

# *Preaching the 2010 Easter Texts*

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On a beautiful fall afternoon last November, I was watching Duke play Georgia Tech in football at Wallace Wade Stadium in Durham. I felt my cell phone vibrate, so I answered. "Hello, Leigh," I said to my good friend, Leigh Knauert, when she identified herself. She and her husband, David, and their four young children were staying at Mission Haven in Decatur, Georgia, waiting for visas so they could move to São Paulo, Brazil. They had appointments as mission workers with the Presbyterian Church of Brazil.

David had completed a Ph.D. in Old Testament at Duke University in the spring. Everyone knew David as bright, insightful, and sensitive. What a gift he and his family would bring to the church! My excitement about their future was tremendous.

"How are you doing, Leigh?" I asked with enthusiasm. "I have some bad news, Joe," was her reply. I immediately left the stands to find a place where I could hear her. "David collapsed this morning while jogging with his close friend, Davis Hankins, and died." I was devastated by this tragic news. What sense can you make of the death of a thirty-eight-year-old man who was a devoted father and husband with a promising future in the service of the church?

On the next Friday, we gathered at the First Presbyterian Church in Durham, where the Knauerts had been deeply immersed in the life of the congregation. Walter Brueggemann, who was David's mentor and friend, came to deliver the homily. The sanctuary was full with family and friends from across the years and from the community. We were deeply grieving the loss of David. In the midst of our pain and despair, we did the only thing we knew to do: come into the presence of God, bringing our lament, our tears, and our pain to worship, seeking some light in the darkness of sudden death.

Our worship was a Service of Witness to the Resurrection. The Book of Order of the Presbyterian Church, USA, reminds us that "the resurrection is a doctrine of the Christian faith and shapes Christians' attitudes and responses in the event of death. Death brings loss, sorrow, and grief to all. In the face of death Christians affirm the hope of the gospel with tears and joy. Christians do not bear bereavement in isolation, but are sustained by the power of the Spirit and the community of faith."<sup>1</sup>

We sought the presence of the one who has promised to wipe the tears from our eyes (Revelation 21:4). We claimed the promises of David's baptism that, united with Christ in a death like his, he would be united in a resurrection like his. In scripture readings, hymns, and prayers, we surrounded the family and ourselves with the narrative of God's steadfast love. It is the story that reminds us that "in life as in death, we belong to God" from whose love nothing can separate us.<sup>2</sup>

At the heart of the narrative that we gathered around on that Friday afternoon are the Easter texts that we proclaim during the Easter 2010 season. It is crucial for us to witness to what happened on Easter because without this testimony, we do not have much to hold us when we come face-to-face with death. These accounts do not answer all our questions or mend our broken hearts, but they remind us that we are in the

company of the one who wept at his friend's death and whom God raised from the dead, offering us hope in the midst of our grief. They are central to this peculiar story, which shapes our understanding of life and death. Reynolds Price describes this crucial narrative in this way: "While we chatter or listen all our lives in a din of craving—jokes, anecdotes, novels, dreams, films, plays, songs, half the words of our days—we are satisfied only by the one short tale we feel to be true: *History is the will of a just God who knows us.*"<sup>3</sup>

### *Easter/Resurrection of the Lord*

In the African-American church, the preacher often asks the congregation, "Can I get a witness?" Our texts for Easter bring us into the company of witnesses to the Resurrection. On Easter, we go to the burial place with Mary Magdalene (John 20:1–18). She is weeping at the tomb. Isn't that where we all stand? She comes out of her grief to deal with the pain of Jesus' death. She is a credible witness because she will not be easily comforted. Her response reflects our sense of loss when someone we love dies. Her response also reflects common sense—the body of Jesus is not there, so someone must have taken it. She *will* not be comforted *easily*. The conversations with the angels and with Jesus are to the point: "Woman, why are you crying?" This brings a passionate reply: "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they have laid him." When she recognizes Jesus, her testimony is bold: "I have seen the Lord."

Mary wants to hold on to Jesus as her teacher, and we can understand. Following Jesus in his ministry was one thing, but a Risen Lord is scary business. Jesus will not let Mary or us return to a life before resurrection: "Do not hold on to me" (John 20:17). His resurrection means our faith is not in vain (I Corinthians 15:12–26), and we can trust our lives to the God who raised Jesus. Mary is not sure what it means to follow a Risen Lord, and neither are we. We want to hold on to the familiar.

Henri Nouwen wrote a remarkable little book, *Our Greatest Gift, a Meditation on Dying and Caring*, in which he relates a story that illustrates what difference it makes to know "Jesus Christ is risen." It means you and I can entrust the death of our loved ones and our own death to God. Nouwen told the story about going to a circus in Germany. He became utterly captivated by the trapeze artists. They were called the Flying Rodleighs. After a very pleasant telephone conversation, they met and became friends. Nouwen followed them around Germany. He reported a conversation that he had with the leader, the "Flyer Rodleigh." Rodleigh explained to him how they fly through the air:

"As a flyer, I must have complete trust in my catcher. The public might think I am the star, but the real star is my catcher." "How does it work?" Nouwen asked. "The secret," Rodleigh said, "is that the flyer does nothing and the catcher does everything. When I fly I have simply to stretch out my arms and hands and wait for him to catch me. The worst thing I can do is to try to catch the catcher. A flyer must fly and a catcher must catch and the flyer must trust, with outstretched arms that the catcher will be there for him."<sup>4</sup>

We learn from Mary that Easter means letting go and trusting in the Catcher. Easter is about learning to trust the God who will catch us.

### *Second Sunday of Easter*

The second Sunday of Easter brings a familiar witness before us, Thomas, who is known for his doubting (John 20:19–31). Jesus took Thomas' doubt seriously, so seriously that he did a rerun of the first Easter encounter with the disciples that Thomas had missed. Thomas is the “resident skeptic” who asks the question the rest of us want somebody else to ask. Remember in the farewell discourse, Jesus tells the disciples that he is going away, and they know the way to where he is going. Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” (John 14:5). Every community of faith needs a Thomas.

We need a “resident skeptic” to keep the story connected to our doubts. For Thomas, “seeing was believing.” Like Mary, his affirmation is powerful: “My Lord and my God!” So we have another reliable witness to the Resurrection. But what about us? John was writing to many who had not been alive to be encountered by the Risen Christ. Sensitive to us, John reminds us that the seeing and believing is one way to faith, but blessed are those who hear the story of the witnesses and have come to believe. Barbara Brown Taylor makes the point that one thing this story tells us is “that seeing is not superior to hearing. One can trust either sense. Maybe that is why we call both Jesus and the stories about him the living Word of God.”<sup>5</sup>

### *Third Sunday of Easter*

The texts for the Third Sunday of Easter emphasize the power of the Risen Christ to transform lives and to lead us in mission. The Gospel text (John 21:1–19) is like a three-act drama entitled “The Restoration of Peter.” The story is so rich that it is difficult to capture its essence in one sermon.

The scene of the disciples going fishing at night is poignant. It is back to business as usual. They fish all night with nothing to show for it. Just like following Jesus, all that effort comes to a dead end. Jesus enters the scene and points them towards a successful catch. Reflecting on this revelation to the disciples in the boat, Lamar Williamson, Jr. was inspired to write:

Just after dawn you showed yourself.  
Many heavy days they tried to go on living  
and at last gathered again on that familiar shore  
and went to work at their familiar task at night.  
And then—  
you showed yourself.<sup>6</sup>

When John was told it was the Lord, he put on clothes and swam ashore to greet his Risen Lord. The report about “skinny fishing” does not offer us any theological insights except to suggest the kind of detail an eyewitness would remember.

Jesus is back and invites the hungry disciples to breakfast on the beach. The meal has the resemblance of the Eucharist, as the Risen Lord shares bread and fish to nourish the disciples. After the meal, there is the heavy lifting of the reinstatement of Peter as a disciple after his denial of Jesus. It is a poignant conversation that faces the truth about the past in a way that leads towards a renewal of the invitation to “follow me.” The apostle Paul encourages us to “speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15), and the Risen Lord shows us the way in his conversation with Peter.

There is another powerful witness to the resurrection available for the preacher on this Sunday: the transformation story of Saul to Paul (Acts 9:1–9). In this lesson, Saul is on the road to Damascus when he encounters the Risen Lord, who says, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do” (Acts 9:5–6). While this encounter bears witness to the transforming power of the risen Christ, there is the danger of measuring all of our experiences with Saul’s. It is important to remember that what happened to Saul was noteworthy, precisely because it was not typical of the way most people became converts. Luke goes out of his way to let us know the significance of this conversion by giving us three accounts of this incident (Acts 9, Acts 22, and Acts 26). For a writer who was concise, this should get our attention.

“Damascus Road experience” is a phrase used to describe many religious experiences which often have little resemblance to what happened to Saul. When you hear the phrase, it brings to mind a dramatic religious experience. It is important to look behind the phrase and remember that what happened on the road to Damascus was unique to Paul. The same is true of our religious experiences.

In his commentary on Acts, William Willimon encourages us to pay careful attention to this story so that we may gain new insight for our lives. He suggests this story is so familiar that its meaning is taken for granted and misunderstood. He cites an interesting quote by Flannery O’Conner, who once said of Paul, “I reckon the Lord knew that the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse.”<sup>7</sup> Never mind that the story in Acts does not say Paul was on a horse.

Despite her addition of a horse, O’Conner forces our attention in the right direction. The main character in this and every conversion story is God. The central point in Acts, which is still relevant for us, is that God changes lives. The one thing clear about the Damascus Road experience is that the power of God turned Saul from someone “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9:1) to someone who “proclaimed Jesus,” and “all who heard him were amazed” (Acts 9:20). This conversion was not something Saul decided to do on his own. This was God’s doing. God can open our eyes to the new reality in the resurrection of Christ.

#### *Fourth Sunday of Easter*

The Fourth Sunday of Easter is what has been known as Good Shepherd Sunday. The Gospel of John (John 10:22–30) gives witness to Jesus as the shepherd who knows his sheep, and they follow him.

Shepherds play a big role in the Christian story. The Bible, as well as our hymns and our prayers, is full of shepherds. It is easy to find material to use in order to guide us in worship on this Sunday. From young David, the shepherd boy who rises to be king, to those shepherds we always remember on Christmas Eve who “were in that region keeping watch over their flock by night, and the angel of the Lord appeared to them and said, ‘Be not afraid.’” Think of all the bathrobed shepherds who come center stage in pageants on Christmas Eve.

Jesus chose the title for himself. “I am the Good Shepherd,” he said in the Gospel of John. “The Good Shepherd cares for his sheep.” And yet I ask: Who needs a shepherd? If Jesus is the Good Shepherd, then who are we? We are the wooly ones, the sheep. Being considered a sheep does not sit very well, does it? Maybe the question

should not be, “Who needs a shepherd?” but rather, “Who considers themselves sheep?”

Sheep are not as dumb as they have been portrayed after all; rather, they are smart enough to know they cannot find their way alone. They need someone to lead them and guide them. Don’t we all? Jesus said, “I am the Good Shepherd... My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27).

There is a kind of bonding that goes on between sheep and the shepherd. They become like a family. The relationship grows between them, and it is quite exclusive. They develop a way of communicating that outsiders are not privy to. A good shepherd learns to distinguish a bleat of pain from one of pleasure. The sheep know that a certain cluck of the tongue means there is food available, or a two-note song means it’s time to go home.

Isn’t it comforting to know a familiar voice when you hear it? Remember in Mary’s encounter with the Risen Christ, she recognized him when she hears him call her name (John 20:16). In our baptism, we are marked by name as belonging to the Good Shepherd.

When I was a child growing up, my parents gave me license to play out in the neighborhood in the afternoon. We would play basketball or touch football in someone’s backyard. About dusk, when it became time for me to come home, I can still remember hearing my mother’s whistle. It sounded like the way you whistle to call a dog, but I could tell it from any other whistle. Whatever I was doing, wherever I was, I knew it was time to stop and go home. It was a sound that I could trust, a sound that I could believe in. It was a summons to come home.

The image of the Good Shepherd and the sheep is about a relationship, a relationship of trust. It is about being a member of a flock to which you belong, a flock in which we know the signals. You know when to pray the Lord’s Prayer, when to say the creed; you know you belong, you know the liturgy, and it brings you comfort, hope, and strength. Now that’s us, isn’t it? We are the faithful, the baptized, the church, the pledging members, the creed-saying, the hymn-singing, and the praying ones. We are the ones who celebrate the sacraments. We hear Christ’s voice. Christ knows us, and we follow him. We know that we belong, and we know how important belonging is. Each year, on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, we read Psalm 23. Why do we come back each year to this theme? Why do we come back and listen again to this old song about shepherds and sheep, a song that seems so out of place in urban America? Let me suggest to you that it is an old song we need to sing anew. We need to hear it, not just with our ears, but also with our hearts. We need to hear it in the very marrow of our being. “The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.”

A young couple was about to get married. They were meeting with their pastor. They were talking about what passage they would like to have read at their wedding. “We would like you to read and preach a homily on the Twenty-Third Psalm,” they said. “The Twenty-Third Psalm?” the Pastor asked. “I’ll be glad to do that, but that’s usually reserved for funerals or memorial services. Why do you want the Twenty-Third Psalm at your wedding?” They said, “We are a little anxious about getting married. We know it’s not going to be easy to make our life together work. We are committed to each other, and we want it to happen, but we want to know the Lord is our shepherd who will go with us, even when we walk through the difficult valleys ahead.”

Who needs a shepherd? I know I do. The assurance that we do not have to go at it alone is crucial in facing the challenges of our lives. What better way to be reminded of this reality than by singing the familiar hymn:

My Shepherd will supply my need;  
Jehovah is His name:  
He brings my wandering spirit back,  
When I forsake His ways;  
And leads me, for His mercy's sake,  
In paths of truth and grace.  
The sure provisions of my God  
Attend me all my days.<sup>8</sup>

### *Fifth Sunday of Easter*

On the Fifth Sunday of Easter, we are graced with an abundance of witnesses to guide us into resurrection reality. Acts 11:1–18 has a heading in the New Revised Standard Version of “Peter’s Report to the Church at Jerusalem.” What an understatement! Peter was being called on the carpet for taking the Gospel to the Gentiles. He had the audacity to eat with them. Does this sound familiar? It is the same charge leveled against Jesus by church leaders (Luke 15:2).

The question before the house is whether or not the community that follows the Risen Lord is inclusive. Does this also sound familiar? It is the question that the church has wrestled with down through the centuries. Resurrection reality creates a new community, a community without borders.

Peter shares a vision he had in Joppa, which gave him some amazing theological insights. He heard a voice from heaven that told Peter, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (Acts 10:15). Peter concludes that God’s love also extends to the Gentiles. He asked a profound question: “Who was I that I could hinder God?”

Think about the astonishing insight contained in that question. If God so loved the world that Jesus came not to condemn the whole world but to save it, who are we to try to limit the mission of God to redeem humanity? Every time we exclude someone from full participation in the redemptive efforts of God, Peter’s question should trouble us and the church. Think about the impact of this story! What if the church had closed the door to the Gentiles and Christianity remained a sect within Judaism? Peter was concerned that God the creator did not intend to exclude anyone from the community of God’s care. This conclusion was revolutionary. The community created by the Risen Christ lives by the new commandment Jesus gave his disciples: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34–35).

If there is hope for the church in these days when there is so much dissention and division in faith communities, then we must pray for a vision which brings us together. We need to be open to the work of God’s healing and reconciling Spirit as we practice loving one another. This is a witness to the world that we are disciples of the Risen Lord.

There is something in this story which amazes me as much or more than Peter’s vision and discernment. It is how the leaders in Jerusalem responded. They listened

and were open to the new reality Peter envisioned. They could have said, “You are out of your mind, and this is wrong!” The Holy Spirit gave them the ability to listen and to change. What a gift!

There is another witness to be heard. On the dark days when death and destruction seem so real, how will this all turn out? Will we learn to live together in peace? Will there be a resurrection life for those who have died? John’s vision on the Isle of Patmos (Revelation 21:1–5) gives us hope. We are introduced to a new heaven and a new earth. God will restore our lives and the whole creation. Even as we grieve in the face of death and the chaos that so often characterizes the human community, we do not grieve alone.

Crying is not something we have to be taught. We did not have to teach our children to cry. It is a basic human emotion. Jesus wept twice, once when he looked over Jerusalem and saw the human misery and violence in the city, and again at the death of his friend, Lazarus. Weeping is essential—we weep at gravesides, at weddings, and other times when we are moved to tears. I am comforted that when we look at death through the eyes of John on Patmos, we see a vision with no more death, as “mourning and crying and pain will be no more” (Revelation 21:4), and God will wipe away our tears. Isn’t that what we want? We long for someone to stand with us, someone’s shoulders to cry on—someone who knows us and loves us. The God who comforts us is the one who raised Jesus from the dead and is leading us towards the new Jerusalem, where all things are made new.

### *Sixth Sunday of Easter*

The Sixth Sunday of Easter speaks to us about the anxiety we experience over the conflicts that surround us. In the Gospel lesson, Jesus encourages us with these familiar words: “Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” (John 14:27). How can we possibly not be troubled and afraid? Anyone who keeps up with what’s happening in our world is afraid. Any pastor who is in touch with the lives of her congregation is troubled. In the face of these realities, we have the audacity to offer a peace, which is different from what the world offers us.

The Risen Christ greets us as he did those first disciples with the greeting: “Peace be with you.” As a good shepherd understands the fears of the sheep, Christ knows our uneasiness about our lives. Peace is his last will and testament for us: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you” (John 14:27). The peace Christ offers is based on the affirmation found in Psalm 67:

Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,  
for you judge the peoples with equity  
and guide the nations upon earth (Psalm 67:4).

God has not given up on us and this world. We are on God’s radar screen, and God has given us a glimpse of the safe landing in store for us in the Resurrection of Christ. The powers of death and destruction do not have the last word.

“Can I get a witness?” I had one several years ago when I attended an urban ministry conference in San Francisco. On our program was a pastor whose congregation was the young people on the streets. They were living as prostitutes, using drugs, lost with little hope. He told us about getting to know them, building trust, offering

them a different life. After his presentation, I told him how impressed I was and how impossible the work seemed.

He invited me to join him that evening as he made his rounds. In essence, he challenged my concern by inviting me to go with him to see for myself. Reluctantly, I went along. I watched him encounter one difficult situation after another. Later, I asked him, "How do you do it? How do you get up every day and go about this business of working with these young people whose lives have been so mangled? It's hard to know how they could get put back together." He stopped, looked straight at me, and said, "It's easy to tell you how I do it—the Resurrection." He had heard about a new reality, and he had decided to live out of that new reality and to offer it to those on the street. This is another way Jesus' resurrection lets us know we are not abandoned or left to our own resources. God works to find a way where there seems to be no way.

### *Seventh Sunday of Easter*

The lessons for the Seventh Sunday of Easter begin with a prayer by Jesus for God's protection and guidance for his disciples (John 17:20–26). It is now our turn to bear witness to God's love made known in Jesus Christ, and this is not an easy assignment in the world in which we live.

If you have any doubt about the risk, the testimony of Acts 16:16–34 makes it clear. Paul sees a slave girl, who was possessed by a spirit which enabled her to be a fortune-teller. She made money for her owners. This oppressive behavior annoyed Paul, so he freed her from the power of this spirit. Her owners were furious. The profit motive trumps compassion every time in the ways of the world. Paul and Silas were put on trial for advocating for the oppressed. The crowd joined the angry owners, and Paul and Silas wound up in jail. Even when they were locked up, God had not deserted them. Praying and singing, they turned to God, who heard them and rescued them. The jailer was so impressed by their witness to their faith that he and his family were baptized into the community.

The world is watching. There is a desire to see a credible witness to God in the world. Jesus understands this when he prays that his followers may be one so that the world may believe (John 17:20–21). He prays for this unity three times, which suggests unity is vital if our testimony is to be believable. The world is still looking to see if we can demonstrate in our common life that what unites us in Christ is stronger than the issues and personalities that would divide us. "Can I get a witness?" the preacher asks. The world is looking and listening for a response.

During this Easter season, we are in the company of a great cloud of witnesses. They testify that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a game changer. This is the story we hope and pray is true and to which we as preachers bear witness. God has overcome death in raising Jesus, and we are called to live into God's good future.

Ted Wardlaw, president of Austin Theological Seminary, tells a story about Calvin Butts, pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church, located north of 125<sup>th</sup> Street in New York City. It is a section of the city that is poverty-stricken and inhabited by drug dealers and prostitutes. The church organized a bank for the neighborhood and set up latch-key programs for children and a redevelopment agency. A reporter for the *New York Times* interviewed the pastor. "Sure," said the reporter, "you're doing great stuff. But it's hard to see what difference any of that is making. What enables you and your folks to keep going?" Calvin Butts responded, "We've read the Bible, and we know

how it ends, and that's what makes the difference."<sup>9</sup>

What sustains us during the Easter season and in seasons of distress and grief is the story to which we know its ending:

All that we can ever hope for  
was present in Christ.  
In Christ God gives hope for a new heaven and earth,  
certainty of victory over death,  
Nothing, not even death, can separate us  
from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.<sup>10</sup>

### Notes

1 "Ordering Worship for Special Purposes: Services on the Occasion of Death, Christians and Death." In *Book of Order: The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church USA 2005–2007*, Part II (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church USA, 2005), W-4.10001.

2 The Brief Statement of Faith, Presbyterian Church (USA).

3 Reynolds Price, *A Palpable God* (New York: Atheneum, 1978), 14.

4 Henri Nouwen, *Our Greatest Gift: A Meditation on Dying and Caring* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1994), 66–67.

5 Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1999), 117.

6 Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Preaching the Gospel of John: Proclaiming the Living Word* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 294.

7 William H. Willimon, "Acts," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, eds. James L. Mays, Patrick D. Miller, and Paul J. Achtemeier (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 73.

8 Isaac Watts, "My Shepherd Will Supply My Need," *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 172.

9 Theodore J. Wardlaw, "Preaching the Advent Texts," *Journal for Preachers* XXXI (Advent 2007): 31:3–10.

10 "Hope in God," in *A Declaration of Faith*, Presbyterian Church (USA).