

Preaching Through Eastertide, Year A

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The texts for Eastertide break the lengthy darkness of Lent with piercing brightness and a breath of approaching Pentecost. They include a conflation of the Gospels of Matthew and John; narratives from the early church in Acts, and early sermons by first-up preachers, Peter and Paul; letter fragments from 1 Peter; and a weekly Psalm. The earliest kerygmatic proclamations are found in numerous places throughout Eastertide, beginning with the shortest, "My Lord, and my God," uttered by Thomas on Easter evening (John 20: 28), followed by the lengthier affirmations attributed to Peter in Acts 2 and Paul in Acts 17. A study of these might make an interesting series, as would, perhaps, a highlighting of the Pentecost leanings of all the Easter texts, beginning with Jesus imparting the gift of the Holy Spirit to his disciples as early as resurrection evening. But what I want to focus on in this article are the bold images that jump out of some of the texts and beg for notice. As the Apostle Paul cites poetry in his speech to the citizens of Aeropagus, "As some of your own poets have said..." (Acts 17: 31), I also will cite some modern poetic phrases in connection to these biblical images, in hopes of sparking imaginations and opening eyes in new ways to the revelation of the risen Lord.

The texts for Easter 1 begin with the empty tomb narratives from Matthew 28: 1-10 and from John 20: 1-18. In Matthew, the account is cosmic and dramatic, with intimations of worlds colliding as heaven breaks into and upsets earth's order of life and death, beginning with a violent Haitian-like or Chilean-like earthquake. And the angel of the Lord sits perched upon the stone of death in brilliant luminosity as dawn rolls in, and the women grope their way towards the tomb. I'm drawn to the image of the angel sitting on that tombstone and the victory implied by his posture. The stone blocking the tomb was meant to signify the end, death, the snuffing out of yet another prophetic witness. But the stone rolled back with the angel sitting on it now becomes a visible sign of an invisible grace: the story is not over, Jesus is risen, death is not final, God has triumphed. The mention of the stone will repeat again in Psalm 118: 22, where the rejected stone becomes the exalted stone; the death stone, the victory stone; the plugging-in stone, the topping-out stone. John Updike in his poem "Seven Stanzas At Easter" says,

The stone is rolled back, not papier-mache,
not a stone in a story,
but the vast rock of materiality that in the slow
grinding of time will eclipse for each of us
the wide light of day.
And if we will have an angel at the tomb,
make it a real angel,
weighty with Max Planck's quanta, vivid with hair,
opaque in the dawn light, robed in real linen
spun on a definite loom."¹

Likewise, the image of the two women clasping the feet of the risen Jesus in a posture of worship (Matthew 28:9) is equally powerful and suggestive of Jesus' true physicality or of our human tendency to cling to old ways, even in the face of brilliant transformation. Of course we have no witness as to how Jesus was transformed from his Good Friday body to his Easter body, but Mary Karr paints an interesting picture in a poem called "Descending Theology: The Resurrection," where she supposes,

From the far star points of his pinned extremities,
cold inched in – black ice and squid ink –
until the hung flesh was empty.
Lonely in that void even for pain,
he missed his splintered feet,
the human stare buried in his face.
He ached for two hands made of meat
he could reach to the end of.
In the corpse's core, the stone fist
of his heart began to bang
on the stiff chest door, and breath spilled
back into that battered shape. Now
it's your limbs he comes to fill, as warm water
shatters at birth, revering every way."²

Acts 10: 34-43, Peter's interpretation of the Jesus event, is a great segue to the Lord's Table with his statement, "He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen – by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead" (Acts 10: 41). To be chosen by God to see the risen Jesus as we partake of bread and cup is a true Easter blessing.

On Easter 2, it is still Easter Sunday, with a narrative from evening of that same third day where John's Gospel peers in on the disciples fearfully huddled behind locked doors (John 20:19). Shel Silverstein in *Where The Sidewalk Ends* uses a children's poem to speak of this primal fear that can paralyze even the most faithful believer, called "I Won't Hatch":

"Oh I am a chickie who lives in an egg,
But I will not hatch, I will not hatch.
The hens they all cackle, the roosters all beg,
But I will not hatch, I will not hatch.
For I hear all the talk of pollution and war
As the people all shout and the airplanes roar,
So I'm staying in here where it's safe and it's warm,
And I WILL NOT HATCH!"³

Even with the presence of Jesus himself, even with the gift of the Holy Spirit, which Jesus breathes upon them/us, sometimes the church is reluctant to hatch. Have we hatched yet? The statement that "he breathed on them" (John 20:22) is a sneak preview of Pentecost, six weeks before the main event. The imagery of the fearful disciples huddled together can be linked to Psalm 16, a psalm of security, where Robert

Alter translates v. 1 to read, “Guard me, O God, for I shelter in You.”⁴ To go from sheltering in fear to fearlessly sheltering in God is a bold affirmation of trust. Other phrases in the psalm convey comfort to the fearful: “Always before me” (v.8), “my whole body abides secure” (v.9), “You will not forsake my life” (v.10), “joy overflows in Your presence” (v.11). The passage from Acts is another kerygmatic proclamation by Peter, interpreting the Jesus event as a fulfillment of Psalm 16. It further links the gift of the Holy Spirit breathed upon the disciples to the “pouring out” of the Holy Spirit upon all believers at Pentecost. Peter speaks again in 1 Peter 1: 3-9, and the interesting thought there comes from v. 8, “Though you have not seen him.” Peter was blessed to have seen Jesus both before and after the resurrection. Others, not so blessed, still believe and are filled with faith, love, and inexpressible and glorious joy.

Easter 3 is yet another third-day event from Luke 24: 13-35. The journey motif, prominent throughout Luke, is strongly conveyed here in vv. 15, 17, 28, 29, 32, and 33. The two disciples are journeying away from Jerusalem and the events thereof, when “Jesus himself” comes and journeys along with them. Does “Jesus himself,” refer to Jesus’ physical presence, in the flesh, the real thing in resurrected form? A sermon could be about discipleship as a journey away from Jesus, alongside Jesus, and for Jesus, as the story suggests. An interesting turning point in the journey for Cleopas and companion occurs at table, where their eyes are opened and their hearts burn within (v. 30-32). In showing hospitality to a stranger, practicing philoxenia, their journey of discipleship out from Jerusalem makes a u-turn and is transformed with a renewed sense of purpose. Poet Wendell Berry says, “We travelers, walking to the sun, can’t see/Ahead, but looking back the very light/That blinded us shows us the way we came,/Along which blessings now appear, risen/As if from sightlessness to sight, and we,/By blessing brightly lit, keep going toward/That blessed light that yet to us is dark” (*Sabbaths* 1999, VI).

Psalm 116 reiterates the journey motif with another u-turn, this time with the supplicant heading for the straits of Sheol (v. 3), plunging down (v. 6), but making an about-face after calling upon the name of the Lord. The Lord inclines his ear, hears, and responds in mercy, and rescues in triplicate by freeing the supplicant from death, his/her eyes from tears, and his/her foot from slipping (v. 8). Thus the journey can take a new turn as the psalmist lifts the “cup of rescue” (v. 13) as if toasting God, with a re-dedication of life to the Lord (v. 14 and 18), with a re-commitment to faithfulness, even if it results in loss of life (v. 15), and with thanksgiving and praise.

Peter speaks in the passages from 1 Peter and from Acts, encouraging disciples to live their lives as strangers and sojourners, as people socially dislocated because of their reverent fear of the Lord. (1 Peter 1: 17). My husband and I often have chastised ourselves for raising our children to be gentle beings in a not so gentle world, thinking that we have failed, perhaps, to prepare them adequately for life. But this sense of dislocation could be further stretched in Peter’s account of the journey of discipleship to include living as redeemed people in a not-yet redeemed world; as fulfilled people in an empty-way-of-living world; as precious blood people in a silver and gold world; as grateful people in an ungrateful world where the sacrifice of the innocent Christ-Lamb means little. Even so, Peter calls for believers to extend themselves in “philadelphia” (brotherly love) that is unfeigned, heartfelt, and earnest. The Acts 2 passage is a continuation of Peter’s Pentecost proclamation, culminating

in the terse kerygma of Jesus as “both Lord and Christ” (v. 36). Upon hearing his entire profession of faith, the listeners are “cut to the heart” (v. 37), or their hearts were stung, as the Greek suggests, making a link to the other Lucan passage from the Emmaus narrative where the disciples’ hearts burn within them as Jesus talks and opens Scripture to them (Luke 24: 32). Truth hurts, it seems, and cuts straight to the heart; and even good news, the best news, brings an awareness of sin and prompts a call to repentance. But the promise of the Holy Spirit is just a call away, for all strangers.

Easter 4-7 bring speeches from Jesus from John’s Gospel about his identity and purpose. “I am the door (or gate),” Jesus claims twice in John 10: 1-10, the access for anyone (v. 9) to salvation and to abundant life. It would be interesting to preach about Jesus as the door, especially if you live in an urban culture where gates and pastures are not so prevalent and where many of our churches now must lock our doors to keep out “thieves and robbers.” What does Jesus, the door, say about our sense of hospitality? What happened on that church door in Wittenburg, Germany in 1517 when Martin Luther nailed those 95 theses there? What about immigration issues? I am reminded of Emma Lazarus’ poem “The New Colossus,” engraved on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty, claiming that America is “the golden door” of “world-wide welcome.”⁵ It might be interesting to compare what lies behind Door #1 and Door #2, as Christian culture clashes with popular culture.

Psalms 23, of course, employs the shepherd/sheep imagery, where The Lord leads the sheep to green meadows, grass and water, food and drink, sleep and safety: the essentials from Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs. But the Lord also provides for higher needs, such as righteousness, forgiveness, love, and belonging. The terse statement of v. 4, “I fear no harm,” after a lengthy rationale as to why fear might well be in order, is a climatic affirmation of trust. Can you hear that same terse affirmation in the Martin Luther King, Jr. speech in Memphis on April 3, 1968, the day before his assassination, where he also recited a lengthy rationale as to why fear might well be in order? But instead, he boldly says, “I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

The passage from Acts 2: 42-47 depicts the norms of early church life in an ideal scenario. The bar has been set high for this inner shepherding of believers who share a bond of responsibility for one another by their common assent to the Gospel. Life is positive and joyful, as they are “continuing steadfastly” to be of one mind, to share food and possessions, to be glad, to live simply, to praise God, and to attract positive attention from all. These are the happy sheep, until the Stephen (Acts 7) incident shatters their shalom. What if the Christian life does not attract favor and positive attention from all? The reading from 1 Peter 2: 19-25 ventures into the territory of victimization by discrimination and persecution, reminding believers that public favor is not their goal, but rather God’s favor. And God’s favor is earned by suffering for God, as Christ once suffered, leaving behind an example for all of his followers. Wendell Berry gives us this insight: “I dream of a quiet man/who explains nothing and defends/nothing, but only knows/where the rarest wildflowers are in bloom, and who goes,/and finds that he is smiling/not by his own will.” (*Sabbaths* 1999, II). Peter breaks into song, perhaps an ancient hymn based upon the servant song of Isaiah 53: 4-12, where the Shepherd Lord of their souls is bruised for their cure and dies for their sins.

John 14: 1-14, the Gospel reading for Easter 5, conveys Jesus' words of comfort to believers in preparation for his absence from them. The "I am" language is strong, and we could almost add "I am the place" to Jesus' other "I am" statements from John, including "I am the way, the truth and the life" in v. 6. Twice Jesus states, "I am in the Father, and the Father is in me," leaving little room to doubt that Jesus and God are one, as are their words and the works of their believers. If I wanted to preach a pastoral sermon, this might be the Sunday to do it, using Jesus' affirmations to assure those who have lost a loved one recently, or who are doubtful about the future. Jesus uses three commands and a series of promises to bolster the faithful and to give firm guidance to the Thomas-like, "Believe in God" (v. 1); "Believe me (Jesus)" (v. 11); and "Continue believing in me" (v.1). Moreover, twice as many promises abound for the trusting: for Jesus' return, for Jesus to take believers with him, for knowing the Father, for seeing the Father, for doing works like Jesus – but greater, and for answering any prayer made in Jesus' name. "Whatever happens/those who have learned to love another/have made their way/to the lasting world/and will not leave/whatever happens" (Wendell Berry, *Sabbaths* 1998, I).

The bow breaks and the cradle falls for the early church with the Stephen episode from Acts 7: 55-60. It is painful that the ideal "favor of all people" towards the earliest church in the Acts 2: 42-47 passage has devolved into a murderous lynch mob so quickly. But Stephen, whose Greek name means "wreath, crown, honor, or reward," is full of the Holy Spirit and is gifted with a vision, a Theophany/Christophany, seeing Jesus "standing" at the right hand of God. This image of Jesus standing (v. 55, 56) is quite unusual in depictions of the ascended Christ, who is usually seated. What could this mean: that Jesus is standing in anticipation, in welcome, in alarm, in intercession, in judgment of others, or in distress for Stephen? Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints," Psalm 116:15 says. Precious to Jesus, not so precious to Saul, introduced here for the first time as a witness to the persecution. Comfort is hard to find in a lynching, but the presence of Holy Spirit, God, and Jesus certainly reminds us that believers are never alone, and the example of Jesus embodied by Stephen throughout his suffering and death leads us to believe that his/our resurrection will certainly follow. The wreath, crown, honor, reward of Stephen, the first martyr, and the faithful who follow, will be their standing reception by Jesus Christ himself.

Psalm 31: 1-5, 15-16 is a petition for rescue, addressed to God, rock of refuge, fortress, crag, stronghold, hiding place. The victory stone imagery of Easter Day is recalled, as the psalmist places his spirit and his times into Yahweh's hands, and not in the hands of those out to do harm. The God who hears, responds, and rescues is the God who has chosen to show favor to believers. Once more, comfort to those who suffer is provided.

1 Peter 2: 2-10 uses the stone imagery again, portraying Jesus as "the living stone" and his followers also as living stones. Like the sorting hat in the Harry Potter series, these living stones seem to separate God's chosen, royal, holy people from others. These living stones build some into a household, but cause others to stumble. Either way, living stones do not escape notice.

Easter 6 entices me to sing "There Is a Balm in Gilead," especially the verse about preaching like Peter and praying like Paul, because both figure prominently here. In 1 Peter 3: 13-22, Peter is preaching to those being persecuted, encouraging them to maintain faith and hope, and to defend their stance with gentleness, respect,

and a clear conscience because Christ has died for them and has saved them by his resurrection and ascension. In an age where bullying and cyber-bullying abound, it might be interesting to address that issue, listening to Peter speaking across the ages. Paul is not praying in Acts 17: 22-31, but giving his famous address to Greeks who worshiped an “unknown God” as a way of making the leap of faith between agnosticism and Christianity. Paul, the persecutor from last Sunday is now Paul the proselytizer, the apologist, the evangelist extraordinaire. People are being transformed by “God’s appointed,” Paul being the prime example, and “all” are invited now to likewise be transformed.

The Gospel text from John 14: 15-21 is Jesus’ assurance to believers that they will not be left alone in his absence, but will be gifted with the indwelling Spirit of truth. There will be no separation between believers and God/Jesus/Spirit, because Jesus’ presence will dwell within them as Comfort or Advocate. The only real separation will be between believers and the world which does not know or accept Jesus. Paraclete is mentioned in only five sayings in John: 14: 16-17, 26; 15: 26; 16: 7b-11, 13-15. For those with abandonment issues or those being objectified or singled-out by a bully, these words bring comfort and companionship. Psalm 66: 8-20 speaks of the nature of Yahweh God, who listens, responds, and rescues, and to the nature of people who have been the recipient of such grace – blessing, praising, effusively recounting God’s goodness, loved and loving.

Easter 7 has two options, primarily: Ascension or promise. Acts 1: 6-14 is the Ascension narrative reinforced by Psalm 68: 1-10, 32-35. Here a unifying image is “the cloud” (Acts 1: 9) which obscures the disciples’ view of Jesus as he ascends and prefigures his return which the two men in white proclaim, reinforced in Psalm 68 by the nomenclature for God in v. 4 as “Rider of Clouds.” Wendell Berry has a line from *A Timbered Chorus*, 1994, #2: “You will remember, watching/the clouds, the future of love.”⁶ I commend the whole poem to you. Or a preacher could lean towards Pentecost and focus upon the promised gift of the Holy Spirit, imparted at Jesus’ ascension, inferred in Peter’s exhortations where disciples’ suffering will be offset by the blessed Spirit of glory (1 Peter 4:14). Jesus, in his impassioned prayer for his disciples in John 17, looks cloudward and prays for mutual glorification, as God’s work on earth is completed by the Son and by those believers given to the Son to participate in God’s work and word. Unity and protection of the faithful is the prayer on Jesus’ lips as he prepares to depart from them. Perhaps this is the future of love.

Notes

- 1 John Updike, *Telephone Poles and Other Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963).
- 2 Mary Karr, *Sinners Welcome* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 61.
- 3 Shel Silverstein, *Where The Sidewalk Ends* (New York: Harper Collins, 1974), 127.
- 4 Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007), 45.
- 5 Emma Lazarus, “The New Colossus,” 1883.
- 6 Wendell Berry, *A Timbered Choir, Sabbath Poems 1979-1997* (New York: Counterpoint, 2008), 177. Other references to Wendell Berry can be found in *Given Poems* (Berkley: Counterpoint, 2005), 74, 70, 55.