

# *Preaching the 2009 Easter Texts*

James S. Lowry  
Great Falls, South Carolina

Several years ago, while serving as interim pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of New Bern, North Carolina, I bartered a deal with a gifted artist in the congregation. In return for something-or-other I created for her in my woodworking shop, she created for me a cross stitch sampler. I got the better end of the deal. The sampler yet hangs in my study. It's kind of in the tradition of *Home Sweet Home* and *Bless This House, O Lord, We Pray* only unlike those usual sampler sentiments, my cross stitch says *I Have Focused on Disputatious Testimony That Refuses Closure*. It's a Walter Brueggemann quote.<sup>1</sup> I like that thought. Among other things, it helps me deal with Easter realities, especially as those realities are presented to us by the Gospel of Mark. In my view, Mark's Gospel, more than all others, forces the church to deal with the disputatious testimony that surrounds Easter and Easter faith. Mark, like the conflicted world in which we live, will not let us slither off to easy Easter answers scented with banks of white lilies. For that reason, and since Mark is the centerpiece of the Lectionary Gospel Offerings for Year B, I am suggesting that we preach from the Mark selection (16:1-8) for Easter Day, and even though there are no other Lectionary suggestions from Mark for Eastertide, I am suggesting that we let Mark's Easter narrative be the lens through which we view all of the texts for our Eastertide preaching in 2009.

Having said that, in the interest of full disclosure, I should make a true confession. Without the least shame or embarrassment, I confess that, among the four evangelists, the Gospel of Mark is my hands-down favorite. If it were not otherwise the case, Mark's Easter narrative and the way Mark ends his Gospel would make it my favorite. His ending fits right in with my painful delight in focusing on disputatious testimony. Without a doubt, the Easter narratives and conclusions of the other three Gospels are filled with their own wonder. How utterly inspiring that Matthew tells of an Easter earthquake, of breathless women running to tell disciples that Jesus has risen, and then of a conspiracy among the guards not to tell what they had witnessed. Mark's Gospel ends with the often echoed refrain of the risen Christ commissioning disciples to go into all the world and baptize.

Luke takes a different but equally inspiring tack. The women find the tomb empty, two strangers remind them that this is the way Jesus had said it would be, and they run to tell the disciples who at first think the women made it all up. Peter goes to see for himself. Then, following the Emmaus Road communion liturgy in which the risen Christ is recognized in the breaking of bread, there is the ever-so earthy scene where the risen Christ appears to disciples, shows them his scars, invites them to touch him, has breakfast with them, and then, in stark contrast to things earthy, ascends into heaven.

For John, Mary Magdalene goes alone on Easter to the tomb, finds it empty, and runs to tell the disciples, Peter and John run to see and find it true, and Jesus appears first to Mary in the garden and later to disciples. After that the Gospel of John has a little trouble actually coming to an end. There are, of course, several important appendices tagged onto the end, but it appears John's narrative once ended with the

remarkable scenes of the risen Jesus entering twice through closed doors with superhuman powers to show disciples his very human scars. The second such interchange was directed especially to Tom, Tom the Doubting one, back from who knows where.

For Matthew, Luke and John, their gospel story ends quite dramatically. All of that drama is really nice and filled to overflowing with colorful preaching fodder. But this Mark fellow? He would have none of it. In Mark, the drama is altogether different. For Mark, the Easter narrative ends abruptly. There is no epilogue, at least not originally.<sup>2</sup> The women who went to the tomb, according to Mark, were confronted by an unidentified young stranger dressed in white, who told them that Jesus had risen from the dead and that they must run and tell the disciples. Mark then ends not only his Easter narrative, but his whole account of the gospel, with the women, dumb struck and lips sealed, fleeing from the tomb. Mark's last remarkable words on the life-changing subject of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead are these: "(the women) said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

I like that. Think of it. Mark, the first of the four to write it all down, left the story dangling in mid air with all the "disputations testimony" left unaddressed. Because that is so, more than all others, he left it to the church to grapple with what it means to believe the frightening truth that Jesus in fact was raised from the dead. And, of course, to continue once more to use Brueggemann's language, the real disputatious testimony runs much deeper than disagreement among the evangelists as to details of what actually happened on Easter and in its aftermath. The real Easter quandary is that, by all accounts, the testimony as to the impossibility of viable life after rigor mortis has set in cannot be reconciled, by any usual logic, with the testimony of the Easter women. Nevertheless, notice that the women, according to Mark, were stunned to silence, not by wondering whether it really happened. They were struck dumb by the frightful wonder at what it might mean that Jesus was raised from the dead. Mark, by his narrative method, more than all others, left the church to the wonder the same frightful thing.

I am suggesting, therefore, that this Easter and Eastertide we focus not only on boldly proclaiming our belief that Jesus is our risen Lord, but most especially I am suggesting that we focus on what it means to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead. Our believing it, of course, will not make it true, but our testimony as to the real effects of believing it will bear witness not only to the truth that it happened, but also to the truth contained in its happening. I further suggest that, proceeding in this way, we use the same strange logic that Paul used in the verses that follow immediately on the heels of the epistle lesson for Easter Day (I Corinthians 15:1-11). "If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain" (15:14). After that bold assertion, what is not stated, but is clearly implied, is something like, "And, of course, it is plain to see our proclamation and your faith are not in vain."

It must be admitted that some folks are not particularly enamored of that kind of logic. It even angers some. For most, however, it's about the best we have to offer, and the best way to proceed through Eastertide with that logic, in my view, is to rehearse our narratives, our biblical narratives, of course, but also the narratives of the believing community.

This, then, is what difference it makes to believe Jesus was raised from the dead:

in the dark of a hot night in the summer of 1958, just weeks before I was to leave home for the first time to let Presbyterian College make its mark on me, my father was awakened by an unexpected phone call. It was the chief of police of our small town in the Piedmont of South Carolina. The chief reported that one of his officers, Bean Pole Hammond by name, had caught Billy B\_\_\_\_, flashlight in hand, pilfering through the merchandise in my father's hardware store. Billy, as it turned out, was a twelve-year-old throw-away yard child of a hard-living, down-on-her-luck woman who lived with her brood on the wrong edge of the wrong side of town. Characteristically, even before asking about the condition of the store and its merchandise, my father's first question was what they had done with Billy B\_\_\_\_. They had taken him twenty miles away to the county jail.

The next morning after breakfast, as was his unshakable custom, Pappy read from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible. In 1958 it was yet a cutting edge thing to read from the RSV rather than the KJV. It was also a cutting edge venture that on that morning our father broke from his custom of reading straight through, a chapter a day, from Genesis through Revelation skipping only the various genealogies (an omission I later learned was unfortunate). Pappy left his book mark in the place he had left off the day before and skipped to Matthew 25. He slowed down in his measured reading when he got to the verse where it says Jesus said, "I was in prison and you visited me." He slowed down again when he got to the verse where it says Jesus said, "In as much as you have done it to the least of these...you have done it unto me." After that, without comment, he offered our family's morning prayer, including prayer for Billy B\_\_\_\_. Then he got up and, after kissing Mom goodbye, drove the twenty miles to the county court house and talked his friend, the county judge, into "sentencing" Billy B\_\_\_\_ to live with us for three months.

Thus it was that Billy B\_\_\_\_, with neither shoes nor shirt and only one pair of high-water pants, came into our lives. He was welcomed as a son and brother with, as they say, all the rights and responsibilities appertaining thereunto. He lived with us for three months because he had to. For several years after that, mostly until he had graduated from high school and was old enough to live on his own, he lived with us as often as he needed or wanted a clean bed, clean clothes, and a place at the table. By most recent accounts, Billy, his wife, children and grandchildren are all getting on quite nicely.

What my father did, of course, was based on upside-down logic. Nobody invites the one who has demonstrated that he wants to steal from you to live with you. Nobody, that is, except maybe the one who ate with sinners and those who by faith follow after him. What Pappy did for Billy was based on the same kind of upside-down logic that comes from believing the Jesus narrative really is true, including most especially the part where it says he was raised from the dead. The worst that could be dealt this man Jesus would not be allowed to defeat him. Would not be allowed, that is, by the God who sent him. Using Paul's strange but strangely believable logic, it follows: if Christ has not been raised, then my father's faith was in vain; and, as anyone who cares to notice can see from the story of Billy B\_\_\_\_ (and countless others like it), my father's faith was not in vain.

And that's what it means that Jesus was raised from the dead, rigor mortis be damned. It's not the only route to believe in resurrection, but it's a good one. And that's not all. The grace and truth which brought redemption to Billy B\_\_\_\_ have the power to bring redemption from Bagdad to the family room; from Darfur to Wall

Street, and from Congo to Capital Hill.

Now, take that upside-down logic, use it as the lens through which to view the Easter and Eastertide lections, and, before you know it, you'll have yourself a barrel full of dandy sermons for the season.

With two exceptions, I find the Acts selections for Eastertide to be compelling. Happily, there are powerful alternatives standing close by.

For the Second Sunday of Easter, the Acts text dishes up the radical story of shared possessions (the lection is Acts 4:32-35, but I see no reason not to continue through 37). Using Mark's Easter narrative as the lens through which to view the text, what we learn is that for those with Easter faith, the economy by which we believers are called to live is radically different from the economy of everyone around us. As I write this (in early November, 2008) the "R" word (*recession*) is being widely used as a worldwide reality and the "D" word (*depression*) is even being bandied about. Unbridled greed, especially as expressed in the last two decades, has finally caught up with us, and the fallout is international in scope. Of course, by Eastertide there will be great need to hear a prophetic word condemning that greed. But there will also be need for a pastoral word of redemption coming from the same upside-down thinkers who dare to live out "an economy based on generosity,"<sup>3</sup> and call on the world around us to do the same.

The first exception to the useful Acts texts offered up for Eastertide in Year B appears on the Third Sunday of Easter (Acts 3:12-19). It's Peter's tirade against the Jews. For that text, making the hermeneutical shift from the first to the twenty-first century may be possible in the quiet of one's study or even in a classroom, but doing so adequately as an act of worship could become quite tedious. Happily, the text just before it (3:1-10, which, by the way, does not appear anywhere in the Lectionary) is an excellent alternative. In it, Peter, in the name of the risen Jesus, brings healing to a crippled beggar who was stretched out just beside the gate to the temple singled out to be called Beautiful. What a hideous contrast to the beautiful gate the crippled man must have made. One can assume hundreds of people passed him daily without much notice. Then Peter and John came by, and, with eyes born of Easter faith, they not only noticed him, but in the name of Jesus, they did something about his plight. That also is what it means to believe Jesus was raised from the dead. Like Peter and John, we have eyes to see the broken humanity all around the beautiful doors to our houses of worship. Not only that, in the name of Jesus, we are committed do what is necessary to bring healing.

The Acts lection for the Fourth Sunday of Easter is listed as 4:5-12, but we really must begin reading with verse one. Acts 4:1-12 is the first part of the story of Peter and John's trial before the Council. On the surface, the issue before the court has to do with last Sunday's episode of the man healed by the beautiful gate of the temple. However, as is made particularly clear by verses one through four, the real issue that got Peter and John in hot water was their belief in the resurrection of Jesus and their proclamation of the promise of resurrection in him. Five thousand converts to that way of upside-down believing presented quite a threat to the powers that were. Seen through the lens of Mark's resurrection narrative, what this text tells the people of God is that we who believe in Jesus will always pose a threat to those who govern by fear.<sup>4</sup> At this writing, just days after he was elected, it is far too early to know if Barack Obama is going to be able to reverse the recent trend in the United States to govern by

fear. In all events, the Fourth Sunday in Easter can be used prophetically to call the hand of any and all who do govern by fear and to speak pastorally to our people saying to them that, even if we must live in a fearful time, because of our Easter faith, we need not be governed by fear.

For the Fifth Sunday of Easter, from Acts the lectionary gives us the remarkable story of the conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch (8:26-40). We know little of the fellow beyond what is told us in the story. Being an Ethiopian traveling in those parts made him a foreigner, being a Eunuch in those parts made him unclean, and being in those parts to worship made him a convert to Judaism before he was a convert to Christianity. That is about all we know about him. By contrast, as biblical characters go, Philip is a fellow we know pretty well. He's the one chosen to minister to the growing church (6:5), he was known as an evangelist (21:8), and he had to hightail to Samaria to escape persecution. We also know that while in Samaria he did some powerful preaching (8:4ff). Having said that, neither the Ethiopian nor Philip is the main character in the story. The star player is the Holy Spirit who, quite dramatically sometimes, moves people around so they will be in exactly the right place at exactly the right time to say and do exactly the right things. Seen through the lens of Mark's Easter Story, one of the things it means to believe in Jesus is that we'd better be ready. By the power of the Holy Spirit we may wind up in some very strange places and be called on to do some very strange things with some very strange people.

The Acts text for the Sixth Sunday of Easter is as powerful as it is brief (10:44-48). It is the story of the Gentiles receiving the Holy Spirit and being included. As hard as it is to imagine, we Gentiles were once the outsiders who were welcomed in. Using the Mark lens to view this text, one of the things it means to believe in Jesus is that those of us now on the inside cannot exclude from our communion anyone who shares our faith. Moreover, we are to extend hospitality even to those who do not share our faith. The full inclusion of homosexual people in the life of the church is, of course, a hot-button issue just now, and it must be addressed. This would be a good Sunday to do so, but there are many others who are, in effect, excluded. With an African American in the White House, this may be an opportune time to address the fact that 11:00 on Sunday morning is still the most segregated hour in the week. That's not all. Virtually every congregation is engaged in some form of feeding the hungry and housing the poor. Yet, how many of those who benefit from our generosity are truly welcome to our communion tables? This list can go on and on, but the Sixth Sunday of Easter gives us an opportunity to address all such pressing questions of inclusiveness.

The Acts offering for the Seventh Sunday of Easter (the Sunday after Ascension) is the second of the unfortunate Lectionary offerings for the season (1:15-17, 21-26). If Luke had seen fit simply to tell us that it was necessary to replace Judas and spare us the details of Judas' burst bowels, this would be a useful text from which to say that one of the things it means to believe Jesus was raised is that we are now bold to believe God speaks through the voice of the church. That sermon, of course, can still be preached (and just think of the possibilities the text provides for the children's sermon!). I am suggesting, however, that since most congregations do not gather for worship on Ascension Day, and since most congregations do not elect officers in May, the ascension narrative (1:6-11) be used on Easter Seven. I further suggest that the preceding introductory verses (1:1-5) be included. They, of course, make the crucial tie of resurrection to ascension. The problem with making this selection for Easter

Seven is that, in some configuration or other, the verses are suggested by the Lectionary every year for Ascension Day and for Easter Seven in Year A. Those unfortunate overlaps notwithstanding, we cannot ignore the fact that the Fundamentalists of (at least) three of the world religions (Jewish, Muslim and Christian) are all making noises that sound a lot like declaring holy war. The ascension text in Acts calls for some clear and definitive word to be spoken on the subject of what it means to be witness to Christ starting at home and then, moving outward in concentric circles to the ends of the earth. The earth with all of its diverse cultures and narratives is shrinking. Moreover, our nation is growing in its diversity. More and more people are bringing their narratives with them to our shores. For example, since his Christian faith means so much to Barack Obama, it is unfortunate that so very many people persist in believing that he is a Muslim. What is worse, however, is that many (all?) of those same people believe that if he were a Muslim, it would disqualify him to be President of the United States. If ever that assertion could be made, it certainly cannot be made now. According to the ascension text, with the risen Lord ascended (i.e., no longer with us as he once was), what it means to believe he was raised is that we must live faithfully at home and around the world. Like Jesus before us, before we speak, we must listen, really listen. Of course we will tell the story of good news, and, if conversion happens, we will sing glad songs of welcome, but our task is not to convert, at least not to convert by coercion. Our task is to be witnesses.

In addressing these texts through the lens of Mark's Easter story, it will be absolutely essential to share and interpret the narratives as they are given to us. We have a rich tapestry for Easter and Eastertide, 2009. First, of course, there is Mark leaving us to wonder what it all means. Then, using the Acts texts, we have the story of the radical sharing of wealth that confronts greed head on; we have the story of the healing of the pain that is all about the doors of the house of worship; we have the story of the confrontation of governance by fear; we have the story of the Holy Spirit putting a believer in the strangely right place at exactly the right time; we have the story of radical inclusion in the community of faith; and, at last, we have the story of the commission to be witnesses. Telling and interpreting those stories is of vast importance. Of almost equal importance, as I attempted to do with the story of my father and Billy B\_\_\_\_, the church's living narrative should be interwoven with the ancient texts of the Biblical narrative. Then, taking a leaf from the notebook of Paul's logic, by doing so, the message will be, of course, my preaching is not in vain, and of the congregation, the message will be, of course your faith is not in vain. Anybody can see that.

## Notes

1 *Theology of the Old Testament*, Fortress, 1997. p 717. In as much as Professor Brueggemann, in his capacity as editor of this journal, will surely be reading this article, I hasten to add, in the lower right corner of the sampler, the initials WB are carefully stitched.

2 It is, of course, all but universally accepted that Mark's Gospel ends with 16:8.

3 This quote is from John Winthrop's famous shipboard sermon. The quote most often cited from that sermon is about establishing "a city set upon a hill." It is almost never noted that Winthrop also said in that sermon, "We are going to establish a nation with an economy based on generosity."

4 One preaching from this text in the twenty-first century must, of course, be careful not to be or appear to be anti-Semitic. The polemic is against all who govern with fear.