

Death in the Midst of Life, Life in the Midst of Death: Preaching and Worship in the Easter Season

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Thine is the glory, risen, conquering Son;
endless is the victory thou o'er death hath won!

So we sing joyfully at Easter in churches around the country, belting out Handel's boisterous chorus from *Judas Maccabeus*. Organ stops are pulled out, brass choirs are hired, and the lilies quiver with the resounding praise. Triumphant gladness is the order of the day.

Surely this is appropriate, for at Easter we celebrate the heart of the gospel: Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Yet as we come to consider worship during Easter, there are two cautions to bear in mind: first, Easter is not just a single day, but a season of fifty days leading to Pentecost. Many early churches approached the Easter season as a time of particular reflection for those who had been baptized at the Easter Vigil. Preachers like Ambrose of Milan and Cyril of Jerusalem offered sermons during the week following Easter Sunday focusing on the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist, in order to help new Christians understand the mystery of the life into which they had been incorporated. Recent revival of interest in the catechumenate has turned attention to this practice, so that the weeks of Easter open up for believers (old and new alike) the riches of the sacramental life.¹ So too for us this season can be an invitation not just to a single celebratory occasion, but to sustained attention to the shape of the new life we have received in our baptism into Christ.

Second, the joyful proclamation of new life at Easter is only good news to those who know the threat of death. We have to tell the truth about death in our world in order to receive the truth about Easter life. For this reason, though it may seem peculiar, Easter can summon us to new reflection on death as it comes to us in the midst of life, as well as the promise of life that comes in the midst of death.

Death in the Midst of Life

In Stephen Sondheim's musical, *A Little Night Music*, two of the main characters sing an ironic ballad, "Every Day a Little Death." Their lament focuses on the little deaths that erode romantic love: the deception, the pretense, the sweetness on the surface that disguises the bitter emptiness beneath. The song concludes:

Every day a little dies
In the looks and in the lies.
Every move and every breath
(And you hardly feel a thing)
Brings a perfect little death.

Even for those who do not dwell in Sondheim's darkly cynical world, we know there is truth in these words. Every day does bring its own "little death," in many

different forms. We all know people who carry on in marriages or relationships that have died at their core. The partners go through all the motions: pouring the coffee, picking up the children from school, making the bed, coordinating the calendar. Yet something at the heart of that relationship stopped breathing long ago.

We have all lived through the death of particular hopes: hopes for a certain job, a certain honor, a certain magic, or a certain security. We move through our days distracted by all the mundane demands of living, and suddenly one day, we look at the paint peeling on the ceiling and realize, “this is not the life I had hoped for.” Somewhere along the way, the bright visions for the future have died, and a tiny piece of our selves have died with them.

More seriously, the newspapers each day proclaim brutal new deaths in wars overseas, new deaths on streets at home. As I write this, twelve miners have just died in an accident in a coal mine in West Virginia; a suicide bomber has killed 32 at an Iraq funeral; the death toll for U.S. soldiers in Iraq has passed 2000; and the death toll for Iraqis during the same period, though not calculated as carefully, is over ten times that. We encounter “little deaths” every day, and we confront real death each time we read, hear, or watch the news. Ultimately, death comes to each of us not only as a bitter disappointment or a harrowing headline, but as the termination of our lives. Death hangs on the horizon for all of us—not always as a present threat, but as the dark line that marks the limit of our vision, there whenever we turn our heads. Whether we go quietly into that good night, or rage against the dying of the light, death comes for all of us, and we cannot finally defeat it.

Death lurks, too, in the gospel texts for this Easter season. On the second Sunday of Easter we encounter Thomas, whose faith in the resurrection comes only after touching the wounds of the crucifixion (John 20:25ff). Thomas has to touch the marks of the nails and the wound in Jesus’ side in order to confirm Jesus’ life. It is precisely the marks of death that make him realize that Jesus is alive.

On the fourth Sunday of Easter, we encounter the charming image of Jesus as the good shepherd (John 10:11-18). This day, which some churches celebrate as “Good Shepherd Sunday,” is frequently filled with images of woolly lambs frolicking happily in verdant pastures. Yet the threat of death pervades this text: wolves threaten the sheep, and the shepherd Jesus gives up his own life for the safety of his flock. Death is not absent from this text; in fact, the life of the sheep depend upon the death of the shepherd.

On the following two Sundays, the gospel texts present Jesus as the true vine (John 15:1-8 and 9-17). As the life-giving vine, Jesus enables those who abide in him to bear fruit. But the threat of death haunts this story as well, for the branches that do not bear fruit are cut off and burned in the fire.

At supper, in the meadow, in the vineyard: in the midst of all of these life-giving settings, the gospel also shows us death. So, too, in the midst of our daily lives: in our homes, at our jobs, in the newspapers, as we go about our business, life presents us with the specter of death.

Life in the Midst of Death

Yet death is not the only reality we encounter in the gospel texts, or in our lives. Easter is, after all, about resurrection, about the triumph of life over death. On the first Sunday of Easter, in John 20, Mary comes weeping to the tomb, to the place of death,

only to discover that there is no longer a dead body there. Instead, the one who had been dead speaks to her in the garden, calls her by name, and sends her to announce to the other disciples that she has seen the Lord—alive! Life emerges right in the place that was suffused with the scent of death.

Back in the meadow with the sheep on the fourth Sunday of Easter, Jesus does indeed announce that he will lay down his life for the sheep, but he does so in order that they may live. And more: he lays down his life in order to “take it up again” (John 10:17-18). Death here is real, but it is the source of life for the sheep, and it does not mark the end even for the shepherd himself. Here, too, the final word is not death, but life.

On the fifth and sixth Sundays of Easter, Jesus declares himself to be the vine not in order to threaten death, but precisely in order to offer life to all who abide in him. “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples” (John 15:7-8). Abundant life is the promise here: the flourishing of those who are engrafted into Jesus Christ.

How does life appear for us in the midst of death? Where do we see hope embodied? Putting my older daughter to bed one night recently, I apologized for having a short temper earlier in the day. “I’m sorry I have been in such a bad mood today,” I said. “I shouldn’t have gotten so angry at you.” Something inside me felt dry, withered, worthy only of being cut off and thrown into the fire. But my daughter looked at me, puzzled. “I didn’t think you were angry.” A hug, and a kiss good night. “I love you, Mama.” At once, unexpectedly, the old life was gone, and a new life had begun.

New life emerges each time we practice forgiveness, and each time we receive forgiveness from someone else. When a relationship has been poisoned with bitterness and seems to be dead, it is yet possible for someone to turn around, to say “I’m sorry” or “I forgive you.” And there, in the midst of what seemed like death, new life is born. Forgiveness allows us to acknowledge the wrongs of the past but not be determined by them, and thus it is a real instance of the possibility of new life.

Poet Billy Collins finds new life in the testimony of the earth itself. In “Picnic, Lightning,” he recounts the various ways death comes suddenly: meteor, plane crash, lightning strike. Then he continues:

And we know the message
can be delivered from within.
The heart, no valentine,
decides to quit after lunch,
the power shut off like a switch,
or a tiny dark ship is unmoored
into the flow of the body’s rivers,
the brain a monastery,
defenseless on the shore.

is what I think about
when I shovel compost
into a wheelbarrow,

and when I fill the long flower boxes,
then press into rows
the limp roots of red impatiens—
the instant hand of Death
always ready to burst forth
from the sleeve of his voluminous cloak.

Collins is well acquainted with the reality of death. Yet the poem does not end here. He goes on,

Then the soil is full of marvels,
bits of leaf like flakes off a fresco,
red-brown pine needles, a beetle quick
to burrow back under the loam.
Then the wheelbarrow is a wilder blue,
the clouds a brighter white,

and all I hear is the rasp of the steel edge
against a round stone,
the small plants singing
with lifted faces, and the click
of the sundial
as one hour sweeps into the next.²

This may not be the witness of the gospel, but on the other hand, as Christians we can celebrate the testimony of the beetles and the small plants singing, for they, too, point us to new life. Small wonders like these remind us of the great wonder that life does emerge in the midst of death.

Our ultimate hope, in the Easter season, comes to us from the gospel story itself—that the darkness does not overcome the light, that death is real but not final, that the end of the story is life. When sleepy children kiss us good night in spite of our scolding, when lingering resentment gives way to forgiveness, when beetles scurry into the soil, all of this reminds us that life springs anew even in the face of death.

Death and Life in the Easter Season

Several recent writers have pointed out the importance of holding together death and life, Good Friday and Easter, in reflecting on the Christian life. Jim Farwell, professor of liturgics at General Theological Seminary, makes this case in his compelling book *This is the Night: Suffering, Salvation, and the Liturgies of Holy Week*. To begin with, Farwell describes the modern myth of progress in which “little by little, through the interaction of technology and capital, humanity is growing toward a more perfect future.” In this popular story of our culture, suffering and death “is reduced to an unfortunate but inevitable moment in the process of growth toward a greater good.” The liturgies of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter, however, contrast sharply with such a myth of progress. Suffering and death are not simply a moment to get beyond in order to celebrate; the paschal mystery is precisely that life emerges out of death, in the midst of suffering. “Far from being a three-day drama that

mimics the modernist sense that suffering is no more than an unhappy but temporary step on the way to triumph, each and every liturgy of the Paschal Triduum is a ritual interweaving of suffering borne and hope celebrated.”³ Death in the midst of life, but finally life in the midst of death: this is the central mystery celebrated in the liturgies of Holy Week.

Alan Lewis, late professor of theology at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, echoes a similar theme in *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday*. In this powerful theological reflection written as he was himself dying of cancer, Lewis focuses attention on the day between Good Friday and Easter, between crucifixion and resurrection, to ask what we might learn of Christian faith from that vantage point. Standing in the empty, formless silence between the horror of Golgotha and the wonder of the empty tomb, Lewis reminds us that “the complex, multiple meaning of the story will only emerge as we hold in tension what the cross says on its own, what the resurrection says on its own, and what each of them says when interpreted in light of the other.”⁴ Easter Saturday, Holy Saturday, he suggests, is a “boundary” where we appropriately stand to look both backward and forward in faith. He concludes his opening chapter with these questions:

Where better than at the Easter Saturday grave to see with clarity the vivid contrast between the humiliation of the crucified Christ and his glorious exaltation? Where better to find the wisdom which can unite cross and resurrection inextricably, and discover truth in such foolishness as presence-absence, powerful weakness, and life-giving death? Where better to hold in equilibrium the first-time hearing of the gospel story and its constant retelling by the people of faith? ⁵

Farwell and Lewis focus in their work on the theology of Holy Week: the three days of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Vigil called the Triduum (Farwell), and Holy Saturday (Lewis). But their words are equally important for us to hear as we move beyond Easter morning, as we travel through the Great Fifty Days of Easter. Once we pass Easter morning, Good Friday seems far, far away. In the Easter season, we might be tempted to say nothing of death anymore, for after all, “the old life is gone, and a new life has begun.” We might be tempted to engage in seven weeks of unmitigated celebration, an orgy of lilies and Alleluias with nary a kyrie in sight.

But this celebration of “pure presence” would be a mistake, both for anthropological reasons and for theological reasons. In the midst of our alleluias, we cannot forget that there are still those among us who grieve, who face death either physically or emotionally. Easter needs to acknowledge such suffering in order that those who grapple with death may receive the good news of life. Theologically, we cannot forget that our resurrection hope is real but not yet fully realized. Easter, the most joyous season of the Christian year, must not just focus on the presence of the living Christ here and now, but must lean into the future, anticipating the time when we will all sit at the table of the Lamb. In witnessing to the new life that has come to us in Christ Jesus, we must not succumb to our culture’s denial of death, but must acknowledge with honesty the death that yet haunts us—even as we know that it does not have the last word.

In a recent essay, theologian Jurgen Moltmann laments the modern denial of death and suffering. "Modern society has no time for mourning, and no space," he declares. "Death and mourning have been radically privatized and banished from public life."⁶ Our modern Western culture tends to make death invisible, relegated to private rooms and the edges of cities. It is embarrassing, unseemly. But we, as Christians, must not fall into this trap of denying death. In this Easter season, it is a particularly tempting path, but it is one that we particularly need to avoid. The wonder of the gospel message is that life comes right in the midst of death.

Death and Life in Easter Worship

How do we express liturgically this interweaving of death and life that is the heartbeat of the Easter season? I suggest four moments of worship in which this can be most clearly embodied: prayers of confession, preaching, baptism, and the Lord's Supper.

First, prayers of confession. The confession of sin and declaration of forgiveness, so important during worship the rest of the year, are often omitted during this season. There is some justification for this; during Eastertide we anticipate the perpetual rejoicing of the saints around the throne of the Lamb in Revelation, where mourning and crying and death will be no more. But even in Easter, we know that this future is not yet fully realized. Might not this season of joy be an appropriate time to acknowledge the continuing presence of death in our world? Resurrection hope is ours, but hope is not a denial of death; it is a declaration that death is not the final word. And so perhaps we should lift up prayers of confession even in this most joyous of seasons; in light of the resurrection it might be particularly important to acknowledge the ways that we continue to live as if we had no hope, the ways that we continue to fear death, as well as the ways our world continues to groan for redemption.

Second, preaching. As I have already suggested, Easter preaching cannot effectively proclaim new life without naming honestly the real power of death in our lives and in our world. A preacher in this season might fruitfully take time to name the little deaths that invade our lives, in order that the promise of new life is made real to people who need it so deeply. Another approach to preaching that takes seriously the intertwining of death and life in Easter is to learn from the ancient practice of "mystagogical preaching," preaching that begins with the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist as primary encounters with death and life: death of the old self, the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, and the gift of new life that comes to us in the resurrection.

Third, baptism. In the first centuries of the church, Easter Sunday was commonly regarded as the most appropriate occasion for celebrating baptism. If churches celebrate baptisms on Easter Sunday, or on other Sundays during the Easter season, this provides a prime opportunity to confront the mysteries of death and life. In Romans 6:3-4 Paul declares, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life." Reflecting on this passage, Cyril of Jerusalem preaches to the newly baptized, "We know well that not merely does [baptism] cleanse sins and bestow on us the gift of the Holy Spirit—it is also the sign of Christ's suffering."⁷ Even as baptism marks the triumph of life over death, it also marks the beginning of a life characterized by death—that is, a life of death to the

things that enslave us. Early Christian converts spent this Easter season celebrating new life, but also learning that living that new life involves dying to “the old life.” It may seem peculiar and out of place to proclaim this gospel of death and life at the baptism of infants, but it is in fact a prime opportunity to underscore that at baptism all of us are welcomed into a new way of being—a life that dies daily to the old ways of death.

Finally, the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, or the Eucharist. During Easter we repeatedly encounter stories of the risen Christ at table: in the upper room of John 20, on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24. We also encounter more subtle images associated with the table: Jesus as the true vine, Jesus as the good shepherd who feeds the sheep. All of these images guide us to the celebration of the Supper. Easter is a particularly appropriate season to come to the table—and not just on the First Sunday of Easter, but each Sunday afterward, since it is the season of resurrection. The Supper brings us face to face with both life and death. Here at the table we meet our risen Lord face to face, but the risen Lord still bears the wounds in his hands and side. The bread broken recalls both the body broken on the cross and the bread that is blessed and broken by the risen Lord in the unknown village of Emmaus. Resurrection does not deny the reality of death, but declares that the death we know too well is not more real than the life that is ours in Christ Jesus.

In prayers and preaching, in baptism and Eucharist, worship during the fifty days of Easter proclaims the astounding news that Christ has risen from the dead. “Thine is the glory, risen, conquering Son; endless is the victory thou o’er death hath won!” This is the good news. In the midst of death, in the face of all that threatens to undo us, we proclaim Christ’s resounding victory. We can tell the truth about death now; we can honestly tell of the ways the world continues to struggle and suffer—because we know that Christ has joined us in these struggles and has pronounced the death sentence on death itself. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Notes

1. For more on the revival of the catechumenate and the practice of mystagogical catechesis (preaching to the newly baptized on baptism and Eucharist), see Edward Yarnold, S.J., *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation* 2d ed. (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1994); William Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1995); and Craig A. Satterlee, *Ambrose of Milan’s Method of Mystagogical Preaching* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2002).
2. Billy Collins, “Picnic, Lightning,” in *Sailing Alone Around the Room* (New York: Random House, 2001), 98-99.
3. James Farwell, *This Is the Night: Suffering, Salvation, and the Liturgies of Holy Week* (New York: T & T Clark, 2005), 8-9.
4. Alan E. Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 33.
5. *Ibid.*, 41-42.
6. Jürgen Moltmann, “Mourning and Consoling,” in *In the End—The Beginning: The Life of Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 121.
7. Cyril of Jerusalem, “Sermon 2: The Baptismal Rite,” in Yarnold, 79.