

Preaching the Easter Texts

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Last August while on my way home from a week at the beach, I received the sad news that a 47-year-old church member had died very suddenly. A pestering stomach ache turned out to be a deadly disease. Eddie's wife grew up in the church, and their family occupies the same pew in the transept every Sunday. When I arrived at their home to discuss the arrangements, I encountered what every pastor I know dreads – family members who want to speak at the Memorial Service. And this time it was Eddie's 14 and 11-year-old daughters. Their grandmother had tried to talk them out of it. Their mother had tried to talk them out of it. I asked with as much pastoral sensitivity as I could muster, "Are you sure?" The girls had already written what they wanted to say, were loudly insistent, and had a look of fierce determination on their faces. I had just shared with them that I was a little younger than they when my father died, that I knew first hand what they were going through, and that they would indeed survive this season of their hearts breaking. In a moment of pastoral confusion I agreed to let them speak at the service and sandwiched them in between the scripture and my meditation on the texts.

The next day, following readings from 1 Corinthians 13 and John 14, these willowy youth ascended the chancel, stood side by side behind the pulpit, and the older one read what each had written. Three months earlier she had knelt before me on her day of Confirmation, and I had anointed her forehead with a cross smelling of frankincense and myrrh. Little did I know she would so soon taste its bitter perfume. The church was packed; the congregation audibly sniffing at this very public sight of Eddie's children before them. She began by thanking everyone who was there because she knew they loved her father and he loved them. Then a most amazing thing happened. This child began testifying to her faith saying, "I know my father is in heaven with God and Jesus because he has been raised to live with God." She told a story about getting stitches in one hand and how her father asked her to squeeze his hand hard to take her mind off the one being sewn up. "I squeezed so hard I know it hurt him, but I will never forget his holding my hand that day," she said. "My love for my father and his love for me will never die, because he is alive with God. I believe in the resurrection, and I know that in heaven Jesus has prepared a special place for him."

It was pure testimony. The primary thing this child of the church said that day was love never ends, and that she believes there is life after death because of Jesus Christ. In essence, she preached 1 Corinthians 13 and John 14. When we all stood at the end of the service for the Affirmation of Faith, using the words of the Apostle Paul, "We are convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord,"¹ all of us were certain those words ring true, for we had just seen and heard that truth proclaimed from the bold testimony of a grieving child.

To preach the Easter gospel calls for bold testimony. The church will pull out all

the stops and put up all the props. About a month before Easter, newspapers, magazines and television will tease our imaginations about what really happened with first century stories from archaeological science, and CNN will broadcast late breaking news about some recently discovered non-canonical gospel. Come Easter morning people will show up for worship in the usual mix of the faithful, doubtful and skeptical. They will expect the preacher to say something and hope it won't go on too long. All we preachers can do is tell the story, like Eddie's daughter at her Dad's Memorial Service, with the passion and authority of one who has stood beside the grave and yet seen the tomb empty and believes the good news of resurrection to be true.

Resurrection News of Cosmic Proportions: Preaching Matthew 28:1-10 on Easter Sunday

Matthew's testimony is the largest and loudest and most earthshaking of them all with cosmic dimensions not found in Mark, Luke or John. His account of the death and burial of Jesus (Mt. 27:45-66) goes into great detail to make sure we know the body really was dead, how it was wrapped, where it was placed, and the huge size of the stone that sealed the tomb. Watching Joseph of Arimathea attend to the details were witnesses, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, and not only that, there was a governmental decree from Pilate himself to secure the tomb and post a guard of soldiers beside it. By Matthew's account the dead body of Jesus was so well guarded that it would be absolutely impossible for it to go missing or get stolen or whatever. In this text God's power to raise Jesus from the dead reaches through layers and layers of death-dealing security.

Against a backdrop of a very sure and secure death, this gospel welcomes the cosmic forces of nature to help herald the good news of resurrection. The great stone rolled up tight against the door of the tomb is no match for God's great earthquake. Unlike Mark and Luke's accounts, this angel isn't simply inside the tomb waiting for the women, but rather descending from heaven, appearing like lightening with clothing white as snow. Matthew exclaims the good news of resurrection as Tom Long has written, with "a shattering earthquake that rippled a seismic shock through history and signaled that the fault lines of human history had shifted dramatically toward grace and hope."²

Everything has changed dramatically, irrevocably, eternally. Time itself, "after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning," has shifted into a new day's observance of Sabbath celebrating the inauguration of a new creation. The women's fear is paired now with greater joy as they throw themselves in awe-filled worship at the feet of their Risen Lord. By Jesus' instruction to the women, the disciples become "brothers" to call forth a new family among all nations.³ The soldiers, in Matthew representing the deadly political powers, have fallen away like dead men upending the power structures of the old social order. The earth itself that has spun under the enormous and exhausting weight of death by violence, greed, poverty and disease quakes with new life and hope now that a greater power is on the loose. Matthew's proclamation of resurrection is huge, loud, and globally good news.

On Easter the preacher is challenged to proclaim this awesome, life-giving power beyond the seasonal spring wonder of bunnies, chocolate eggs, and the sentimental floral cross on the church's front lawn. Occasionally, however, something happens in nature that is reminiscent of Matthew's cosmic magnitude of the resurrection. In

January, 2002, a massive wet weather system moved into Central Mexico with unusually cold temperatures in the low 20's, causing an unprecedented death of Monarch butterflies which migrate to Mexico from Canada and the United States each winter. Tens of millions of monarch butterflies at the two largest over-wintering sites in Mexico died in catastrophic, unprecedented proportions. The entomologists who gathered there to estimate the death toll found gray carpeted acres of decaying wings. In order to measure the depth of the dead, they reached down through the decaying layers of butterflies, and at about eight inches down, they discovered a layer of living monarchs which had been protected from the freezing rain by the ones that had died, just enough over time to restore the species to life. Buried beneath layers of death was hope for survival and a future for the species.⁴ With images from the natural order of God's creation, earthquake and lightening, worldly powers fallen before the awesome power of God, new life in the midst of death, Matthew gives us opportunity to proclaim how God reaches through layers of death: betrayal by Jesus' friends, the brutality of crucifixion, an air tight tomb, a guard of soldiers — through all of it to bring about resurrection and an altogether new creation.

Matthew's resurrection calls not only for trumpets, but also timpani. This gospel's Easter Alleluias do not dangle at the end of an incomplete sentence as in Mark or get dismissed as women's idle chatter as in Luke. Through multilayered depths of death the world has been experiencing since last Easter, from record breaking death tolls in Iraq to unimaginable suffering in Darfur, from forest fires in California to a cyclone in Bangladesh, from catastrophic oil spills to melting ice caps, from a college campus shooting spree in Virginia to a college student house fire in South Carolina, from individuals to families across our pews, God reaches through layers of death to raise up new life. Follow the word "great" through Matthew's text – great stone, great earthquake, great joy – and what you have is powerful testimony.

A Resurrection Church for Our Time: Preaching Acts of the Apostles during Easter Season

Given Matthew's resounding, earthshaking testimony, which sent the brothers and sisters of the Risen Christ into all the world baptizing and making disciples, perhaps this is the year to preach about the resurrection's newly created family, the church. Let's part company this go around with the usual Easter Season subjects, doubting Thomas, the couple on the road to Emmaus, the Good Shepherd, and consider the Acts of the Apostles where the ground beneath one's feet is still trembling with resurrection power.

In 2008 we recognize that the church has ceased to be propped up by the culture around us, and we struggle to discern who God is calling the church to be during this post-Christendom, post-Constantinian, post-denominational, postmodern time. As we do our grief work about what has changed, Anthony Robinson has written, "We may notice that we not only grieve some aspects of Christendom's demise, we are also liberated by that death. We are free to embrace the wonderful, liberating oddity of being Christians, of following Jesus in a life more challenging and adventuresome than Christendom imagined."⁵ The texts from the Acts of the Apostles appointed for the Sundays after Easter come from a series of early church sermons and events which describe the people's response to the fresh news of resurrection. Interestingly, the form and content of these texts seem to follow the order of worship for the latter half of the

Service of the Lord's Day. In response to the resurrection Word of God proclaimed, these passages of scripture invite us to explore, as if in liturgical order, the wonderful, liberating oddity of being Christian in our time.

Second Sunday of Easter: Acts 2:14a, 22-32 as Affirmation of Faith

For three Sundays following Easter, Acts 2 gives the preacher opportunity to consider how we respond to this good news in word and deed. On Easter we receive the resurrection news with joy, and on the 2nd Sunday of Easter we are invited to affirm our faith as witnesses to God's awesome power. This second part of Peter's Pentecost sermon in Acts 2:22-32 presents one of the earliest Christian confessions of faith. These verses attest to Jesus the person, Jesus the Messiah, and Jesus as Lord.⁶ Peter's proclamation of the resurrection claims continuity with the Old Testament saying King David died and was buried and his tomb can be visited. While David may have foretold resurrection, as Peter recalls paraphrasing Psalm 16:8-11, it wasn't David whom God raised, but Jesus. Jesus fulfills the Messianic promises made through David and sung through the Psalms, that God is ever about the business of restoring us from death to life. Jesus performed "deeds of power, wonders and signs" which recall God's mighty acts in the history of salvation, including the exodus. This oft repeated phrase describes Luke's church in which the powers, wonders, and signs of the disciples become proof that the living God was at work among them. What Jesus began did not end with the crucifixion. Rather our discipleship begins in confession of who Jesus is because we are witnesses to the awesome power of God who raised Jesus from the dead.

Third Sunday of Easter: Acts 2:14a, 36-41 as Celebration of Baptism

After we confess Jesus Christ is Lord and Messiah, what next? Our grateful response is a call to repentance, the cleansing waters of baptism, and openness to the gift of the Spirit. The good news of resurrection summons public worship and changed lives. In her book, *Celebrating Resistance: The Way of the Cross in Latin America*, German Theologian Dorothee Soelle tells a story from Brazil where some twenty-five million children live on the streets. Every day homeless boys got together in one particular spot to chat, to discuss their problems and to share their fears and anger with one another. Church mission workers including a Catholic priest, a Methodist, a priest of the Umbanda cult, a Presbyterian, and a young Lutheran pastor established a ministry among them. One day, one of the boys said he would like to be baptized. "In which church, then?" asked the Catholic. "Which church? In ours here on the street, of course, I want to be baptized here among us." The Methodist said he couldn't get a certificate. The Catholic priest thought it wouldn't be possible to perform jointly with the Umbanda religion. Among the leaders an interdenominational issue arose about how to baptize this child.

The boy, however, stuck by his wish, and finally the young Lutheran pastor followed his lead and organized the necessary things. He filled an old boot with water which the children provided and put it on a board over two crates. The Catholic brought along a candle, and the baptism took place on the street, in the name of Jesus Christ.⁷ In these verses from Acts we see how the good news of resurrection took to the streets, drawing all kinds of new people into the household of God, in ways that might enliven the work of the church in our post-Christendom, post-denominational time.

Fourth Sunday of Easter: Acts 2:42-47 as Eucharistic Community

As Peter's preaching washes over the congregation, we catch a glimpse of the essence of Eucharistic community in teaching and fellowship, breaking bread and praying together, and responding to God in worship with glad and generous hearts. Following Peter's Pentecost sermon and the welcome of the first 3000 converts, we see in these verses the intentional formation of the church's life together. The Christian community is defined not just by belief or doctrine, but by engaging in shared practices of faith formation. In their commentary on Acts, Anthony Robinson and Robert Wall write, "God is in the business of creating a people, building a community, and calling each of us into a new community that is defined by new loyalties and a new story. In Acts we see God at work to create a new people who are not to be defined by the old categories of race, language, gender or social class, but a people united in witness to the resurrection in a way of life that embodies what we call 'resurrection practices.'"⁸

In these weeks after Easter our congregation will ordain and install elders, welcome the Confirmation Class, begin a season of commissioning various mission groups going into the world in service, as well as continue the regular rhythms of baptism and celebration of the Lord's Supper. This snapshot of the early church, albeit sweetly nostalgic of a time before theological debate began creating division, gives us opportunity to interpret our life together as a community which practices resurrection. The healing, teaching, preaching, miracle performing ministry of Jesus continues among his followers who are nurtured by the shared meal of communion and empowered by the Spirit to do what Jesus did.

Fifth Sunday of Easter: Acts 7:55-60 as Offering and Dedication

After assimilating the good news of resurrection into the life of Christian community by confession of faith, baptism, and communion, now we have opportunity to consider how risky a business this faith can be. The stoning of Stephen is the preeminent offering of life and labor to the Lord. I find it fascinating that December 26 is Saint Stephen's Day, as if an earlier church era must have meant to conjoin forever the birth of Jesus with the death of the first Christian martyr. In an artful little book, *Saints: Who They Are and How They Help You*, I discovered that Stephen is the patron saint of deacons and is to be invoked by headache sufferers.⁹

Well, headache is what the people must have suffered listening to Stephen, whose preaching was prophetic, but not very pastoral, calling them stiff necked people and Jesus' betrayers and murderers. His faithful proclamation engendered rage among the crowds who did him in. Ironically, however, Stephen's death by stoning did not scatter the church in fear, but emboldened the church with courage. Perhaps they had seen the most horrendous thing that could happen to a witness for Christ and decided the only thing worse than death was to withhold the proclamation of the life Christ brings. The presence of the then persecutor Saul, standing there, his head nodding in assent and approval as every stone is hurled, further underlines the amazing drama that God has in store for the Christian community in and for the world. As with Stephen, persecutions will come, but so will conversions like Paul's. At the moment of his death, Stephen's prayer for those who stone him bears witness to that resurrection power.

Sixth Sunday of Easter: Acts 17:22-31 as Sending into the World

Following lections from sermons of Peter and Stephen, here we have the

dramatically converted Paul preaching against a backdrop of the erudite philosophers in Athens and a religious shrine to an unknown god. Borrowing from their own style of philosophical debate and quoting Greek poetry, Paul makes his case on behalf of the God of all creation who alone has the power to raise the living from the dead. Although the name of Jesus is never mentioned, it is quite obvious that his resurrection is the central message of the text. The gospel of Christ is expanding into a world every bit as pluralistic as ours today, with many converging cultures, faiths and gods. Perhaps the main difference between then and now is that we don't have to go as far as Athens to find Paul's audience before the Areopagus. That crowd is in our pews and within us, having read the recent *New York Times* bestsellers by renowned atheists, finding ourselves curious about the connections between universal myths and scripture, searching for truth in a country where the Wiccan and Islamic religions are growing faster than Christianity.

Preachers can take a cue from Paul's reasoned appeal to his audience, beginning where they are and trying to move them toward understanding the power of God to raise the dead. But when you get right down to it, we are left as Paul with no control over the response to revelation. Some scoffed, some believed, some wanted to hear more (Acts 17:32-34). To be sent to spread the gospel these days may mean to go far away in mission or simply to the places of our daily rounds where this kind of inquisitiveness meets us everywhere we go. Paul shows us how to be pastoral to seekers as we meet them where they are, how to proclaim the resurrection boldly nevertheless, and then how to leave the rest up to God.

Seventh Sunday of Easter: Acts 1:6-14 as Benediction

Reading from the Acts of the Apostles through these weeks of Easter, we have seen how the Spirit of the living Christ inspired faith and faithfulness among the earliest believers as they gave rise to the church. This early Christian community has been identified in Acts by resurrection practices as together they affirmed their faith, baptized newcomers, shared their goods in common, worshipped, ate together, and went forth into the world as bold witnesses to proclaim their resurrection faith in word and deed.

At the end of Easter season this Ascension text takes us back to the beginning with a snapshot of the final resurrection appearance of the risen Christ. How had these early believers been empowered for founding the church and risking their lives for the sake of the gospel? They had heard the blessing and benediction of the risen Lord himself who said, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 8:1). Then between Jesus' leave taking and the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost, they had been left alone for a while to figure it out on their own. They were left as we are left, with their doubts and their questions. When they had implored Jesus to tell them when the coming kingdom would come, he refused to answer, but he blessed them and took off! With the Ascension of Jesus, suddenly all the disciples had was each other and the testimony of what they had seen and heard. That, however, was all they needed to begin doing the work of Christ themselves as they spread out into the world obeying his charge. Benediction means simply "good word." As he ascends into heaven, the good word of Jesus is that the Holy Spirit will come, and of that life giving, earthshaking resurrection power there will be no end.

Notes

- 1 Romans 8:38-39.
- 2 Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 322.
- 3 Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 247.
- 4 Noah Adams, "All Things Considered," National Public Radio, February 12, 2002, with details researched at monarchwatch.org.
- 5 Anthony B. Robinson, "Changing the Conversation: Nurturing a Third Way for Congregations," *Congregations*, The Alban Institute (Summer 2007): 25.
- 6 Paul W. Walaskay, *Acts*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 41.
- 7 Hannah Ward and Jennifer Wild, editors, *The Westminster Collection of Christian Meditations*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 203.
- 8 Anthony B. Robinson and Robert W. Wall, *Called To Be Church: The Book of Acts for a New Day* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2006), 79.
- 9 Elizabeth Hallam, *Saints: Who They Are and How They Help You* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1994), 111.