

Preaching the Easter Texts

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Alleluia!

This seems the right word with which to start speaking of the Resurrection, this event that lies beyond what words can say. Whenever Easter Sunday looms and I start thinking about the sermon I'll offer, these lines of Emily Dickinson come to mind:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind—¹

What I really want to offer from the pulpit is just an invitation to come back next week, and the week after, and the week after—since success in circuit lies. “We’ll take this one slant,” I want to explain, “a little at a time.” After all, that’s what the church year is for—to come to terms with this event that is utterly beyond words and yet is God’s answer to our deepest need and highest hope and so must be proclaimed that it might be lived.

I’ve never said as much (so little!) on Easter Sunday. But my approach here is to take it a little at a time. For each of Easter’s seven Sundays, I’ve chosen the lectionary text that seems to have chosen me, to have called to me like a toy that beckons a child across a well-stocked playroom to come and play and learn what it has to teach.

To say that Scripture is something to play with shouldn’t indicate that I think lowly of it, but that I think highly of play, and that I experience God when I’m free to imagine a kingdom unlike anything the world has ever known yet is breaking in even now, even here. If what I come up with is of any use to you, my colleagues who are perhaps as thrilled and freaked out by the task that lies before us as I am, then I can only say, “Thanks be to God.”

Easter Sunday: Mark 16:1-8

“To no one nothing they said, they were afraid for...” (Mark 16:8b). This close translation of Mark’s last line might strike our hearing as using syntax only Yoda could love. But even in its more familiar rendering, “And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid,” it strikes a strange note. It’s so abrupt! We’re not alone in finding it unsatisfying: someone added several verses, it seems, to make this earliest Easter message more palatable, more appropriate. But these strike not just a strange note; they strike a false one. In an attempt to tie the narrative together—this narrative that defies any such neat ending—they feel rushed, forced. And how could they not?

The whole point of Easter is that things do not come to so neat and tidy an end. The whole point of Easter is that, with God, what seems an ending is actually the opening up of whole new possibilities.

Given this, I think the final verse of the gospel reading for Easter says exactly what we now need to hear—we who are Christians in the Modern West. After all, so much of our known world seems to be coming to an end. Even as I write this, the American government is in such gridlock that shut-downs are near-monthly likelihoods; the European Union threatens to come unraveled; global markets are in disarray; the globalized, technologized economy can't accommodate all those who want to earn a steady livelihood; and the consumer culture is less and less satisfying, more and more disappointing, even devastating of all that we truly hold dear. Most fundamentally, our civilization is built on reliance on power sources that threaten the planet or at least our wellbeing on it. The way into the future is unclear, to say the least.

Our churches are hardly better off. For twenty years prominent mainline thinkers have forecast fundamental changes in our society, and our congregations' need to adapt to these changes. We all know their prophecy has been on the mark, has played out as they predicted. Christendom has ended, its assumptions are dead, and, to cite the title of a book by Brian McLaren (which is both prescriptive warning and descriptive assurance), *Everything Must Change*. It surely causes each of us to ask that age-old question: "Is the Lord among us or not?" (Exodus 17: 7c).

Ironically, I think the original ending of Mark's gospel (as we have it) implies the answer, "Yes." Given that this story isn't neatly tied off at the end, then, yes, the Lord is among us. Given that the narrative can't take every one of its implications into account and come to some final conclusion, then, yes, the Lord of Life is yet with us. Given that the good news of Jesus Christ crucified and raised is a story whose final sentence never comes to its own end, then, yes, the God and Father of Christ and of us all is yet with us, ushering us to that closing-in horizon and then ushering us through it into the light of a new day.

2nd Sunday of Easter: John 20:19-31

Time now for our annual shaming of Thomas, "doubting" Thomas as we call him. And, why not? After all, Jesus himself seems to. "Have you believed because you have seen me?" he asked this hapless disciple. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet who have come to believe." In what seems an approving nod to those for whom this gospel was first written—all of them living long after Jesus had lived, all of them having come to believe in spite of not having "seen"—Jesus, it seems, gives us every excuse to pile on Thomas for being so shamefully doubting, and then to pride ourselves on being so obediently believing.

But what did Thomas doubt? It's often assumed that he doubted the Resurrection (and so we preachers encourage those in the pews to believe in the Resurrection). But it would have been understandable if Thomas did doubt this! After all, he wasn't with the disciples when they were locked safely inside that upper room. Thomas was out, in those dangerous streets—and doing what?—buying supplies for those safely locked away? Giving word to loved ones that they were alive and safe? He was who-knows-where when the rest were standing by to receive what must have been the greatest visitation of their lives. He returned only to hear them all say, whether

in chorus or in cacophony, “We have seen the Lord!” This would have had me swallowing my own bile.

We don’t know what Thomas felt upon hearing this. All we know is what he said: “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the marks of the nails and in his side, I will not believe.” And what I hear isn’t that Thomas demanded proof of the Resurrection, but that he needed proof of the Crucifixion. I don’t think Thomas doubted the Resurrection; I think he doubted the Resurrection of one crucified. I think he doubted the Resurrection of one so thoroughly abandoned—abandoned even, it would seem, by God. It was the Resurrection of the one beaten and abused and at last abandoned (even by the God in whose name he claimed his own authority) that Thomas found incredible, unbelievable.

How could this one be the Messiah? How could this suffering, bleeding, dying one be the one the world most needs? And, you know, it’s a really good question—and we shame Thomas for asking it! But such doubt in the crucified Lord is yet all around us, even in our churches. Whenever we hear of God acting in wrath to punish his enemies, we hear doubt that Jesus took on the cross. Whenever we imply that God is at work in making rich people rich and poor people poor, we reveal our doubt that God’s Son took on the cross. Whenever we speak of God conforming to the values that we live by in the world, we confess a doubt that God Himself suffered in order that we might be saved from systems that thrive on the belief that human suffering is divinely ordained.

We might have hoped to be done with the cross now that Lent is behind us, now that it’s Easter. But I think the church in the modern West has a special obligation to keep ever before us the cross. We exercise so much power in the world! Ensclosed in the most powerful imperial force the world now knows, we exercise such tremendous influence, even if that power and influence are diminishing. It’s true that the church and the empire are no longer one; but it’s also true that we can still claim to be Christian even while enjoying all the comforts of empire. And so we have a particular obligation to proclaim Christ and him crucified—which means we ought not to shame Thomas but to recognize in him our brother. What he doubted we also doubt—that in power there is tragic vulnerability, but in vulnerability there is such power as cannot be overcome. Likewise, what he received is ours also to receive—peace, and not the sort that empire promises, but the sort that only love poured out can deliver.

3rd Sunday of Easter: Luke 24:36b-48

On this, the third Sunday of Easter, concern for the wounding of Christ continues as Jesus, appearing resurrected to the disciples still gathered in Jerusalem, asks them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and feet; see that it is I myself.” But this time, the marks of the reality of the crucifixion are less important than Jesus’ utter corporeality, for he goes on to say, “Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” Add to this the almost comic touch of Jesus asking, “Have you anything to eat?” And you get the point: Jesus has been resurrected not only in spirit but also in body.

There’s a compelling trend in homiletics urging preachers to create sermons that resemble the form of the scriptural readings on which they focus. I don’t know much about this, but I do think the one genre that should be left in scripture and not imitated in preaching is the apologetic. This story of Jesus eating a piece of bread is

an apologetic text to prove the Resurrection of the Jesus in body as well as in spirit. And any sermon taking on this task is doomed to failure. We simply can't prove Jesus' Resurrection in body. But we can explore the implications of its being so.

Resurrection of the body answers the predominant, persistent dualism that claims material things are corrupt and spiritual things are pure and good, spirit rising at death as the body falls away. Christ's and our resurrection mean body and spirit cannot be so neatly separated. We are matter animated, determined by body as much as by the cultivation of our minds. We can accept ourselves as we are, along with the joys of good food, good sex, the cool of rain on your face, the warmth of sun on your body, rejoicing in these blessings.

But Christians, especially in America, remain at best ambivalent about the body. Despite our confession that God intends blessing in our being embodied, Christians don't seem widely to experience that blessing as lived reality.

Ernest Kurtz's book, *Shame and Guilt*, makes the point that shame is the laying bare of "the essential paradox that inheres in be-ing human."² Moving past the superficial considerations of whether we *should* or *shouldn't* feel ashamed, Mr. Kurtz claims that to be human *is* to know shame, for "to be human is to be caught in a contradictory tension between the pull to the unlimited, the more-than-human, and the drag of the merely limited, the less-than-human."³

Not long ago, I talked with a friend who was anticipating the birth of her second child. Her first childbirth had been traumatic—a long, horribly painful labor that frightened and even panicked her. She had made it through without the medical interventions she wanted to avoid, but now another birth loomed, and she was becoming prematurely afraid. To manage her anxiety, she wanted to allow the possibility of an epidural. But she was ashamed that she might need what she'd sworn off—terribly, tearfully ashamed.

Not long ago, I sat with a once-powerful man who was dying. He talked with me for a long time, and then suddenly he asked me to leave. He was getting tired. He was losing track of what he was saying, of what he had said. Suddenly, he seemed on the verge of shame. Aware of me, a relatively young woman, seeing him, listening to him, he didn't want me to see him come a bit undone.

Not long ago, we all came to the cross where Christ hung. And I wonder if there was a moment of shame—deep, personal shame—for Christ hanging there: "I meant to save all, but I merely suffer alone. I meant to bring life, but I'm conquered by death."

Shame is where our boundless hope meets our embodied limitations—which means that to know the God on whom all hope is founded is to be confronted with our shame. The resurrection of the body, of Christ's body and our bodies, promises an undoing of shame's power in our lives—that we might simply, "Edenically," be with God. Released then from our secret shames, we are free—free to live in the light of God's loving countenance and free to live intimately and honestly with one another. May it start here and now in our churches.

4th Sunday of Easter: John 10:11-18

When I was in divinity school, I went to a classmate's house party. It was packed. Moving around was tough, so I stayed mostly where I was, squeezed up against the dining room table where I found myself face to face with someone I didn't know, a

handsome man about my age. He was quite literally breathing down my neck, and I returned the favor. We said awkward, hollered hellos. Then I asked, "Are you at the div. school?"

"No, no. I'm visiting my friend who is."

"Where are you visiting from?" I asked.

"France," he said, in perfect American English. "I moved there after college."

"What do you do there?"

"I'm a shepherd," he said, tossing out the perfect pick-up line for this particular party—a house full of soon-to-be young pastors. If ever there was a positive association for this crowd....

"You're kidding," I said.

"No," he said, apparently not appreciating his plum position.

"So, I've got a question for you," I said. "Is it a good shepherd who'd lay his life down for the sheep?"

"No," he said, puzzled at the question. "That's not a good shepherd. That's a *dead* shepherd. It's not about laying down your life. It's about just being on the lookout."

"Thank you," I said. "That's just what I thought."

I wonder if this statement puzzled the first disciples, as well—Jesus claiming to be a good shepherd, and for the very reason that he lays down his life for his sheep. Wouldn't a shepherd who'd at least put up a fight be of more use?

But the strange assertions of John's gospel regarding Jesus begin long before that. Consider this line, early in his narrative—John the baptizer saying upon seeing Jesus, "Look! Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

This is bizarre because, although sacrificial lambs are indeed understood as having the power to take away sin, these would be *people's* lambs—a lamb offered by this person, a lamb offered by that person—lambs from people offered to God, not God's lambs. Here the Lamb of God is offered, apparently, to people; here is the Lamb of God offered to *us*.

This turns the whole religious enterprise on its head, recasting a religious mandate (taken to have been from God) as a mandate of humanity: God doesn't need our religious offerings; humanity does. God doesn't require right religious practices; humans do.

Many of you will recognize the influence of anthropologist Rene Girard in this hearing of John's gospel. Girard recognizes in all human culture the use of so-called sacred violence to safeguard against an outbreak of profane violence. Sacred violence is the sort of violence that helps maintain social order. It keeps most people safe, though at the cost of a few select "sacrificial lambs." Mundane violence is meaningless violence, and once unleashed, it's almost impossible to get back under control.

By way of illustration, I think of a scene late in the movie *Downfall*, about Hitler's last days. Berlin is smoldering rubble. People are missing or dead. High-ranking Nazis are committing suicide. Now comes this street scene: a group of Nazi soldiers out to hang suspected Bolsheviks, the strange fruits of their labor already hanging all around. "Order," one shouts out, "order must be restored!" while others wrestle an old, already broken man into a noose.⁴ Never mind that there's no chance this will "restore order." Never mind that there's barely a city, barely a street. This attempt to establish order by state-sanctioned violence lays bare the absurd situation such violence landed them in. Their mission is futile. But what else can they do?

Jesus, according to John, was one who recognized this dilemma of human civilization—that orderliness comes at a cost, but at less of a cost than utter lawlessness. He recognized that the systems by which we establish order are better than no systems at all, but they fall far short of the Kingdom of God; they reflect imperfectly the life-giving will of God. So what he, the Good Shepherd (Good with a capital G), means to do is not merely to protect the sheep while we await proper slaughter. No, what the Good Shepherd means to do, and what his Father in Heaven means for him to do, is to lead the flock out from under the pall of our conviction that life for some means death for others. What the Good Shepherd means to do is to guide the whole flock out from the pen of peace-by-force, that we might enter the free realm of peace won by forgiveness.

I've often preached Christianity as a sort of un-religion. And it's a risk because, if church isn't compulsory, then maybe people won't come—or maybe they will. Maybe they'll come because they recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd and because they want to hear more. This is a tall order for those of us who would clear space for that voice. It means we can't be cheap in our speaking the Word of God or shallow in our thinking through its implications. It means we can't conform comfortably to the sacrificial mechanisms that keep most of *us* safe anyway. It means we have to be willing to lay down our lives just like the one whom we seek to follow—not to settle for the world's definition of what's good, but to strive for the Kingdom's Good. Yet it also means that we may simply rejoice in being part of such a flock, under the guidance of such a Good Shepherd who leads us into life.

5th Sunday of Easter: Acts 8:26-40

The fifth and sixth Sundays of Easter feature two encounters, each between two men who wouldn't have been together were it not for the gospel. The first is the familiar scene between Philip and the unnamed eunuch, which offers the tantalizing moment when the eunuch says to Philip, "How can I [understand this scroll] unless someone guides me?" Preachers everywhere will want to take this moment to secure our jobs: how could you in the pews understand the scriptures without us? And that might be good for a laugh, so make the most of it! But the more important implication here is that the Bible isn't just one more book, one more piece of literature. No, here is a book that requires a particular quality of *attention* and *intention*. The fact that the eunuch recognized this is promising—but not all that surprising, considering....

A eunuch, of course, is an emasculated man. By choice or by force, a eunuch is one whose testes are missing, and so he is unable to reproduce. It follows, then, that this Ethiopian court official was in some real sense cut off. So I imagine him, alone on his chariot, having come across this scroll, reading these words of Isaiah: "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living...."

The eunuch too was one so cut off—something he himself seemed to recognize, since he was drawn to this text. He was cut off physically, of course, such that this phrase may well have painfully resonated in him, but also cut off from a society in which a life's value lay in having children. For by children you might be remembered; by children you achieve "eternal life," living on through the generations that

you helped produce.

This was established religious teaching, and though we don't hold to such doctrines anymore, it's not so different today. Over my ten years in pastoral ministry, I've sat with two different aging mothers, each of whom lost an adult child to death, children who had not had children themselves. In their crushing pain, both women uttered this between sobs: "What a waste." It was heartbreaking to hear, but later it had me wondering what makes a life a waste? What is life *for* that some lives might be deemed a waste? Doubtless, there are people in the pews for whom we'll preach who know this loss, this sense of being cut off. Doubtless they, like this eunuch, need to hear some good news regarding their predicament.

Philip "proclaimed the good news about Jesus," which leaves wide open the question of what he said. Here's a possibility: Philip explained that the prophet was speaking both of his people who'd been cut off in the exile and (even if unbeknownst to him) of Jesus Christ—he who, though celibate, generated a whole family for himself, a family that is fruitful to this day.

That the eunuch chose baptism lends itself to such a possibility: he wanted to join the family that Philip proclaimed. It also might have us hope that we can wrangle someone for baptism this Sunday to demonstrate the drama of such a decision. But if no one offers him or herself to be baptized and the sacrament for the day (other than the sacrament of the word) is the Lord's Supper, then that's just as well. After all, Jesus said to the disciples that whenever they did this (gather to eat blessed bread, gather to drink blessed wine), they should do it in remembrance of him. And remembrance is exactly the thing the eunuch was drawn to—re-membering being the opposite of dismembering, re-membering being the medicine for having been cut off. Remembrance is largely why any of us comes to church on Sunday or to the church universal. Re-memberance is largely what we're looking for. As worship leaders, then, we should pray that in our congregations' remembrance, for any who come seeking it, is there to be found.

6th Sunday of Easter: Acts 10:44-48

Peter's urging that Gentiles be allowed baptism into the church was big. We know this. We know that there was a lot of resistance among circumcised believers to allowing the uncircumcised in, and so we know that Peter was bold to ask, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"

This makes a good preaching point, that we of the church should be similarly open to new believers who seem somehow foreign to us and yet whom the Holy Spirit has also touched. But it's a somewhat bloodless point, like all the readings set aside for this sixth Sunday of Easter. They're rich, to be sure, with theological treasures. But for a body of believers that confesses faith in a God who became incarnate and that, during this season, celebrates (among other things) the Resurrection of the body, we might long for something a little meatier.

We find it in the story of the event that led Peter to such an insight—his visit to Cornelius the centurion. Centurions sometimes supervised the nailing of condemned men to their crosses—which is to say maybe Cornelius had in his cohort the very men who'd crucified Jesus, or maybe he himself was the centurion who'd said of Jesus, "Surely, this man was innocent." Let's suppose Cornelius was that close to the cross

of Christ and saw from up close the brutality and grace at work that day, not long ago, just a few weeks.

This might be why Cornelius was “a devout man who feared God.” Maybe this was a new development in his life. Generous with alms and prayerful all the time, Cornelius might have been increasingly ill at ease within the empire in whose service he’d lived his life—for this is what constant prayer can get you, a sneaking sense that you’re not at home in the empire, a persistent pain that says something here is very wrong.

Of course, Peter would have known none of this. When Cornelius’ men arrived, all Peter knew for certain was that a centurion had sent a soldier for him. Granted, he’d been primed to break through boundaries that he’d once considered unbreakable. The vision he had received in prayer was of animals clean and unclean that a voice beckoned him to kill and eat without regard to kosher laws. When Peter refused, the voice said, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

And it was then that Peter learned of the three men who waited for him at the gate—come to bring him from Joppa to Caesarea. His being in Joppa should pique our hearing, and did perhaps pique Peter’s thinking. Joppais was where Jonah was when the Lord sent him to warn the people of Nineveh. But Jonah didn’t want to go. He knew that the Lord is “a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.” Jonah knew the Lord wouldn’t go through with what Jonah was to say the Lord would do. At the sight of the people repenting, the Lord would accept these foreigners as his own—leaving Jonah to look the fool. No! Jonah wanted no part of this—and so along came the big fish.

It was perhaps with this in mind that Peter responded “without hesitation” when the voice came to him at prayer: “Look, three men are searching for you. Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them.” But Peter was probably frightened by what he’d been told to do. He was about to journey with men of whom he knew only that they were physically powerful and largely beyond legal reproach, they were comfortable with violence, and they were no friends of his people. Yes, they said that the one who had sent them and to whom they would bring him was upright and God-fearing; yes, they said this Cornelius was spoken well of by the whole Jewish nation. But why should Peter believe them?

Imagine being at home, getting ready for bed or tending to your children or whatever you do at your least guarded moment. Suddenly there they are, at your door, come to take you with them—three strangers. What’s more, they’re people who dwell on the other side of your social boundary. You’re old: they’re adolescent. You’re a woman: they’re men. You’re black: they’re white, in uniform, and armed. You’re gay: they’re straight and skin-headed with black, shiny boots. That they say, “We’re bringing you to one of ours, but he’s a nice one,” hardly helps. That a voice you hear in prayer says, “Go with them without hesitation” is just one voice among many, and a dissonant one at that. Do you open the door? No one would blame you if you didn’t. Really, the people who love you most in the world would probably thank God if you didn’t.

But there they went, Peter and some of the believers with him, on a day’s journey to Caesarea escorted by a soldier and two servants, to a realm that Peter likely couldn’t even imagine—having never entered such a place, having never spoken to anyone who’d ever entered such a place or perhaps never having had such a place

described to him. “It is unlawful,” Peter explained to Cornelius when he arrived, “for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile.” But more than breaking a legal boundary, he was breaking a conceptual one. Like one setting out across the sea with a map whose edges proclaim, “Here be dragons,” like one aiming for the dark side of the moon without a radio to tell Houston, “We have a problem,” Peter was venturing into territory beyond the horizon of his mind. As a homebody myself, I marvel at this—which is usually the sign that here is the sermon. Significant indeed was Peter’s theological insight, which he proclaimed (likely shocking himself) to Cornelius: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” And ground-breaking indeed was the policy that followed this proclamation, that no one who has received the Holy Spirit could possibly be denied the waters of baptism. But I think the sermon the church needs to hear is at this point, where Peter and Cornelius have come together in the same room. That our sanctuaries might be such a room as this is our challenge and our hope.

Ascension Sunday & 7th Sunday of Easter: Acts 1.6-14

Now we arrive at the final Sunday of Easter, this exalted season, and we are meant to consider a quite boring aspect of life together—filling an empty committee position.⁵

It might just be me, “low church” that I am, and moreover serving a congregation that has but twelve sometimes in worship (though we’ll settle for eleven). There might be others out there for whom this reading seems lackluster. Perhaps especially to pastors serving congregations undergoing a process of restructuring—that sometimes painful transition from committees to shared ministries—this might seem one reading to avoid, lest those who cling to *Robert’s Rules of Order* be reenergized for battle!

It might also seem lackluster when considered alongside what came just before: the awesome sight of Jesus’ ascension to heaven. But I think the contrast has a lot to teach us about the life of faith and life in the church—which is, as the saying goes, part inspiration and part perspiration. But it’s not only that. It’s not even mostly that. Really, most of what the believers did during those days between the ascension of Christ and the descension of the Holy Spirit is wait. One hundred twenty people, ten days, one room.

This portion of Acts 1, which feels like a hinge between inspiration and perspiration, appears in the lectionary for Easter 7, Year A, but I consider it here because I’m drawn to it. It has me reflecting on how weak we are at waiting—we as Americans, perhaps we as humans, even we as Christians. And so it has me wondering, what would a worship service all about waiting look like, feel like? What would it mean to put our congregants in that place of waiting for the Holy Spirit?

It’s an awkward place. I think of jury duty, when I was ushered into a small room with a bunch of strangers awaiting word as to what to do, what to attend to. It can be a dangerous place; people gathered without clarity of purpose can be a breeding ground for anxiety and aggression. I think of a group dynamics conference I attended whose only agenda for the week was to study how we all interacted—a mind-bending experience, even painfully so.

Happily for the church, it’s also a prayerful place, as it was in those earliest days for “all these” who were “constantly devoting themselves to prayer.” Sadly, though,

for the contemporary church, it's not a place where most of our members will have spent much time.

To be sure, a worship service is the product of spirited waiting, but usually just on a few people's part. The preacher will have awaited a word and then prepared to preach it. The minister of music will have awaited a spirit and then prepared to deliver on it, and the choir will have awaited music and then rehearsed it. But most who come to worship will receive a product rather than participate in its production, the first step of which is to wait, prayerfully to wait.

And it probably can't be done effectively. Without resorting to manipulation or gimmickry, we who lead worship can't provide for our congregants the sort of open-ended waiting that those 120 people long ago endured during those 10 days in that one room. And it's too bad, because in many ways we find ourselves in a time similar to the time of the birth of the church. As many writers of many books in many fields of study have said, we are at the close of one age and at the dawn of the next—a hinge time, a time of fear, a time of hope. And what might help all creation make its epochal journey is the church—a body gathered for the purpose of love in service of life abundant whose methods are wisdom and compassion and forgiveness, and so whose first step is to wait for the Spirit.

No, it probably isn't possible to reproduce such a suspended state of waiting for the church today. But we can do waiting in our own way. We can name it and then frame it. We can also ready the gathered body, as Peter did, to receive the revelation when it comes. For it is coming. Pentecost is coming, of course, just next week. More significantly, the Holy Spirit is coming, is always coming—to renew the church, to breathe into it the breath of life, to renew the whole world that God so loves.

There's hardly a more satisfying feeling in my workweek than when I tie off the end of a sermon—hard-born but at last having a life of its own. But there's also something false about such a satisfying conclusion. For while a sermon should be self-contained and coherent, it should also recognize that here is but one word in what is in truth a long, long conversation. So while it's something of a temptation to me to look to tie things off too neatly, to go for that feeling of satisfaction, what the Spirit demands is continuation. "Success in circuit lies."

This seems especially true at the end of the Easter season—a season that we end very much looking forward to what comes next, a season that we end in a bated-breath waiting. This is to say, I cannot end this article with anything approaching a satisfying conclusion. So, as we do in life, I'll end as I began.

Alleluia!

Notes

1 Emily Dickinson, "1129," in *Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson's Poems*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little Brown Company, 1962), 248.

2 Ernest Kurtz, *Shame & Guilt* (New York: iUniverse, 2007), 8.

3 Kurtz, 8.

4 *Downfall*. dir. Oliver Hirschbiegel, Sony Pictures presents a Constantin Film production. Frankfurt, Germany: 2004, video recording.

5 As for the reason *why* the disciples needed a new twelfth, namely Judas' death, I won't take it on here—but I would take it on, because it's a significant event. To be honest, I think our attitude about Judas says as much about the quality and character of our faith as our attitude about Jesus. There's an opportunity to consider Judas on the 6th Sunday of Lent, Year C, though many congregations would balk at not observing Palm Sunday then.