

Preaching after Easter

William H. Willimon

North Alabama Conference, United Methodist Church, Birmingham, Alabama

Here we are, just a few weeks into our annual attempt to get over the jolt of the resurrection. Some of the best intellectual defenses have been enlisted to cope with the outrage of Easter. And yet, in spite of ourselves, Christ keeps rising to us.

As he began work on *Romans*, Karl Barth wrote his friend Thurneyson, “Don’t things get dangerous because God is?” A decade into preaching, Barth rediscovered the fresh, disarming availability of God, that is, the reality of resurrection. In resurrection, God vividly reiterates God’s self. No preacher has ever been able to persevere in the weekly task of bringing the gospel to speech without the dangerous, intimidating, homiletically invigorating awareness: *God is*.

Stanley Hauerwas reflected upon preaching in a cross shattered church¹ (a book he graciously dedicated to me); I wish here, in this Easter issue of *The Journal for Preachers*, to focus upon an even greater offense: preaching after Easter, speech that is shattered by the weekly recognition *God is*.

“In fact (*nuni*), Christ has been raised from the dead, first fruits of those who have died,” says Paul. “So we preach and so you have come to believe.”² Barth’s great homiletic rediscovery was that the risen Christ is not just preaching’s subject but preaching’s agent. The message to the Easter women (“Go! Tell! He is risen!”) is the birth of preaching not only as content, but the engine that drives preaching. The angel did not say, “Go! Form an intentional faith community!” or “Go! Take up a set of cruciform practices!” The angel said, “Go! Talk!” Christ rose into preaching, provoking a post-Easter explosion of uppity Jewish, world changing speech. (Sometimes, in my work, I think that if preaching is the effect of Easter, church is defense against Easter!)

In the Gospel accounts of the resurrection, it wasn’t just that Jesus was raised from the dead; it was that *he returned to us*. As Robert Jenson notes, the scriptures don’t report early Jesus sightings; they describe Jesus’ *appearances*.³ It’s an important difference. Resurrection, revelation is entirely in God’s hands, something God does. In resurrection God not only defeats death, but also overcomes the limits of human perception of and relationship to God. The first result of resurrection was not eternal life for us, but rather appearance to us, revelation.

Furthermore, Jesus was not only raised, but *he was raised to the wrong people*. How odd of the risen Christ to spend the first day of his resurrection in a sorry dump like Galilee! Christ didn’t appear to Pontius Pilate up at the Whitehouse? No, he was raised to powerless, marginalized Mary, Peter, Thomas in Galilee.

Thus W.D. Davies once criticized my Easter preaching in Duke Chapel because, in five Easters, I never preached on forgiveness. Davies was right. Forgiveness and reconciliation are linked to resurrection because Jesus wasn’t just raised, he didn’t just reappear – any old god could have done that. He appeared to the very ones who so betrayed and disappointed him in the first place – the same losers with whom he shared his last meal before execution. Surely this is what Wesley was pointing to when, in argument with Calvinists, Wesley said, in effect, that God could have been

supreme, could have been sovereign -- as Calvinists love to assert. But God in Christ chose rather to be love. To be encountered by crucified Jesus as resurrected and present to sinners like us is to discover God as forgiving love. He did not simply rise from the dead; he rose from the dead *to us*.

Resurrection is not only the basis of the Christian faith, but the engine that drives preaching: Talk begins when God shows up.

I love that the risen Christ sometimes appeared to a large group; this thing is more than merely personal, subjective, or individual. When it comes to speaking about Easter, we must speak in a way that preserves the objectivity of the event and defeats our modern tendency to collapse everything into subjectivity. Paul, of course, wouldn't know an inner experience if he had one, so Paul never describes his being commandeered by the risen Christ as inner. He speaks of it as revealing (*apokalyp-sai*), something that was actually there,⁴ and as revelation (*apokalypsis*), something God did in public. *Pace* Schliermacher's contemporary West Coast imitators.

Paul's characterization of the appearances of Christ as *apokalypsis* makes one mindful of the connection between Paul's apocalyptic talk and that of Daniel and Zechariah. In the risen Christ showing up, everything in this dying world is being set on its head, boring Greek time disrupted, continuities, probabilities, and predictabilities (so beloved in the modern world) are shattered; there really is something new. (Which is why I prefer Douglas Campbell's apocalyptic Paul to N.T. Wright's more orderly and English fulfillment-of-the-covenant Paul.⁵) As I read him, Paul is a man attempting to recover after being hit by a bus.

After his resurrection, the peripatetic, itinerate nature of Jesus is heightened. He appears, but quickly disappears. He is a body--in motion, remarkably available to us, but as night falls, he does not abide, reside with us (Luke 24). The gifted, God-controlled quality of his presence is thus intensified. Jesus before resurrection never stayed anywhere long; after his resurrection he is even more itinerate, never again telling his disciples "Come!" but rather, "Go!" (Matthew 28). As Barth says, revelation cannot be taken into our hands. There is with Jesus no proud having, only humble receiving. In my experience, control freaks do poorly with Jesus.

Aquinas notes the peculiarity of Jesus' post-resurrection presence is that Jesus "did not choose constantly to associate with [his disciples] as he had done before..."⁶ He "vanished from their sight,"⁷ he "withdrew from them."⁸ If the tomb of Jesus is empty, it is empty as Duke Chapel is now empty--Christ is present, present to the wrong people, in the wrong places, ever revealing, but always as gift, not sedate, never as possession.

It is not that he is evasive; it is rather that he is apocalyptic, appearing from God's promised future, a visitation by a resident of the age to come whose appearance blows our age to bits. His presence is future present. As Luther noted, Christ's absence from us, his distance from our conceptions of God, is most apparent precisely when he is to us most present. The closer to us he comes, the more we realize our distance. He is most veiled from us in those moments when he is most revealingly unveiled. Furthermore, his comings and goings have nothing to do with the faith or the expectation of those to whom he appears--Paul was decidedly an enemy when Christ most vividly showed up to him.

The only thing fixed, settled, about Jesus after his death is his identity: after his cross, we can't make God into anything we like. His resurrection not only confirms

his identity, but also extends it. It makes all the difference to know that God raised only the humiliated, rejected, tortured-to-death by the government Jesus. (As Jenson says, “God” is whoever raised crucified Jesus from the dead.) Preaching is interesting only when it talks about whoever raised crucified Jesus from the dead.

Jenson also says that the major difference between a dead person and one who is alive is that a live person is able to surprise. Nothing about Socrates surprises. Socrates can powerfully influence, but he cannot surprise. In Easter, Jesus as free agent is able to surprise. Of this, as a forty year preacher, I am a witness. To think how long I’ve been at it, how many Sundays I venture forth again with Jesus, only to be shocked, rocked by him into befuddlement. It’s for me a proof of resurrection, sort of.

Well, if these propositions be true, allow me to tag some implications of resurrection for the practice of preaching in the name of resurrected Jesus:

1. As Bonhoeffer said, there is only one preacher—the resurrected Christ. As Barth said, only God can speak to us of God. And as Will Willimon has said, many of my homiletic failures are due to Jesus and cannot be blamed on me. I don’t know why the Risen Christ chose not to appear through some of my very best homiletical products. Grace isn’t grace if it’s predictable, programmable. I’m not troubled that Jesus performed many miracles; I’m troubled that he performed so few. Even one so talented as Richard Lischer has not been able to come up with a knock down, one hundred per cent successful homiletical method. Preaching works not for reasons rhetorical, but rather for reasons theological. As Lischer famously said, “Preaching works before it is understood.” After forty years of working with Jesus, I still don’t understand why he insists on talking to losers with whom I would never strike up a conversation and why sometimes, though he chooses to speak through me, he refuses to speak to me. All preaching is externally authorized. If anything is ever heard anywhere by anyone in one of my sermons, it’s a miracle.

2. While it is aggravating for those of us who talk about Jesus to have Jesus come and go as he pleases, preaching keeps generating faith in me because of the wonder that Jesus shows up at all. In my experience, the last people to believe that preaching actually works are preachers—perhaps this is a defense mechanism against the reality of Easter. It is so tough to relinquish your life to a discipline over which you have so little control. How many Sundays (not as many Sundays as I wanted, but enough to keep me nervous) would some besotted, smart young thing emerge from Duke Chapel after service and report that she had actually heard something. I would respond, “So? The women were right? He is risen and returned to the same losers who disappointed him the first time.” When one considers all of the artful, governmentally subsidized defenses against the word of God — the Duke curriculum, alcohol, promiscuity, the Department of Religion—it restores my belief in miracles. You don’t need a me to tell you why preaching often doesn’t work; only the Risen Christ explains why preaching sometimes works.

3. Preaching is the purpose of the church and its ministry, the most important thing that pastors do. All your theological training is for the purpose of giving you the guts to make an apocalyptic announcement: *God has won a great victory*. The bloody, crucified Lamb rules. Join up, or else stay stupidly out of step. There are powerful forces working against the utterance of this liberating announcement. All I ask is for a Sunday congregation of fifteen or fifteen hundred, with their chests stuck out,

saying, “Hit me!” I fully understand why pastors allow so many things to crowd out their preparation for and investment in preaching – look, I’m as big a coward as the rest of them. Only Easter explains why so many persevere in this vocation. But faith, as Paul says, is an auditory, acoustical phenomenon. In an unguarded moment Jesus said, “He who hears you hears me.” I didn’t say it was the most effective way to get a New Heaven and a New Earth. In all this, I have just meant to say... it is true.

Notes

- 1 Stanley M. Hauerwas, *A Cross Shattered Church: Reclaiming the Heart of Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009).
- 2 1 Corinthians 15:20, 11.
- 3 Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology: Vol. 1, The Triune God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). I am particularly indebted to Chapter 12, “Resurrection,” of Jenson’s book for this article.
- 4 Galatians 1:16.
- 5 Douglas Campbell, *The Deliverance of God: An apocalyptic reading of deliverance in Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans) , 2009.
- 6 *Summa Theologiae*, iii, 55.3.
- 7 Luke 24:31.
- 8 Luke 24:51.