

The Easter Texts: Hope, Comfort, Courage

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I.

Years ago I was sitting with a group of my fellow seminarians at lunch in the Yale Divinity School refectory. It was the custom in those days that senior ministers of local churches always preached on Easter and then religiously assigned the Sunday after Easter to the student minister of the year.

So here we were, the Tuesday after Easter, half a dozen of us, thinking together about what we might say on Sunday when attendance was down, the partying was over, and we were left with the stark and almost incredible claim: "Christ is Risen." In those pre-postmodern days we were still burdened with the questions of modernity, and the sad truth is that not one of us had an easy time speaking as unambiguously as we might on the truth of Jesus' resurrection. We were joined at table by our history professor, Jaroslav Pelikan, who listened to the conversation and then said something that seemed quirky to my Baptist ears but has often helped me since: "When I am in doubt about what I believe, I preach the creed."

I have come to translate that into my own terms as a reminder that has helped me preach on more than one occasion: "When I am in doubt about what I believe, I preach what we believe." Not I, the preacher, but we, the church, the community of faith, the communion of saints. The gift of the texts assigned for Easter is that each of them, in quite different ways, helps us remember what we believe.

II.

Paul: Easter as Hope

Paul, who is not above talking about himself, is here most clear that what he proclaims is not his word but the church's word. "For I handed over to you what I myself received." Furthermore, by the end of the assigned passage it becomes clear that what Paul received from earlier apostolic testimony the Corinthians have now received from him. He is proclaiming what they all believe: "Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe" (1 Cor 15:11).

In recent years I have heard distinguished scholars try to argue the probability of Jesus' resurrection on grounds more public than the testimony of believers and the proclamation of the tradition. I have heard some argue that the resurrection can be defended as a matter of philosophical probability, and others argue that a right reading of the sources indicates the historical likelihood of their claims. Such arguments may be right, but I am reasonably sure that Paul was neither a philosopher nor an historian. He was a conduit of tradition; he told the story that he had been told; he bore witness as witness had been borne to him; he bore witness to what he himself had witnessed. Paul of course does not reiterate the proclamation of resurrection only as interesting information. This is saving news, "the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which you are being saved" (1 Cor 15:2). Rightly to understand the resurrection story is to participate in the very salvation it declares.

Probably no single sermon can or should attend to all the reasons Paul is so concerned to reaffirm the common faith in Jesus' resurrection, but the preacher needs to remember what's going on here. Throughout I Corinthians, Paul is responding to information he has received about some of the dubious theological claims the Corinthian Christians are making. He makes clear what dubious claim enticed him to write this chapter: "Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection from the dead?" (1 Cor 15:1).

The whole section of I Corinthians 15:1-34 is a reversal of our usual apologetic mode. We try to persuade doubters that Christ rose from the dead and then try to assure people that since God had raised Christ, God will raise believers, too. But the Corinthians don't doubt that Christ was raised from the dead; they've got that one clear. They do doubt that there will be a general resurrection, and Paul says what seems odd to us: "If there's no general resurrection Christ hasn't been raised because there's no framework, no category even to think about resurrection."

Put in other words, if Christ's resurrection is a unique event it's a non-event. Resurrection is and can only be God's eschatological act and God has not, does not, and will not act eschatologically for one person alone—not even for Jesus. God acts eschatologically for all the world. Resurrection is not just about you or me; resurrection is about the shape of history and the future of the cosmos—if God won't vanquish sin and death for the universe, God didn't vanquish sin and death for Jesus, either.

I once heard Krister Stendahl, the distinguished New Testament scholar and former Swedish bishop, say that we preachers had our congregations all wrong. We thought people were mostly worried about their individual destinies: what happens when I die? Rather, said Stendahl, people are worried most deeply about cosmic destiny. Does history have a purpose? Does the world begin with creation and move toward consummation? Each of us asks not just what happens to me, but what happens to God—does God really reign?

Paul's great claims in I Corinthians 15 remind the Corinthians and us what we believe, we the church. Paul confesses what we all confess. And then he reminds us that the only reason we can confess resurrection is that God is the God who brings life to the dead—all the dead, the God who brings purpose to the history we share.

II.

John: Easter as Comfort

In his poem "The Wreck of the Deutschland," Gerard Manley Hopkins prays in words always appropriate for the celebration of Christ's resurrection:

Let him easter in us; be a dayspring to the dimness of us.¹

Easter is primarily a story about Jesus and the great shift at the heart of history, but it is also always a story about the way in which Easter happens in the life of the believer. If I Corinthians shows how Easter changes the world, John 20:1-18 shows Christ eastering in three of his earliest followers, and their story helps illumine the story for us. In John 20, as is so often the case in John's Gospel, we see would-be believers move toward greater faith. In this chapter Peter and the beloved disciple come close to Easter faith while Mary Magdalene discovers and proclaims the thing itself.

The story of the race between Peter and the beloved disciple is an almost climactic moment in the narrative of John's Gospel. The two disciples rush and jostle toward the privileged position of viewing the empty tomb. Peter enters first; the beloved disciple believes first. The hint we have in all the gospels that the disciples were not immune to the temptations of human competition helps explain even this most holy scene. My then colleague, the late Langdon Gilkey, once said our divinity school faculty managed to get along as well as we did only because there is no Nobel Prize for Religion. Compared to the physicists and the economists, our competition was always relative. The resurrection relativizes our egos and our rivalries even more.

There may be a Christian congregation somewhere where members and groups do not worry about relative power or protect precious turf, but I have never seen that church. Resurrection calls us beyond that Christian competition into the kind of community that is generous in the way in which Christians serve and honor one another.

The fact that the grave clothes are folded is probably not a sign (contrary to some early twentieth century preaching) that our Lord was a neat and tidy person. Rather the clothes provide a contrast to the story of Lazarus. Lazarus, even raised, is still wrapped in grave clothes, a sign that he will die again. Jesus has put off the grave clothes to live forever.

Though the disciples see the empty tomb they do not yet fully understand its significance. Whatever the "facts" of resurrection, it takes more than even eyewitness evidence to bring faith. Scripture helps to build that faith. The Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, whom the disciples will receive later in this chapter, inspires and confirms faith. Through the Holy Spirit, Christ easters in us.

Raymond Brown has persuaded me that the tension between Peter and the beloved disciple in John's Gospel reflects a rivalry between churches in John's own time. The Fourth Gospel is written for a community whose most important authority was the beloved disciple. They see themselves as distinct from—and better than—another Christian community that looks primarily to Peter. So it is that the beloved disciple gets to sit right up at Jesus' side at the Last Supper and tell Peter what Jesus really said. So it is that the beloved disciple, though he deferentially lets Peter first enter the empty tomb, is in fact the first to believe.²

Yet even this early denominational rivalry is criticized and relativized in this resurrection story. For one thing, neither Peter nor the other disciple comes to the empty tomb alone; Easter brings them together. For another thing, neither Peter nor the other disciple comes to Easter faith nearly as fully as the witness whose story frames their scene—Mary Magdalene.

Mary's story is the embodiment of the other great Easter claim, not only that on Easter the world is redeemed but that through Easter we, too, are redeemed, comforted, sustained. I have always been wary of the saccharine hymn "In the Garden," but in one way it captures the meaning of this scene in the garden. When Jesus calls Mary by name he "tells her that she is his own." He acts out his own parable of the Good Shepherd earlier in John's Gospel: "He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out . . . the sheep follow him because they know his voice"(John 10: 4).

Mary doesn't trust her eyes, but she does trust her ears. (Notice sometime about how often John's Gospel tells us that God is more apt to use our ears than our eyes for

blessing: “Thomas, have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen but have come to believe” (John 20:29); “I ask not only on behalf of these disciples but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word” (John 17:20). For John, Jesus uses signs (things we can see) but he *is* word.

Part of the faith by which every preacher lives is that it is still true that faith often comes through hearing. In the preaching of the risen Christ, the risen Christ is present. In your Easter Sunday sermon you help Christ easter in us, be a dayspring to the dimness of us. More than that, the word Mary trusts is the word that knows her and claims her. She knows Christ when he calls her by name. The Samaritan woman in John 4 also begins to know who Jesus is because he knows who she is. For the Bible, to be named is to be claimed. Claimed, Mary calls out, not just teacher, but more literally, “My teacher!”

Jesus tells Mary to lay off holding on to him. The tense of the imperative is a little tricky here, but the impression is that she’s already grabbed hold of at least a hem. In the narrative, of course, Jesus’ great purpose has been to return to the Father. The crucifixion, when he is lifted up, is the first leg of that return journey, and so Mary must not keep hanging on.

We do not need to move too far into either allegory or psychology to note that hanging onto the Jesus we have known can keep us still from the Jesus who knows us better than we know ourselves. It is not that Jesus is forever elusive; it is rather that he is always greater than even our most cherished memory of the way he used to be. Only because he is too great to be grasped is he strong enough to grasp us.

John’s way of saying that is that only when Jesus goes away can another comforter come, the Paraclete, to teach us and to hold us fast. However we understand the theology of such a claim, its effect on us is clear enough. The death and resurrection of Jesus did not diminish his sovereignty but affirmed his sovereignty and his freedom, too. We can’t keep him in the garden of our childhood faith. As we get older and wiser we sing better songs.

III.

Mark: Easter as Courage

Perhaps it is because we have the other three gospels that we find the ending of Mark’s Gospel abrupt and strange. Certainly some early Christian writers were puzzled enough by the way Mark concluded his gospel that they added on endings that seemed to round it out. Part of the oddness of Mark’s ending, at least for those who know the rest of the canon, is that there are no resurrection appearances at all—promises of appearance to be sure, in 16:7 (as in 14:28), but the Risen Lord never appears. But the oddity is even odder than that.

For one thing, the last response we get to the news of resurrection is fear. Just when we assume that the women would dash out joyfully to proclaim the good news that Christ is risen they clam up entirely, overcome by fear.

And for another thing, the sentence, chapter, and entire verse end with a conjunction—a joining word that ends up not joining the sentence to anything else. The translations appropriately try to smooth out the roughness of the grammar, but a wooden translation of the Greek would make Mark’s last sentence run something like this: “And going out they fled from the tomb, for fear and trembling had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone. They were afraid, because . . .” (Mark 16:8).

Students of Mark's Gospel have wondered whether the last sentences or paragraph somehow got clipped off accidentally, or whether Mark suffered a fatal heart attack just before completing his gospel. But whether by fluke or by grace (as I think), we deal with the text we have, and that text ends with Mark 16:8. There are various ways to interpret this odd ending, and I do not think these interpretations are mutually exclusive.

One suggestion is that this gospel is unfinished because the Christians who hear or read it are supposed to carry on with the Gospel. The proclamation of the risen Lord is the task of believers. By this interpretation when Mark starts his work by saying, "The Beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ," he doesn't mean that verse one is the beginning of the Gospel or that chapter one is the beginning of the Gospel (Mark 1:1). The title for Mark's book is "The Beginning of the Gospel," and all of Mark from 1:1 through 16:8 tells how the gospel begins. It's for the church to figure out how it continues, and it's for God to bring it, finally, to its glorious conclusion.

Another suggestion is that the word of the young man, "He is going before you to Galilee," should be followed by parentheses as Mark speaks to his readers, "There you readers will see him." Readers are being directed to return to the beginning of the Gospel, which is set in Galilee, and to read or hear the text again knowing that it portrays not just the earthly Jesus but the authority of the risen Lord. The Gospel doesn't come to an abrupt end at all; it circles us back to the beginning. Every sermon on Mark, therefore, becomes a sermon on the power of the Risen Lord.

I discovered a third possibility for understanding the ending of Mark's Gospel when I was preparing a sermon on Mark 6:45-52. I wrote the sermon at a time when we were facing a frightening medical situation in our family and I noticed (as I needed to notice) that Jesus appears, not when the disciples are full of faith, but when they are full of fear.³ If we have read Mark's Gospel carefully enough we will know that the fear the women feel at the empty tomb is the sure sign that Jesus is just around the corner, ready to say what he says to the fearful disciples on the sea: "Fear not; it is I."

However we interpret the abrupt ending of Mark's Gospel, one theme is absolutely clear in this resurrection narrative: "He is going ahead of you" (Mark 16:7). For Mark, resurrection is not so much a past event to be remembered, or even a present comfort to be celebrated. It is a promise that Christ always precedes us into God's future. Whether we rush to the future eagerly or stumble toward the future confusedly or shuffle toward the future fearfully—Christ has gone before us on the way. There is no pilgrimage that does not lead toward him, and no life story that does not have him as its goal. In life, in death, Christ goes before us all the way.

We can set out after him—with courage. That is Mark's Easter promise.

Notes

1. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "The Wreck of the Deutschland," stanza 35 in W.H. Gardner and N.H. MacKenzie, ed., *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 63.
2. Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 161-162.
3. The sermon is available in Ian Doescher, ed., *To All God's Beloved in New Haven: David Bartlett's Yale Sermons, 1990-2003* (Philadelphia: Xlibris, 2003), 178-181.