

# *The Challenge and Opportunity of Easter Preaching*

Sam Wells

Duke University Chapel, Durham, North Carolina

I recall a pastor of the “old school” who hated Christmas. He was most at home in a quiet midweek Communion service with a dozen faithful folk present. He could be roused to a Sunday, although much of his preaching was a lament about human sin, with a general tenor that there was a good deal more of it about these days than there used to be and that it was reflected in lower church attendance than hitherto. (One might have judged, given the style and content of his preaching, that there could be plausible reasons for lower church attendance other than sin or unbelief, but reflexive self-awareness was not one of his attributes.) His life revolved around the annual travail through Holy Week – and he enjoyed making Advent feel as much like Holy Week as possible. When Easter came, he was bereft: without it, he realized, there was, technically, no gospel; but if it had been allowed for one moment to seize center stage, he feared he would have no ministry. No gloom, no dire premonitions, no eschatological foreboding, no bumptious human pride that needed taking down a peg or two: what would there be left for him to say if the human race were doomed to happiness after all?

Every Sunday is Easter Day. We all know that. Nonetheless, Easter Sunday presents a number of challenges to the preacher, which in some ways are more focused versions of the challenges the preacher faces every Sunday. Here are a few:

1. The gospel accounts are sketchy, figurative, and inconsistent. The layperson’s imagination tends to blend them. If the pastor were to ask a congregation, “What happened on Easter morning?” the answers would be hybrid – a synthesis of angels, male disciples, women followers, and folded grave clothes. And yet Easter, rather like Christmas, has taken on a huge infrastructure of its own – chicks, eggs, lilies, brass, bonnets, bunnies, chocolate, feasting, and weekend vacations. Both the narratives and the infrastructure seem a step or two removed from what the preacher feels the need to say on Easter morning.

2. In churches that take their liturgical heritage in any way seriously, Holy Week has been heavy going – Good Friday certainly, the gloomier the better, Maundy Thursday also, always with “a lower turnout than we’d hoped,” and perhaps a Stations of the Cross or Tenebrae evening for those whose disposition tends toward that of the old school pastor mentioned earlier. These traditions present two problems for the Easter preacher: one is, having been to the depths of human failure in Holy Week, it’s emotionally pretty challenging to turn the page and witness God making all things new quite so rapidly and comprehensively. The practical solution to this is for the preacher to prepare the Easter sermon in advance of Holy Week, something most preachers find it logistically or spiritually impossible to do. The other problem is that there is almost no Protestant church in the whole wide world where the number present on Easter Sunday isn’t more than double those that turned out during Holy Week. So the members of the congregation are in markedly divergent liturgical places. More than half have simply flicked the page from Palm Sunday (or Christmas!). A smaller group are just coming up for air from the doldrums of putting Jesus in the tomb. It’s

hard to address both simultaneously.

3. Almost all mainline preachers in the U.S. are familiar with Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words in *Discipleship* about cheap grace: "Cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without repentance, it is baptism without the discipline of community; it is the Lord's Supper without confession of sin; it is absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the living, incarnate Jesus Christ."<sup>1</sup> It's hard not to admit that this constitutes a fair description of many, if not most, Easter Sunday sermons. H. Richard Niebuhr, talking about the Social Gospel, put it similarly: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."<sup>2</sup> How does one communicate unbridled joy and unalloyed good news without suggesting it's all easy, all a done deal, and no human response, let alone sacrifice, is required? The old-school pastor mentioned earlier may have been a bit of an Eeyore, but he was correcting a gospel that Bonhoeffer identified and whose nefarious consequences Bonhoeffer confronted throughout his life.

4. A related challenge which concerns every sermon, but perhaps particularly an Easter sermon, is how to avoid the gospel becoming so domesticated that it's emptied of all political purchase. Put another way, how to explain Jesus' ministry in such a way that makes sense of why the Romans had him put to death? Easter bunnies do not help with this. Why should Jesus' resurrection make the oppressor quake and put a song in a weary throat?

5. A more subtle theological point is buried in the phrase "unalloyed good news." The term "risen, conquering Son" (from the Edmond Budryhymn "Thine be the Glory") is not without complications. The troubling question is, does not the Lord of glory have a way of redeeming the world without losers, without conquest, without triumph? It is, almost by definition, hard for the fallen human imagination to settle upon a notion of resurrection joy that does not involve such things. But if resurrection is truly the first-fruits of the renewed creation, surely heavenly perfection goes beyond language of conquest and enters new and inspiring territory that is less about victory and more about breakthrough.

6. A final theological question that in some ways synthesizes all of the above is this: "What does the resurrection of a single being, albeit the second member of the Trinity, 2000 years ago, mean for the resurrection of all beings (or at least all believers, possibly including all people of good will, and the odd righteous Hindu like Gandhi, together with those of our family and friends who didn't make it to church that often) today and on the last day?" The connection is not obvious or simple. Explaining what actually changes because of Easter, why Death is dead after Jesus' resurrection when it seems to be alive and well all around us, why sin is overcome when it too seems in rude health, is essential to any Easter sermon.

I'd like to demonstrate how to turn these challenges into opportunities. The simplest way to do that is to offer an Easter Sunday sermon of my own and highlight how I have addressed each of the above challenges as I go. The sermon is from Mark 16:1-8 and is called "The Rolling Stones."

Earthquake. The very word conjures up our deepest primal fears. We build strong towers, secure walls, formidable foundations – but something up near the top of the Richter scale turns them all into dust and fragments. Whether it's Haiti, or China, or

Chile, or Japan, or one day San Francisco again, we have these images of huge tears in major highways and buildings rumbled to their core. And, more than anything, the sense of being buried alive, scarcely able to move, with a massive mountain of concrete lying across your chest, asking yourself, "Who will roll away this stone?"

Put yourself back on Good Friday night, 33 AD. Jesus' body is safely tucked away in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb. And covering the tomb is one enormous stone. Focus on that stone for a moment. It's huge. It's solid. It's very, very heavy. It's utterly immovable. It's inanimate nature at its most unforgiving. It's probably existed about as long as the earth itself. It's not the kind of thing that dies. It's just always been there, from the beginning of time, through mollusc, bacteria, invertebrates, dinosaurs, mammoths, Neanderthals – it's seen them all. You can't negotiate with it. It's covering the tomb. It's the final statement on Jesus' death. And it's not going anywhere.

I want you to imagine that stone and the power of what it represents, through the eyes of the different participants in the Easter story. Think first of the three women who run to the tomb early on this Sunday morning – Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome – asking one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us?" For these three women the stone represents the depths of grief. They'd loved, and they'd lost. They'd dared to hope, and the object of that hope had been captured, cruelly beaten, unjustly tried, mercilessly ridiculed, and ruthlessly executed. The stone was the barrier between them and their past, a past in which they'd believed in Jesus, believed in God, believed in themselves, believed in the power of love, believed in gentleness and generosity and forgiveness and healing and grace and gladness and truthfulness and joy.

Yes – they'd believed in joy. They really had. Just for a moment there they'd found a life that they'd never known, a hope that they'd never imagined, a love that could never die. But it had died. Life, hope, love – they'd all died. They were all there, now, squashed and squelched behind that stone. Getting up early to anoint Jesus' body with spices was a way of preserving this wondrous memory, of keeping alive something they couldn't accept was really dead, of honoring a legacy that they could never, for one second, forget. It was an act of gratitude and beauty and dignity in the face of gruesome, calamitous, and final defeat. And the incontrovertible evidence of that defeat was that massive, immovable stone.

Now for a moment change perspective and think about the Roman and Judean authorities, and how they thought about the stone. For the people running Jerusalem in 33 AD, that huge, heavy, immovable stone represented their power, their authority, their being in control. They knew their rule was based on a lie. The Judean leaders like Caiaphas the High Priest were Roman appointees. They lived with daily humiliation and its crushing compromises. The Romans themselves proclaimed the peace of the Pax Romana – a peace that was, in truth, no more than a slogan masking the dominance of one army over another. But such lies seemed a small price to pay for the social, economic, and political privileges of being the ruling elite. Jesus had been a serious threat to these cosy arrangements. By healing on the Sabbath, forgiving sins, cleansing the Temple, and being called king, he clustered together all the authorities' worst fears. Having Jesus safely dead and silencing the voices seeking religious renewal and social revolution – this was what the stone represented to the Jerusalem authorities. Their power was lodged uneasily in the present, not likely to last long; but this execution meant it was safe for another day. The great immovable stone was

a bold statement that anyone who came in their way would be squashed like a fly.

But what of Jesus, the figure at the center of the story? What did the stone mean to him? On Palm Sunday Jesus is where God and humanity meet in perfect harmony. Jesus on a donkey epitomizes the renewal of God's people and the coming of the Lord. But five days later everything unravels. The people turn their back on their leader. And, on the cross on Good Friday, the Son discovers he's forsaken by his Father too. He dies utterly alone, disowned by humanity and deserted by divinity. That's what the stone represents to Jesus: his separation from humanity and his separation from the Father, the antithesis of everything he is and came to bring about. Jesus is utterly with the Father and the Spirit in the unity of the Trinity, and he came to restore humanity to companionship with God by being utterly with humanity too. The stone is the sign of contradiction, the symbol of everything that separates the Father from the Son and the Son from humanity and all creation. But here's the crucial point. The stone is part of God's good creation. The bondedness of Christ and the Father, together with the Holy Spirit, is the most fundamental truth there is. The coming of Christ among us shows that God's determination to make us companions in the life of the Trinity is as true and permanent as the life of the Trinity itself. Nothing, nothing whatsoever, neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation – and certainly not a large, cumbersome, solid stone – can separate Christ from the Father or us from Christ. So, mighty stone, you may have been here since time began, but I guess it's time for you to roll on by. There's a force greater than gravity at work right now.

For the two Marys and Salome the stone represented the past – the glorious but failed memory of a dream that died. For the Jerusalem authorities, the stone represented the present – the compromised but merciless control they exerted while it lasted. But for Jesus, the stone represented the future. It was the symbol that nothing can separate the Father from him or him from us. Every permanent, immovable, unshakeable obstacle you could possibly think of, between us and God, between death and life, between this life and the life to come – every single one of them is going to find itself going the same way as that stone: rolling, rolling, rolling.

And what about your stone? What does the stone represent for you? Reflect for a moment on what is standing, heavy, unshakeable, immovable, between you and life, between you and love, between you and healing, between you and God. Think again about that image of the earthquake: you lying, scarcely able to move, with a huge slab of concrete lying across your chest, asking yourself, "Who will roll away this stone?" Is that where you are right now? Is that where you've been for a long time? Are you paralyzed, with a great weight across your body, buried under cynicism or sloth or suffering or sadness?

We're all like the three women – we all ache for a glimpse of glory, a taste of joy, a hint of a dream, a vision of hope. But we're all, a little more than we care to admit, like the Jerusalem authorities, full of the compromises that promise to secure control, full of the broken promises made fragile by our anxiety and reluctance to live with uncertainty, full of lies and secrets and half-truths and shabby pretences. The stone seems unshiftable, but we know it's there partly because we haven't got the courage or the faith or the imagination to see that it could really be any different.

Don't forget that when Jesus' friend Lazarus has been four days in the tomb, and Jesus tells Mary and Martha to take away the stone, Martha's having none of it.

Jesus' answer is uncomplicated. "Do you want to see the glory of God or don't you?" He's asking us the same question today. Easter's going to unravel your habitual grief, Easter's going to dismantle your grubby compromises, Easter's going to unsettle your lingering sadness about the past and your half-baked ways of negotiating the present. Because Easter's asking you the same simple question: "Do you want to see the glory of God or don't you?"

Just for a moment, imagine. Just for a moment, hear the whisper of wonder. Just for a moment, lift your hearts and open your eyes. It's Easter morning. What might it be like if that stone rolled away?

Easter's about something more powerful than an earthquake. An earthquake is when deep in the bowels of earth something shifts, and the effects are felt on the earth's surface. Easter's about a heavenquake. A heavenquake is when deep in the heart of heaven something shifts, and earth is never the same again. Here comes the heavenquake. Keep your eyes on that massive stone. It's starting to move. It's rolling. Watch it roll.

Watch that heavenquake roll away the stone of your past. Yes, there's sadness back there; yes, there's shattered dreams and broken hearts; yes, there's missed opportunities and failed hopes; yes, there's bitterness and resentment, old wounds and promises broken; yes, there's hurts you can't forget and blessings you can't remember. But the stone's rolling from the tomb of your past. It's rolling. Watch it roll, and ask yourself, "Do I want to see the glory of God or don't I?"

Watch that heavenquake roll away the stone of your present. Yes, there's compromises there; yes, there are ways you've sold out that would have horrified your youthful idealistic self; yes, there are ways you've domesticated Jesus and kept the church at arm's length and turned dreams into busyness and programmed your life so much there wasn't space to imagine; yes, you read the beatitudes and don't recognize yourself in any of them; yes, you count the fruits of the Spirit and realize you haven't felt joy or peace or gentleness or kindness for years; yes, your heart is dominated by fears about money and the fragility of love and the anxiety of your own mortality and the sense of your own worthlessness. But the stone's rolling from the tomb of your present. It's rolling. Watch it roll, and ask yourself, "Do I want to see the glory of God or don't I?"

Watch that heavenquake roll away the stone of your future. Yes, I know, you've had this massive slab of concrete across your chest, weighing you down as long as you can remember. It's hard to imagine the future without it. But the stone's rolling. It's rolling away your past. It's rolling away your present. Now it's coming for your future. Yes, you've always felt others were closer to God than you; yes, you've always feared that the hope of God was a fantasy; yes, you've always found prayer difficult; yes, you think the church is full of hypocrites even worse than yourself; yes, you feel paralyzed in the face of your own death and the expectations of your culture and family and the limitations of your own energies and resources; yes, you're terrified to entrust your body and soul to the everlasting arms of the crucified savior. But the train's left the station, the ship's sailed, the stone has rolled. Watch it roll, and ask yourself, "Do I want to see the glory of God or don't I?"

The stone has rolled. Let it roll. Feel the joy of all your grief and folly and fragility and failure rolling with it. Let it roll. Feel your heart burst with the wonder of resurrection. Let it roll, let it roll, let it roll. This is a heavenquake. Jesus is risen. The

stone of death and grief, the stone of sin and control, the stone of fear and paralysis couldn't hold steady. They've rolled. And your past and your present have rolled with them. But your future's still open. The stone has rolled away, and the future is exposed to the fresh air of early morning and new life. Do you want to see the glory of God or don't you?

It's Easter. It's a heavenquake. It's the day of the rolling stones.

Let me now address my six challenges and demonstrate how, in this sermon, I seek to turn them into opportunities.

1. *Cutting through to the heart of the story.* As with any sermon, if you begin with the text, you rather assume the congregation has been immersed in this story in the past few days as much as you have – which is invariably a false assumption – and this leaves the sermon short of existential punch and erring on the side of pious platitude. However, if you begin with existential punch, it may take you a long time to get to the text (or the theological heart of the issue, in this case resurrection) – often, too long. I usually write my introductions after I've worked out what I want my conclusion to be. In this case the conclusion is a convergence of three phrases – one conventional challenge (“Do you want to see the glory of God, or don't you?”), one disarming reversal (“heavenquake”), and one rhetorical flourish (the cumulative repetition of “rolling stone” so that it gathers pace and energy each time and echoes Martin Luther King's “ever-rolling stream”). I judge the place to begin is with earthquake, because the reversal earthquake/heavenquake is the chief way I render the Easter transformation, and because earthquakes had been especially prevalent in the news during the six months prior to the date this sermon was preached. The earthquake theme also introduces the stone, which becomes the focal image linking the whole sermon together and relating it, crucially, to the Lazarus story in John 11.

2. *Acknowledging but not being overshadowed by the cross.* The stone provides the solution to this second challenge. I portray the stone as the lingering presence of the cross on Easter Day. It is a huge negative, but it can become a positive. More importantly, it becomes the focus for each key character as the Easter story is told through multiple lenses – the women, the authorities, Jesus. This offers an opportunity to summarize all that the resurrection overturns, but in a way that keeps the issues personal rather than letting them become abstract. The gut-level matters of earthquake and being trapped are balanced by the heart-level griefs of daring to hope, daring to dream, and wondering if love has died. Those who have trudged through Holy Week should find their meditations met in this sermon, but the person who has appeared on Easter Day without pausing on the melancholia of faith should find a hope that's rooted in the realities of sadness.

3. *Costly grace.* This concern is addressed chiefly with the repeated question, “Do you want to see the glory of God or don't you?” (sometimes rendered in the first person). This is a paradox. Easter is precisely the moment when God has done something for us that we could not possibly do for ourselves – so much so, that resurrecting the dead is frequently employed as an argument for the existence of God or an argument that Jesus was and is God. And yet Bonhoeffer's misgivings are all the more poignant to a dedicated congregation who see a whole bunch of occasional visitors arriving on Easter morning, apparently to collect the candy without struggling through the meat, vegetables, and potatoes. The way to offset the resentment and self-righteousness that

can easily ensue is to offer a challenge that meets regular and occasional worshiper alike.

4. *Social and political purchase.* There's a good deal to say about the politics of Easter – not just the politics of Good Friday, but it's debatable whether Easter Sunday is the best day to say it. While contemporary political realities are an essential dimension of preaching, the pastor who can't leave them alone on Easter Day may be communicating to a congregation that politics is indeed everything. Thus in this sermon I rehearse the principal political dimensions of Holy Week and Easter within a single paragraph and make them a dimension of what is represented by the stone. There's a place for careful exegesis of how Easter reconfigures the political horizon, but the principal point of an Easter sermon is to evoke non-triumphalist joy, and some pertinent details consequently need to be set aside.

5. *Transcending conquest.* This, together with cutting to the heart of the story, is where Easter sermon preparation begins. One year I preached about Easter as an outbreak of laughter around the universe – an inclusive, non-defensive, non-aggressive, intriguing and engulfing image designed to be infectious.<sup>3</sup> On this occasion I settled upon the picture of a rolling stone, something overwhelming, unstoppable, mesmerizing, and ultimately thrilling – but not requiring conquest, losers, or victory.

6. *Eschatological significance.* And finally, "So what?" This is what the string of paragraphs beginning "Watch that heavenquake roll..." is designed to address. The rest of the sermon is arranged to give these key paragraphs maximum impact. By arranging matters into past, present, and future I am offering a structure aimed at comprehensiveness. That comprehensiveness is directed at the heart rather than the mind, but there is plenty for the mind in this sermon, so that is a deliberate decision. The language is existential in order to combine present realization and eschatological fulfillment, personal joy, and global/universal renewal.

There's no doubt that an Easter sermon is one of the hardest of the year to prepare. But when you get it right, it's among the most fulfilling moments in ministry. To articulate the grief of a community at a focal death or tragedy is a high privilege and a profound service. But to offer reason for the hope in people's hearts to a congregation that believes falteringly, wants to believe more, and is searching to turn faith into lived experience and witness – now that is the role of the preacher.

### Notes

1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 4; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 44.

2 H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), 193.

3 Samuel Wells, "One Day You Will Laugh," in *Be Not Afraid: Facing Fear with Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011), 175-80.