

Preaching as Demonstration of Resurrection

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Christian preaching is born at Easter in that first astonished, breathless cry, “He is risen!” In a sense, this is as far as faithful preaching goes. As Paul says, without the resurrection, we have nothing to say and our preaching is in vain. The angel’s word was not the comforting “Jesus is raised, now you will all get to see your loved ones in eternity.” Rather, the angel’s command was *Go, tell!*

Preaching is specifically *Christian* that actively participates in cross and resurrection. Paul told the Corinthians to look at their own radical transformation. They were once nobodies, strangers separated by a host of divisions. Now they are family, first wave of God’s great reclamation of the world. God “has chosen things low and contemptible, mere nothings, to overthrow the existing order” (1 Cor.1:28 NEB). In our preaching, God uses frail, lowly human means to accomplish divine work, even as was done in cross and resurrection.

Though Paul bragged that when he preached to the Corinthians, he said nothing but cross, cross, cross, Christian preaching can’t stop with cross-talk. To do so leads to morbidity that merely wallows in suffering and guilt and gives away too much to death. Some sermons gleefully list the abundant evidence of injustice and evil in the world and then predictably urge some form of human action to right the wrongs that ail us. Insufferable moralism characterizes preaching that goes no further than “Look what we did to Jesus and still do to one another. We ought to do better.” Preaching lapses into the exclusively imperative mode. “Should,” “ought,” and “must” fill the air as moralistic preaching transforms good news of what God has done and is doing in resurrection into the bad news of ethical exhortation. Since God has not acted decisively, we must try. Anthropology replaces theology; self-salvation is the theme.

Every time a preacher stands up and dares a sermon, it’s demonstration of resurrection, of God’s determination not to let death have the last word. Contemporary preaching is often tempted toward anthropology rather than theology. Perhaps that’s why Easter preaching is tough; the resurrection is quintessentially about a living God who is determined finally to get what God wants. So while we are attempting cruciform truth, let’s also be Easter honest. If preaching frequently fails, preaching also, by the grace of God, succeeds. Despite all obstacles and hindrances, people do hear. A new world is created on the basis of nothing but the words. Preachers are powerful because God has chosen to use preaching to bring to nothing things that the world regards as something (cross) and to make something out of nothing (resurrection).

Failure in preaching can eventually be justified: I told them the truth and they can’t take it. Success in preaching is scary. Some yokel staggers out of church on a Sunday exclaiming, “That was a great sermon, preacher! Because of that sermon I’m going to sell the pickup, learn Spanish, and move to Honduras to be a missionary.”

And what is your reaction when preaching is heard and resurrection becomes a present event? Will you preachers agree with me when I say that one of the greatest challenges of Christian preaching is working with the Risen Christ. It would be one thing to preach on the subject of Christ, but “we preach Christ” crucified and resurrected

(1 Cor. 1:21-23). We do not preach ideas, precepts, or principles. Rather we preach a living, active, resourceful person, Jesus Christ. Our challenge is well represented by the movements of the risen Christ in John 20. It is “the first day of the week,” first day of the Jewish work week, day when Israel, including the disciples of Jesus, are attempting to return to normal after a particularly bloody weekend. Unfortunately, the yearning to get back to business will be disrupted by the resurrection. He appears among them, kicks open their locked doors, and speaks, commands, and commissions, and then disappears, moving on, eluding their grasp.

The call of Paul the apostle was his experience of finding himself living in a whole new world. Paul changed because of his realization that in Jesus Christ, the world had changed. It was not merely that he discovered a new way of describing the world, but rather that his citizenship had been exchanged. Paul’s key testimonial to this recreation is in his Second Letter to the Corinthians:

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. (2 Cor. 5:17-18)

Certainly old habits die hard. There are still, as Paul acknowledges so eloquently in Romans 8, “the sufferings of the present time.” The resistance and outright rejection that preachers suffer is evidence that the church has not yet fully appreciated the eschatological, end of the age, transformed arrangements that ought to characterize church talk.

That many of us preachers still use essentially secular (i.e. godless) means of persuasion borrowed uncritically from the world is testimony to our failure to believe that God raised Jesus Christ from the dead, thus radically changing everything. In so doing we act as if Jesus were still sealed securely in the tomb, as if he did not come back to us, did not speak, and cannot, will not speak to us today.

Resurrection is not only the content of gospel preaching, but also its miraculous means. Where two or three of us are gathered in his name, daring to talk about him, he is there, talking to us (Matt. 18:20). Our words are unable to tell the truth about God without God’s agency. All the way to the end of the age, in every part of the world, in our baptism and proclamation, he speaks for himself (Matt. 28:20).

Christian preaching never rests on my human experience, even the experience of the oppressed, as some forms of Liberation Theology attempt to suggest, because human experience tends to be limited by the world’s deadly, deathly means of interpretation. The world tells Christians to “get real,” to “face facts,” but we have, after the cross and resurrection, a particular opinion of what is real. I don’t preach Jesus’ story in the light of my experience as a helpful symbol or myth which is illumined by my own story of struggle and triumph. Rather, I am invited by Easter to interpret my story in the light of God’s triumph in the resurrection. I really don’t know the significance of my little life until I view my life through the lens of cross and resurrection. On a weekly basis we lay the gospel story over our stories and reread our lives in the light of what is real now that crucified Jesus has been raised from the dead.

So last week, in conversation with a troubled soul in my congregation, when asked,

“Preacher, do you really think that I can get a grip on my addiction to heroine?” I almost responded, “No. Almost no one ever gets that monkey off his back. I really don’t think you’ll get better.” But then I remembered that we are in Eastertide when the church insists that we tell the story of the resurrection of Christ as our story, as a truthful account of what God is really up to in the world. So I responded, “You know, if this were about you or even the two of us working together, the answer is ‘No, you can’t get better.’ Fortunately, after Easter, this is about God, about God’s determination to get what God wants.”

Only because we worship a resurrected Lord can we risk preaching. As Rowan Williams says,

The Christian proclamation of the resurrection of the crucified just man, his return to his unfaithful friends and his empowering of them to forgive in his name offers a paradigm of the “saving” process; yet not only a paradigm. It is a story which is itself an indispensable agent in the completion of this process, because it witnesses to the one personal agent in whose presence we may have full courage to “own” ourselves as sinners and full hope for a humanity whose identity is grounded in a recognition and affirmation by nothing less than God. It is a story which makes possible the comprehensive act of *trust*....¹

It makes a world of difference whether or not a preacher has been encountered by the living, speaking, resurrected Christ. Thus, making doxology to God (Rom. 11:33-36), Paul urges us to present ourselves as “a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God” by not being “conformed to this world” but by being “transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Rom. 12:2). All of this is resurrection talk, the sort of tensive speech of those who find their lives still in an old, dying world yet also are conscious of a new world being born. Our lives are eschatologically stretched between the sneak preview of the new world being shown to us in the church and the old world where the principalities and powers are reluctant to give way. We throw out our frail voices into a dying world, and they come back to us in the lives of those in the congregation who have seen and heard the risen Christ and who now embody that new life in their lives.

As pastors, we see a world in the grip of the Final Enemy, but we also, by the grace of God, get to see the Enemy losing his grip upon some of the territory he thought was his. We see the cross being raised again in a thousand places, but we also see Jesus. In the meantime, which is the only time the church has ever known, we live as those who know something about the fate of the world that the world does not yet know, something so grand and wonderful that we cannot keep silent. We must go and tell. We must preach.

Because of Easter, we preachers are not permitted despair. There is certainly enough failure and disappointment in the preaching life to understand why depression, disillusionment, and despair could be considered three curses of the preaching ministry. Despair is most understandable among some of our most conscientious and dedicated preachers. Any pastor who is not tempted by despair has probably given in to the world too soon, is expecting too little of the preached word. Weekly confrontation with the gap between what God dares to say and what we are able to

hear leads many of our best and brightest to despondency.

Yet, as Paul says, we do not grieve as those who have no hope. If our hope were in ourselves or our techniques for the skillful and effective proclamation of the gospel, we might well despair. Our hope is in Christ, who for reasons known only to himself has determined our spoken words to be a major means of his powerful presence in the world. Many Sundays, standing at the door of the church, bidding farewell to the worshippers, I see no evidence for Christ's faith in us preachers. The congregation appears to have heard nothing. Yet by the grace of God, I do believe that we preachers work not alone. In Jesus Christ, God is reconciling the world to God. And Easter tells us that God's purposes shall not be defeated, not by the Enemy nor death nor principalities and powers nor even by the church itself.

There is that sort of homiletical despair that leads some of our brothers and sisters to quit, to stop talking, and to go into less demanding vocations. Yet there is also that despair which I find more widespread, that leads some of us to slither into permanent cynicism about the efficacy of preaching. "Preaching doesn't change people" becomes their mantra.

Some of this sense of the vanity of preaching is due to lack of faith that God can do any new thing with us. It is sad to see such accommodation to sin and death. How do we know that Easter is not true? Who told us that Jesus used bad judgment when he made us his witnesses to the resurrection even to the ends of the earth?

In order for the powers-that-be to have their way with us, to convince us that the rumor of resurrection is a lie, they must first convince us that death is "reality" and that wisdom comes in uncomplaining adjustment to that reality: "this is it, this is all there is. Preaching is woefully archaic, one sided, authoritarian indoctrination that is bound to fail. Silence!"

If one considers the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, the birth of the church from the once despondent and defeated disciples, the perseverance of the saints even unto today, last Sunday's sermon that changed a life, it is difficult to see why anyone would disbelieve resurrection except for two reasons:

1. The resurrection is an odd occurrence outside the range of our usual experience, so that makes it difficult for our conceptual abilities. We tend to reject that which we lack the conceptual apparatus for understanding. Because we cannot conceive of resurrection, we deny its possibility.

2. Perhaps more importantly, if Jesus is raised from the dead, if the resurrection is true, a fact, then we must change. Resurrection carries with it a claim, a demand that we live in the light of this stunning new reality or else appear oddly out of step. (This must be Paul's point in 2 Corinthians 17.) Easter means we must either change, join in God's revolution, or else remain under the illusions of the old world and its rulers, sin and death.

We are not permitted the excuse for lethargy, "people don't change." Certainly, everything we know about people suggests that they usually don't change. But sometimes they do. And that keeps us preachers nervous. Change is rare, virtually impossible, were it not that Jesus has been raised from the dead. When a pastor keeps working with some suffering parishioner even when there is no discernable change in that person's life, when a pastor keeps preaching the truth even without visible congregational response, that pastor is faithful witness to the resurrection (Luke 1:2). That preacher is continuing to be obedient to the charge of the angel at the tomb to

go and tell something that has changed the fate of the world (Matt. 28:7), which the world cannot know if no one dares to tell.

Easter keeps differentiating the church from a respectable, gradually progressive, moral improvement society. Here, there are sudden lurches to the left and to the right, falling backwards and lunging forward, people breaking loose and out of control. Easter keeps reminding us pastors that the church is the result of something that God in Jesus Christ has done. When the world wants change, the world raises an army and marches forth with banners unfurled. When the God of cross and resurrection wants to change the world, this God always does so nonviolently, through some voice crying in the wilderness, through preaching.

Easter is great grace to those well-disciplined, hard-working, conscientious preachers who are so often in danger of thinking that the Kingdom of God depends mostly on their well-constructed and energetically delivered sermons. Easter is also a warning to cautious and too prudent preachers that they ought to expect to live on the edge. A resurrected Christ is pure movement, elusive, evasive. Christ goes ahead of us and will not be held by us. A true and living God seems to enjoy shocking and surprising those who think that they are tight with God. We therefore ought to press the boundaries of what is possible and what is impossible to say in the pulpit, ought to keep working the edges as if miracles were not miraculous at all but simply typical of a God who loves to raise the dead. We ought to preach in such a reckless, utterly-dependent-upon-God sort of way that, if God has not vindicated by the peculiar way of Jesus by raising him from the dead, then our ministry is in vain. But, as Paul says, thank God, our faith in resurrection is not in vain because, by the grace of a living God, our preaching is not in vain.

Note

1 Rowan Williams, *Resurrection* (London, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1982), 49.