

What Is Critical for Easter Preaching 2010?

David Bartlett

Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

When the editors graciously asked me to write this article, they also graciously suggested that I approach the question from a “theological/analytical” perspective and not jump, as I usually do, right to exposition of the biblical texts suggested for Easter. I want to take that assignment seriously and to begin with a series of observations about what seems to me critical for our preaching as we finish the first decade of this millennium. And then, of course, I’ll want to look briefly at the texts to see how they relate to my more general claims.

Because I have been ordained for almost forty-three years, I am going to throw aside all the nuanced use of hypothetical possibilities that usually adorn my theological reflection, and I am going to declare (you may imagine, loudly) one issue to avoid for our Easter preaching and three issues that we should address, if not in one sermon, in the Easter season.

First, I encourage us to avoid at all costs any sermon that tries to prove the validity of the Easter story or the winsome persuasiveness of the Easter kerygma. For as long as I can remember, I have heard children’s sermons that show that the resurrection of our Lord and Savior is very much like the progress of a caterpillar from cocoon to butterfly. “Look around, boys and girls. You will see that Easter is the way the world goes.”

More recently, scholars I much admire have taken to arguing the plausibility of the Easter faith. One friend argues as an historian and tries to muster the appropriate documentary evidence. Another argues as a philosopher for the probability of resurrection as an explanation for much that followed after. Yet a third has noticed that many people experience something very much like an epiphany of those whom they have loved and lost awhile and suggests that these experiences may help to explain the visionary experiences of the first disciples in the days following Christ’s crucifixion.

Each of these strategies in its own way says, “Look around, friends, and you will see that Easter is the way the world goes.” Time after time caterpillars move to cocoon to butterfly; it’s beautiful, but predictable. When it comes to history, documentary evidence is great for documentable events—but for resurrection? As for scientific probability, what was the probability that the crucified one would live again. Zero. That is the point. And though I do not doubt that people have experiences where they can almost feel the presence of a deceased loved one, I do doubt that the resurrection of Jesus was one more in a series of comforting apparitions.

Paul says that God does two things. God brings the world out of nothingness, and God raises the dead (Romans 4:17). When God creates and when God conquers death, God does not do something surprisingly beautiful. God does something mind bogglingly impossible. I am not suggesting that we believe because it is absurd, but it is absurd, and we do not believe primarily because we are argued into thinking it is less absurd than it is.

Second, I encourage us to preach the faith of the church, not our own most recent reflections on the relationship of life to death. Jaroslav Pelikan, the distinguished

historian, taught briefly at the divinity school I attended before he decamped for the university's history department. Professor Pelikan did not hang around much with aspiring divinity students, but he did join a group of us for lunch on one memorable Tuesday of the week after Easter.

Now it happened in those days that seminary student assistants were invariably given the assignment of preaching the week after Easter. On those Sundays the choir was smaller than the week before as was the congregation; the brass ensemble had disappeared until Christmas, and the texts were no longer blessedly familiar. The texts were puzzling, and they all had to do with resurrection.

So there we sat, a group of twenty-somethings, barely acquainted with grief, puzzling about what to say in the afterglow of Easter. "Whenever a claim seems too puzzling for me," said Professor Pelikan, "I preach the creed." Most of us at that lunch table were from so-called "free" churches, which meant that we did not preach the creed, but in a week when we searched to the depths of our own theological understanding and found the depths pretty shallow, the creed helped. The faith of the church enriched our individual attempts at faith.

It is not surprising in our time and our nation that one of the most popular features on National Public Radio has been the series "This I Believe." The series has provided the reflections of a number of fascinating individuals with a number of fascinating viewpoints. But in church we do a trickier thing. We preach "This We Believe," especially on Easter. Easter is after all more a matter of testimony than of proof, and the good news is that you and I are not the first to testify and that we will not be the last.

Third, I encourage us to preach Easter not only as personal comfort, but as cosmic hope. Two thirds of the way through the twentieth century, Krister Stendahl spoke to a group of aspiring preachers and said, "Do not go out and preach assuming that everyone simply wants to know whether he or she is saved. What people want to know is this: does history have any meaning, any point, any hope."

I do not know exactly where our anxiety will be most intense in spring of 2010. As I write these words toward the close of 2009, the President of the United States is about to announce an escalation of yet another war in the Middle East. Genocide continues to terrorize the black population of southern Sudan. One fourth of the children in the United States are on food stamps. A documentary on the lost boys of Sudan is called "Maybe God Forgot Us."

Easter is God's great remembering. Told right, it is the story that does not invalidate all those threatening stories, but that does assure us that no enemy, not even death, is stronger than our God.

In our house we recently watched a movie on the Turner Classic channel. The movie dated from 1940 and starred Jimmy Stewart as a German resisting the rise of Hitler. What struck me was that in the twenty-first century we knew how the story came out, but no one making that movie or watching it in 1940 had any idea. They had only hope.

From our vantage point six decades later and more, we knew that things got even worse than the movie knew — Jimmy Stewart's escape to Austria looked like a brilliant solution in 1940, but we know that the Nazis invaded soon after. And from our vantage point, we knew that things turned out far better than the movie feared. Five years later, the Thousand Year Reich was in ashes.

Of course we always preach in the middle of things. We do not know what will happen in Afghanistan or Sudan or to the homeless shelters of Atlanta. What we do know is that the resurrection is the first great act in God's all consuming purpose to make all things new. We preach that.

Fourth, I encourage us to preach Easter not only as cosmic hope, but as personal comfort. Dr. Stendahl was perhaps right that in our time we are not unduly anxious about our own eternal destiny. But we still love the ones we love, and with that love comes our prayer that death might have no victory, not just in history, but for the ones we cherish most.

Easter is about that longing, too. New Testament writers tell it differently. For Paul death will be swallowed up in a great universe-shattering cataclysm at the end. For John, Jesus has gone to prepare a place for each believer in his Father's house.

Paul says, "Don't grieve as those who have no hope." In John's Gospel, Jesus says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled." John Donne, who knew how to preach, also wrote his sonnet, "Death be not proud." In every congregation where we preach there will be people for whom this is the first Easter without that person they loved beyond life itself. Do not send them home without a word. Preach Christ risen; preach hope.

Now a look at the four New Testament texts suggested for Easter Sunday: Acts 10:34-43; 1 Corinthians 15:19-26; John 20:1-18; Luke 24:1-12.

Acts 10:34-43 emphasizes two of the Easter themes we have highlighted. For one thing, the text makes clear that Easter faith is not based on proof, but on testimony. More than any other New Testament writer, Luke (who also wrote Acts) holds fast to the centrality of witness. Witness is both what faithful people have seen (Christ risen) and what faithful people declare ("Christ is risen."). The Easter faith is not based so much on empirical "proof" as on the testimony that has been passed on from the first generation of believers until now, on the family story.

Acts spells out the first three generations of the history of witnessing. In Acts 1 the original circle of the twelve adds to their number another "witness to the resurrection"—one who has watched the story of Jesus' ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension, and one who will tell that story to others (Acts 1:22). The next "generation" of witnesses starts with Paul, whose ministry is approved by the earlier circle, but who also witnesses the Risen Lord (in Acts 9) and proclaims the Risen Lord—for the rest of the Book of Acts. Then in Acts 20, Luke points us to the third generation of the faithful. The Ephesian elders will not bear witness to what they have seen, because they have not known the visible presence of the Risen Lord. They bear witness to what they have heard from Paul, who says to them, "And now I commend you to God and to the message of his grace, a message that is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32). The first generations of the apostles will die, but not without passing on the testimony to the Risen Lord.

For another thing, Acts 10 makes clear that Jesus' resurrection is not only part of our personal histories and hopes, but it is also a great turning point in the whole dealing of God with all of humankind. Peter says that "(The Risen Christ) commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead." For Luke and Acts, Christ's resurrection confirms that Jesus is God's viceroy, entrusted with the power to judge all people who are, or were, or are

to be.

But individuals are invited to become part of that great Easter drama. It is far greater than any of us, but by the grace of God, it can include each of us. And the way we claim our place in the drama is by penitent faith and grateful acceptance of the forgiveness of sins. Other New Testament writers have other ways of explaining the great good that God did in Christ's death and resurrection. For Luke that great good is, above all, the forgiveness of sins. At Easter we reaffirm our faith in the crucified and Risen Lord and receive again the confidence that in him, our sins are forgiven — as a kind of token and foretaste of the final redemption of the world.

1 Corinthians 15:19-26 continues the great discussion that begins with *1 Corinthians 15:1*. We are quite clear from reading *1 Corinthians 15* that some Corinthian Christians did not share Paul's hope for God's final triumph over the forces of death. What these Corinthians did believe is a matter for hypothesis and therefore, not surprisingly, for dispute.

We can see how Paul answers his congregation's doubts. He begins by confessing what Acts has indicated. Paul is a witness who passes on the family story: "For I handed over to you as of first importance what I in turn had received" (*1 Cor. 15:3*). What Paul has received is the proclamation of Christ crucified, buried, and raised again. What Paul declares in the light of this proclamation is that in Christ God intends to conquer sin, not for believers alone, but for the whole creation.

The designated lectionary passage shields us from the full cosmic scope of this promise by breaking off with *15:26*. When I preach this text, I make sure that we hear it right through *15:28*. Here is what the whole passage reminds us: 1) Resurrection is a promise about individual believers. 2) Resurrection is a promise for the entire cosmos. 3) Resurrection is above all, a promise about God. For Paul, God is in the resurrection business above all to vindicate God's self. The final promise is not that you and I will be resurrected (though that is there); the final promise is not that death will be defeated (though that is there); the final promise is that God will be all in all, or all things to everyone. Easter is nothing smaller than the demonstration that God is God and will be God.

Of course, however, this enormous theo-centric promise is not without individual consequence. Paul writes not just to instruct, but to comfort: "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead." If Christ is God's victory over death, Christ is God's victory over my death too, and most powerfully, he is God's victory over the death of those I love. Note that for Paul there is no sense that death is a natural process to be quietly affirmed; death is our strongest foe outfoxed and outarmed only by the power of God.

John 20:1-18. In their different ways, both our passage from Acts and from *1 Corinthians* stress the cosmic scope of Christ's resurrection. John's Gospel pays more attention to resurrection as personal promise.

The first section of the passage, on the footrace between Peter and the beloved disciple, provides a fascinating clue into the background of John's community and an interesting interplay among seeing, believing, and remembering. It seems less rich for Easter preaching than the story of Mary Magdalene that follows. Like every good Easter story, the story of Mary's meeting with Jesus suggests a whole range of implications.

In part it is an invitation to personal hope for Christians of the first century and of our own.

There is hope in the fact that Jesus knows Mary and that Mary knows Jesus because he calls her name. The moment of recognition recalls what Jesus has said about himself as the good shepherd in John 10:4: “The sheep follow him, because they know his voice.” Personal hope in John’s Gospel includes the promise that we can know as we are known, both in this life and beyond.

There is hope in Jesus’ word to Mary not to keep hanging onto him. For John to say that Christ is risen is to say that we do not dwell on the past—either Jesus’ past or our own—but that we live in the present, toward the future, knowing that God in Christ does not let go of us in this life or beyond.

It is good news that Jesus is returning to his Father, because the paraclete will come to comfort and guide believers on earth, and Christ himself will welcome believers to his father’s house. For preachers and parishioners looking for a word of hope in the face of death, the passage from John provides a marvelous opportunity for Easter preaching.

Luke 24:1-12 . Women appropriately read this story as one more instance of the fact that from the beginning of the church until now, their testimony, their witness, has been undervalued. What the “official” and male apostles dismiss as an idle tale is rather the good news of Christ risen.

The question of the angels provides the opportunity to preach Easter hope: “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” We tell the Easter story, not for proof, but for testimony. We testify what the church has testified from the beginning: the Lord Jesus Christ is always best described in the present tense. He lives; he reigns; he does battle against our deaths and against Death and all Death’s minions. And of his rule, there will be no end.

That’s what we preach.