

# Preaching Easter

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Easter is coming. On Resurrection Sunday, the high peak of the church year, many of us will invite the largest congregations we have seen all year to join us in proclaiming the central truth of Christian faith. *Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.* As usual, this will not be the only reason that people come. Some of them will come to hear the music, others will come to bring their children, and a higher ratio than usual will come to please their mothers, but when the preacher stands to deliver the sermon they will all enter into the same silence for a few moments at least, giving the anointed one in their midst one more chance to tell them why what they are doing there really matters.

I do not know anyone who relishes preaching on Easter Sunday. Along with Christmas Eve, it is one of the most difficult days on the homiletical calendar, not only because our listeners' expectations are so high but also because their plates are already so full. When we stand to speak, we look out at people with much on their minds. Even those who mean to listen to us cannot stop their minds from ricocheting between the roast in the oven and the war in Iraq; the painted eggs on the kitchen counter and the threat of bird flu; the maiden aunt in the nursing home, whom they will visit later that afternoon, and what they will do if her dwindling resources run out before she dies.

What is the good news this Easter morning?

When I teach preaching workshops that require participants to preach, I tell them not to worry about presenting a whole, perfect sermon. Just give us your introduction, I say, or tell us a story that you think you want to use. Take a risk. Try something new. Think of this as a lab where a failed experiment won't cost you your job. When preachers take me up on this offer, the results are often gratifying, both for them and for their listeners.

Typically, these preachers begin very much as they are used to beginning. They read a biblical text. They pray a prayer. They say something apologetic about whatever they are about to present and then they launch into it, going strong until they all of a sudden look up and say, "That's it. That's as far as I got."

As anti-climactic as this is, it has a liberating effect on many of us who listen. The pressure to produce a whole, perfect sermon is relieved, and in its absence some of us become so weightless that we erupt in giggles. Wouldn't it be wonderful to do that one Sunday? Wouldn't it be wonderful to make a couple of good points, tell a story or two and then say, "That's it. That's as far as I got"?

Because I have never allowed myself to do this in person, I have decided to do it in print. With the kind permission of the editors, I am inviting you to walk with me toward an Easter sermon with no pressure, either external or internal, to arrive at my destination. All I want to do is to think out loud about the difficulties of preaching this particular Sunday, and to share with you some of the resources I am using as I prepare my own Easter sermon.

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Besides the difficulties I have already mentioned, there is the difficulty of gaining a fresh hearing for a story that our listeners have heard so many times before. I am not sure this is a requirement, since the preacher's job is to come up with a true word, not a new word, but this year in particular I am aware of the ways in which I have participated in the domestication of the gospel.

When I look back at my file of old Easter sermons, I note how often I have preached the Easter story as a call to courage for those who fear death, or the deaths of those they love. I have preached it as a primer on walking by faith and not by sight, since all four gospel writers record the testimonies of those who saw things we have not seen. I have even preached the empty tomb as an occasion for idolatry, since there sometimes seem to be more Christians who would rather sit inside of it arguing about what "really happened" than pack up and follow the living Lord who is no longer there.

What all of these sermons have in common is that they are aimed chiefly at individuals seeking some reassurance that they are right, or will be all right, in the days following their own Good Fridays, whatever shape those crucifixions may take. While there is nothing intrinsically wrong with this approach—the gospel *is* personal, after all—I have lately been struck by the almost complete absence of the political in my preaching.

Where is the gospel that once threatened the values of the most powerful empire in the world? Where is the gospel that turned Jesus, Peter, and Paul into "persons of interest" for the Roman government, which eventually executed them all? In preparation for this year's Easter sermon, I have gone hunting for that gospel.

Since I am a lectionary preacher, I am understudying Mark this year. Before I decide what I want to say, I want to hear what he has to say, so that he and I are not working at cross-purposes. The gospel reading for the principal service on Easter Sunday is Mark 16:1-8, the most ancient end to the Jesus story, which breaks off abruptly with a sentence that is hardly a whole sentence.

According to Mark, the story ends after Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome encounter the young man dressed in white in Jesus' empty tomb. Shocked senseless not only by his presence but also by his instruction ("But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you"), they flee the tomb in terror and amazement. Translated directly from the Greek, the last sentence of Mark's gospel reads like this: "...and no one anything they told, they were afraid for..."

There is a whole new *Da Vinci Code* waiting to be written about how such an ending came to be. Did Mark slump over his manuscript at that point, dead from a sudden heart attack? Did a Roman soldier walk up behind him and say, "You're done, son"? Maybe those who inherited Mark's manuscript were so appalled by what he had written that they ripped it right there, right in the middle of that sentence, and pretended that was all there was to it—or maybe Mark was simply a brilliant storyteller, the James Joyce of his century, willing to take linguistic risks that no one else dreamed of taking. Whatever the explanation, there it is: "and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

In one of my favorite old commentaries, *The Gospel in Solentiname*, a Nicaraguan campesino named Laureano wants to know why the three women get so much credit for going to the grave. "They weren't running any risk by going there, the soldiers weren't attacking the women or doing a damned thing to them," he says at the Easter

Vigil, where the priest has invited everyone present to comment on the gospel. “Going to see Jesus and weeping for him there, why were they running any risk?”

But a Colombian poet named William has an answer for Laureano. “It takes a certain courage, man,” he says, “it’s like going now to lay flowers on the grave of a guerilla fighter.”<sup>1</sup> In the 1970’s, Nicaraguan peasants had no trouble hearing the political implications of the gospel. The Sandinista Revolution was underway, seeking to overthrow the Somoza dictatorship. While this revolution was far from peaceful, it offered students of the Bible a vivid parallel to the world in which Jesus lived. A little later in the Easter Vigil, Laureano pipes up again.

“What’s important is for us to live resurrection here, right now,” he says, “and for us not to believe, as many have believed, that this world doesn’t count, that what counts is to go to heaven afterwards and all that nonsense.” A woman named Olivia agrees with him.

“And there’s people that say you have to put up with things and live in poverty and sickness,” she says, “and live with your kids naked, because that’s the way Jesus lived, and be resigned so we’ll get to heaven. We’ve been told that Christ’s death is so we’ll live resigned to misery. And I don’t know why, because Christ died like a brave man, because that’s why they killed him, for being so brave, always denouncing injustice.”

I imagine that the gospel Somoza heard in his private chapel later that same Easter morning was offered from a different hermeneutical angle, but I do not believe that we have to pretend to live in a different place or time in order to wonder what kind of revolution Jesus might inspire in our own empire today.

Many of us have Walter Brueggemann to thank for teaching us how to read the Hebrew Bible as a response to empire. Now Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan are helping us to read the New Testament in a similar way. Their jointly authored text, *The Last Week*, looks at the final events of Jesus’ life as challenges to the domination system of the empire. One need not agree with their conclusions in order to be awakened by their questions.

As Crossan has been saying in lectures across the country, the way of the empire and God’s way are not the same way, regardless of similarities in their vocabulary. While both proclaim peace to those who are far off and those who are near, their strategies could not be more different. Where the way of the empire is peace through victory, God’s way is peace through justice. This insight alone will keep me from using the language of “victory” on Easter Sunday, especially since that language is presently linked so strongly at both the conscious and subconscious levels to U. S. military action in Iraq.

Ched Myers has also been helpful to me as I seek to read Mark anew. In his book *Binding the Strong Man*, Myers notes that it is not one, two, or four women who come to Jesus’ tomb on Easter morning, but three. Replacing the three men who formed Jesus’ inner circle, these three women become the “lifeline” of the discipleship narrative, he says, who do two things that their brothers in faith found impossible to do: they become servants, and they continue to follow Jesus even *after* he has been arrested and executed.

“The world order is being overturned,” Myers writes, “from the highest political power to the deepest cultural patterns, and it begins with the new community.”<sup>2</sup>

While the young man in white, whom Myers calls “the martyr-figure,” tells the women to go reinstate their brothers—that is, to go tell the disciples and Peter that

Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee—they do not do this. In a reversal of Mark's trademark healing stories, in which healed people are commanded to keep silence but speak anyway, these three women are commanded to speak but keep silence instead.

Because they do, the burden of the narrative shifts from the women *in* this gospel to the hearers *of* it, who will either choose to be members of the new community by returning to Galilee to follow Jesus all over again or who will flee the scene in order to go back to the world the way it was. The ambiguity of Mark 16:8 cannot be resolved "aesthetically," Myers says, but only by practice. Will we flee or follow? Whether or not anyone in this story ever "sees Jesus" will depend on whether they renew their commitment to walk his way.

Myers finds the dynamism in Mark's original ending so compelling that he dismisses longer endings as "imperial rewritings" in which male dominance and triumphal aspirations are restored, miracle-working is resumed as a guarantor of belief, and Jesus is removed from earth to heaven. Far from honoring the struggle of real disciples to act faithfully, the longer endings allow readers to remain passive while Jesus does all the heavy lifting. In this way, Myers says, the rewrites try to "rescue" Mark from his own "deepest narrative and ideological commitments."<sup>3</sup>

On the controversial subject of where Mark's narrative really ends, make sure to get a copy of *Marked* by Steve Ross, a graphic novel of Mark's Gospel recently published by Seabury Press. I will not spoil the ending for you, but the very first page of this book shows a refugee camp just beyond the outskirts of a big city. Two helicopters patrol overhead. A big sign is posted just inside the coils of razor wire that circle the camp. "Annual Thank Your Liberators Day," the sign reads in big block letters, "Have your ID ready for inspection."

A hushed dialogue is taking place between two people hidden inside one of the tents. "But Dad," one of them says, "they say we have to band together if we want to fight the occupa...."

"Shhh," the other voice warns, "I've told you before. What happens to the others is none of our business. Period."

Another book I am reading as I prepare to preach on Easter is *When Jesus Came to Harvard* by Harvey Cox. For fifteen years, Cox taught a course called "Jesus and the Moral Life" to undergraduates at Harvard. Some of his students were Christian, and many were not, but the content of the course proved so compelling that their numbers grew and grew, until Cox finally had to move the class to a theater usually reserved for rock concerts. Divided into sections called "Stories He Told" and "Stories They Told About Him," the book covers some of the same territory as the class, showing how Cox used Jesus' parables to bridge the gap between the ancient and modern worlds. In his chapter on "The Easter Story," Cox tells why he initially ended his class with the story of Jesus' crucifixion.

The students were from a variety of religious backgrounds, he explained. Unlike the crucifixion, the resurrection was a "borderline event" that sat on the line between the historical and the mystical. Cox thought it best to stop short of that, devoting the last few sessions of the class to discussing some of the different interpretations of the moral significance of Jesus' life that have arisen in the centuries after his death.

His students pressed him, however, and not just the Christians. They wanted to know why Cox was leaving the climax of the story out, the part that made Jesus different from Moses, Muhammad, or the Buddha. Listening to them talk, he dis-

covered that the closest parallels some of them had for Jesus' resurrection were the stories of Dracula or the Terminator. So Cox decided to add the resurrection to the syllabus, but not before he had done his own research. Chief among his surprises was the discovery that

stories of raising the dead in the Old Testament *did not have to do with immortality*. They are about *God's justice*. They are expressions of a human hope that is both of a *moral*, not a metaphysical impulse. They did not spring up from a yearning for life after death, but from the conviction that ultimately a truly just God simply had to vindicate the victims of the callous and the powerful.<sup>4</sup>

In the course of this rich chapter, Cox compares the stories of Moses and Jesus much as the evangelist Matthew does. Along the way he points out the political dimensions of a story that is too easily declawed by those who do not want to replace the furniture. To restore a dead person to life is to strike a blow at mortality, Cox points out, but to restore a crucified man to life is to strike a blow at the system that executed him.

His most startling insight is that the deep hope nourished by Christ's resurrection—that God's shalom will triumph in the end—is not the private property of Christians but a hope that may be shared by people of other faiths and no faith. If the Easter story “cannot be parsed to include the hopes of all peoples,” he says, “then we are left with a tribal god who will be rightly dismissed by those who hold no church or synagogue membership card.”<sup>5</sup>

That's it. That's as far as I got. There is still a great deal to be done—deciding what one thing I want to say, making sure that it is true to what Mark wanted to say, finding the central image that will show what I want to tell, figuring out how I will engage my listeners' hearts and wills as well as their minds—but, God willing, I still have time for all of that.

You, meanwhile, have your own journey to make. No one can go to Galilee for you. If you want to meet Jesus, you will have to go see for yourself.

## Notes

1. Ernesto Cardenal, trans. Donald D. Walsh, *The Gospel in Solentiname*, vol. 4 (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997), 247.
2. *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), 397.
3. *Ibid.*, 401.
4. *When Jesus Came to Harvard: Making Moral Choices Today* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), 274.
5. *Ibid.*, 283.