new life, rebirth. As St. Basil of Caesarea wrote some 1700 years ago, “What time is more appropriate for baptism than this day of the Pasch. It is the memorial day of the resurrection. Baptism implants in us the seed of resurrection. Let us then receive the grace of resurrection on the day of resurrection.”¹¹ The symbolism of dying and rising with Christ—of our sharing in his death and resurrection—is more readily apparent when baptism is practiced by submersion. Traditions that baptize by pouring or sprinkling, however, may make that connection more vivid by using an abundance of water, so that the symbol is both visible and audible to the whole congregation.

When water has been poured out, and baptismal vows have been taken or renewed, the community gathers for the communion meal. In recent years we’ve come to understand that the Lord’s Supper is not only the somber remembrance of Jesus’ death, but also the joyful celebration of his resurrection. This is the day to celebrate the “joyful feast of the people of God!” Having broken bread on Thursday evening and having remembered Jesus’ last meal with his disciples, we gather at the table on Sunday to give praise for new life. In sharing the body and blood of Christ with one another, we anticipate the heavenly banquet all God’s children will enjoy in the reign of God, renewing the vision that fuels our calling to live as Christians in the world.

Whether a church celebrates an Easter vigil as well as an Easter morning service, or gathers for worship only in the morning, baptism and eucharist are the visible proclamations of both the mystery and joy of Easter. What better time than Easter to celebrate the promise of new life—the life into which we baptize our children and

welcome newcomers to body of Christ? When but at Easter do we yearn to feast in joy, on this most important day when Christ was found to be not dead at all, but alive, never to die! In baptizing and communing, we remember Christ's resurrection and grasp hold of the promise that neither will we die, but live with him forever in his reign of justice and peace. By breaking bread and sharing wine, by pouring out water and anointing with oil, we show forth the profound mysteries of the faith that we can only begin to express with our words.

Enacting the Mystery: Other Language

There are still other visible words—other hidden languages—to speak during worship, especially Easter worship. These are not sacraments, but they are sacramental in character, for they reveal Christ's presence to us. Here we will consider three: movement, sight, and sound.

Movement. Gertrud Mueller Nelson tells the story of the day she was sewing and her young daughter, Annika, was playing at her feet. After a while, realizing that the child was nowhere in sight, Nelson went to investigate. She finally discovered her daughter in the back yard, wielding a pole she'd found in the garage. Using big wads of sticky masking tape, Annika had attached to the pole the many colorful scraps of materials she'd collected from beneath her mother's sewing machine. Curious, her mother asked what she was doing. Without looking up, her daughter said, "I'm making a banner for a precession [sic]. I need a precession so that God will come down and dance with us." And so she stood and with reverence held her banner high, that she and the fluttering colors might dance with the divine.¹²

Annika knew instinctively what many of us have forgotten—that we worship with our whole selves, not just with our words. So it is indeed something of a dance with God—a holy play—that goes far beyond what we can express in speech. We *all* need a procession! We need to worship God with our whole beings—minds and lips, yes, and also hearts and hands, feet and voices, with colors and dances and songs.

It may be that the best way to start is with the children. (Even Calvin suggested that children are best at wooing their recalcitrant elders into trying something new.)¹³ Perhaps Easter is the day we should turn our children loose. Instead of using them to reenact a Palm Sunday parade (where joy is short-lived and the impending passion of Christ must be acknowledged), perhaps we should instead let them skip down the aisles on Easter! Let them wave streamers in the air every time they hear the word "Alleluia" said or sung. Let them dance the circle dance we are too embarrassed to enact ourselves, not just because it's good for the children to lead us in worship, but also because it's good for us.

The people of St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco dance their way from the place of preaching to the place of eucharist every Sunday morning.¹⁴ Most of our congregations will not be ready for that—but we can rise from our pews to process to the communion table, surrounding it to pass bread and wine to one another, over and over again until all are fed. We can raise our hands to share in the prayer of blessing over the newly baptized. We can sway in time to the joyous music as we sing. And even if we *all* won't dance, some of us might, expressing the mystery and the joy on behalf of us all.

Sight. In her book, *Spaces for Spirit: Adorning the Church*, artist Nancy Chinn describes how drab the sanctuary of her church looked on one particular Easter

Sunday. The choir offered jubilant songs, the organ trumpeted gloriously, and the congregation sang with vigor. But the space was another story. The ministers wore black Geneva gowns with manufactured white stoles. Whatever was hanging from the pulpit was faded and torn, and there was a single row of lilies, all with buds that remained closed. The space, Chinn realized, said “‘Life as usual! Stay safe! Pay attention to the words! Stay numb!’” As she left the service that morning, she mumbled complaints to her pastors, who responded by calling her during the following week to find out more about what she had to say. The result was a far-reaching ministry in liturgical art that has enriched the worship lives of numerous congregations.¹⁵

Art for the church is more than ecclesial interior design; it is symbolic and proclamatory. In other words, liturgical art speaks a word that is open to interpretation. It should, says Chinn, “reach beyond literalism, behind an easy answer, to find the miracle in the story....Our work is not so much to make the Holy visible as it is to proclaim that the Holy is present.”¹⁶ Those of us who have been nurtured by the Reformed tradition sometimes have a deep-seated suspicion of art for the church. Yet art is but one more way to apprehend the mystery of the resurrection and to express our response of joy and praise. As Chinn puts it, “words alone, even the finest words, cannot completely touch our hearts and souls.”¹⁷ Neither can words alone completely express the depth of the gospel.

Art for the church need not be complicated or expensive. When fashioned by artistic hands, even a simple swath of cloth or a splash of color can evoke the people’s prayer and praise and lead worshipers into deeper contemplation of the mystery and joy of Easter.

Sound. If there is one thing we associate with the great festivals of the church, it is music. On Easter we bring out the brass and the timpani, the organ plays at full tilt, the choir sings its best songs, and the people who fill the pews sing with gusto. The musicians of the church bring their best gifts, and we’re grateful. The best part of music on Easter, though, is when *all* the people sing. Don Saliers says, “music is the language of the soul becoming audible”¹⁸; indeed, our songs are prayers with wings. On Easter, then, we sing whenever we can—a jubilant verse of an Easter hymn in response to the declaration of forgiveness; a psalm of praise (numerous settings are available in a wide range of musical styles)¹⁹; an array of joyful hymns during the Lord’s Supper. If the congregation has refrained from using the word “alleluia” during Lent,²⁰ the singing of it is especially uplifting when Easter dawns.

In making use of all of the languages of worship, we need to remember that participation, not performance, is key. That is, our worship is fuller and richer when all the people take part as fully as possible. Invite many people participate in the making of art. Encourage several dancers, not just one, to dance out our praise. Let all the people sing, and often.

Living Into the Mystery

Until the day when we *will* cry out, “The Messiah is back!” we continue to tell the story of the resurrection, using all of the varied languages we have at our disposal. We do this to remember what happened that first Easter, but this is no mere historical exercise. As Laurence Stookey points out, when we sing, “The three sad days have quickly sped; he rises glorious from the dead,” we sing in the present tense, not the past, to affirm Christ’s living presence. Stookey explains, “it is not that the events we refer

to in the present are happening again as we sing and pray. Rather it is that events that occurred only once nevertheless become contemporaneous with us because the Risen One holds all time in unity.”²¹ Through word and sacrament, Christ is made present to us, here and now, in the midst of the worshipping community.

By the same token, when we celebrate the resurrection, we also affirm our hope in the future. The words of Paul cannot be improved:

When we were baptized in Christ Jesus,
we were baptized into his death.
We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death,
so that, as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father,
we too might live a new life.
For if we have been united with Christ in a death like his,
we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.
(Romans 6:3-5)

So, too, is the future brought into our present when we proclaim the mystery of the resurrection and reclaim God’s promises. Through sound and sight, taste and touch, both the memory of the resurrection of Jesus and the promise of the life to come are brought into our present. The risen Christ is with us! By the power of the Holy Spirit we apprehend the mystery—and with our whole beings break forth in joy. As author Nora Gallagher has put it, “the resurrection means that nothing is hopeless anymore.”²² By remembering the miracle past and leaning into the future promise, we live into the mystery that has claimed us. It’s enough to stake our lives on—enough to send us out to live each day in hope—for ourselves, for those we love, and for the whole aching world.

Notes

¹ Ron Alexander, “Metropolitan Diary,” *The New York Times*, December 25, 1985.

² John Chrysostom, “The Easter Sermon,” ed. Mark Baker, www.ocf.org/features/EasterSermon.html. For a text of the sermon in Latin, consult “Sermo Catecheticus in Sanctum Pascha,” in J. P. Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus: seu Bibliotheca universalis, integra, uniformis, commoda, oeconomia omnium S.S. patrum, doctorum, scriptorumque ecclesiasticorum*, vol. 59 (Turnholt, Belgium: Brepols, 196-), 721-724.

³ Thomas G. Nelson, Sermon delivered at the Conference on the Catechumenate, Louisville, Kentucky, October 24, 2003.

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Unnatural Truth,” in *Home By Another Way* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1999), 112.

⁵ Balthasar Fischer, *Signs, Words, and Gestures* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Co., 1981). Reprinted in *An Easter Sourcebook: The Fifty Days*, ed. Gabe Huck, Gail Ramshaw, and Gordon Lathrop (Archdiocese of Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1988), 17-18.

⁶ Don E. Saliers, *Worship and Spirituality*, 2nd ed. (Akron, Ohio: OSL Publications, 1996), 30.

⁷ Maxwell E. Johnson, *Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 168.

⁸ Peter C. Bower, ed., *The Companion to the Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, Ky.: Geneva Press, 2003), 106-107.

⁹ *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 294ff.

¹⁰ Nathan D. Mitchell, *Eucharist as Sacrament of Initiation* (Archdiocese of Chicago: Liturgy Training

Publications, 1994). Reprinted in *A Triduum Sourcebook II*, compiled by Joan Halmo and Frank Henderson (Archdiocese of Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1996), 216.

¹¹ Bower, 106-107.

¹² Gertrud Mueller Nelson, in *Liturgy and Spirituality in Context: Perspectives on Prayer and Culture*, ed. M. Francis Mannion and Eleanor Bernstein (Minneapolis, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1990). Quoted in *A Sourcebook About Liturgy*, ed. Gabe Huck (Archdiocese of Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994), 67.

¹³ Charles Garside, Jr. *The Origins of Calvin's Theology of Music: 1536-1543* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1979), 10. In the *Articles* of 1537, Calvin advised the Geneva city council that psalms should be sung in the church: "The manner of beginning in this seemed to us well advised if some children who have previously practiced a modest church song sing in a loud and distinct voice, the people listening with complete attention and following with the heart what is sung with the mouth until little by little each one accustoms himself to singing communally."

¹⁴ You can learn more about this congregation from their website at www.stgregorys.org.

¹⁵ Nancy Chinn, *Spaces for Spirit: Adorning the Church* (Archdiocese of Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1998), v.

¹⁶ Chinn, 35.

¹⁷ Chinn, 42-3.

¹⁸ Saliers, 39.

¹⁹ See, for example, *The Psalter B Psalms & Canticles for Singing* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), *Psalms for the Church Year* (in several volumes, GIA Publications, Inc.), and *Psalter for Christian Worship* (Witherspoon Press, 1999). See also *Halle, Halle: We Sing the World Round* (ed. C. Michael Hawn, Choristers Guild, 1999) for psalms and songs from around the world. For suggestions of congregational, choral, and instrumental music, consult the journal *Call to Worship: Liturgy, Music, Preaching & the Arts* 37:1 (Year C Lectionary Aids for 2003-2004).

²⁰ Refraining from using "alleluia" in spoken and sung liturgy during Lent is a traditional practice. Some congregations ritually put away the "alleluia" on the first Sunday of Lent. At Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, a banner bearing the word "alleluia" is processed out of the sanctuary and locked in a trunk in the narthex, where it stays as a reminder during the season of Lent. On Easter Sunday, the banner is processed back into the sanctuary, with the alleluias of the congregation resounding.

²¹ Laurence Hull Stookey, *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1996), 29-30, 31-32.

²² Nora Gallagher, *Things Seen and Unseen: A Year Lived in Faith* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 134.