

Easter Preaching: A Matter of Hope

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For pastors, the pressure of preaching is a constant one. Sunday comes quickly—“instant in season and out”—and is no respecter of our emergencies, schedules, struggles, obstacles, or obligations. Week in and out, the anxiety of hearing clearly and expressing faithfully the *Good News* to those sated on other news and noise while striving for relevance and rightness—this is a blessed burden. But we wonder if it needs to be so?

This pressure is amplified as we approach Easter. The pressure to preach our best sermon—you know the one that connects with those we see regularly as well as those we are less likely to see in the days, weeks, and months to come—heightens the precarious pitfall and subtle temptation to perform, to be relevant, to be engaging, to be funny, to be provocative, to be memorable, to be prophetic ... to be *this* or *that* ... to be *all* things to all people ...

We wondered, is there a faithful alternative? As we approach Easter,

- *How might we retreat again to contemplation and meditation that allows us to experience for ourselves the resurrection that we aim so intensely to express to others?*
- *How might we resist the inclination for apology or explanation and abandon ourselves to the full-bodied, full-throated declaration that is rooted in our own encounter with the Resurrected Savior?*
- *Can preachers experience an overwhelming flood of grace, filled to an overflow erupting in doxology that also invites others to join us in awe at the inexplicable hope of Resurrection?*

Is not this *the* power that contends with all that's dead and dying while reminding us that death has been swallowed up in victory, that the grave has been conquered, that sin has lost its power, and that love and life prevail, no matter what? In this spirit, we asked several of our clergy colleagues to respond to these questions:

The Resurrection is the ultimate good news in a world fraught with suffering and ravaged by violence. How do you/will you approach the preaching task this year? What is front of mind for you as think about preaching at Easter?

1. Among the best guidance several colleagues offered was to not try to make Easter sermons *explanations* about Easter. One preacher noted: “None of the disciples knew what to do after Easter,” so why should our sermons be so definitive? To be able to reflect on the four gospels’ accounts of Easter Day should reflect the authenticity of confusion, fear (how many times does the angel in these accounts have to implore “do

not be afraid”), and disruption. Often folks come to Easter in their best attire with a brunch reservation right after worship. An honest reading of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and their four very different emphases about Easter morning, unify in one impression: something changed, disrupted, and unsettled. At least for the women at the tomb and the others that day, Easter is bad news (or at least unsettling news) before it becomes good news.

2. This lack of immediate certainty in the gospels about the meaning of Easter, however, should not be mistaken for a lack of clarity about God’s message at Easter. *Hope* was the single word mentioned more than any other in the 40-50 responses we received from preachers. “There is no better news; there is no greater gift; there is no greater source of hope; there is no message more relevant,” one pastor shared. “Don’t give up hope in (God’s future); nothing has greater saving power than the resurrection of Jesus and God’s victory over despair.” Another colleague noted about their Easter preaching: “I encourage hope among the people. Generally, we suffer from lack (of opportunity, of resources). Even with all our real time challenges, there is still hope. Withstanding betrayal and even being abandoned by his followers, Christ endured. Sometimes we just have to endure and hope!” This message of Easter hope was raised by most preachers with a keen eye toward the struggles, pain, violence, and hardship of the world. The hope they seek to share is anchored in those challenges, not oblivious to them. One preacher responded to our prompt directly: “My answer is that the best way to successfully survive suffering and violence is with hope. Hope can provide the drive needed to survive the darkest of times. Hope is the latent energy that drives individuals when the will to drive ourselves has been long lost. Therefore, the Resurrection in the big scheme of things is a message of hope. In reflection of this question my goal is to illustrate to some and to remind others of the hope that is promised by the resurrection of Jesus.” Preaching hope in the wake of a national election in America a few days before the election, one pastor said: “It’s so hard to know without knowing the outcome of the election, but whichever way it goes, I know that we are a people for whom the sight of death has rendered us unable to envision a future with hope. We need a new vision, and as Christians, it begins with the resurrected Jesus early on Sunday morning.”
3. Many preachers made a simple, but essential, point in talking about their Easter preaching. This hope, this life, this resurrection is not manufactured by humans. For all the planning churches put into Easter Day, the power of the resurrection *is the power of God at work* in the world. One

preacher stated it plainly: “Jesus did not raise himself from the dead. God did.” Another commented: “As I approach preaching at Easter, I feel compelled to remind people that we are not the primary author of our story. I will do all I can to put God back into the center of our narratives—our individual stories and our collective ones. I am convinced the absence of a God-dominated imagination is the fuel of all despair.”

4. And with God at the center of the Easter story, several preachers noted that, looking at the state of the world today, ***God’s Easter message ... has much to confront and much to answer for.*** “I’m struck with various things I’ve heard my parishioners say lately about how if they weren’t people of faith, they would find this world hard to live in,” one pastor responded. “I think there’s so much hope our faith offers that is hard to find if you don’t believe in the power of the resurrection - i.e. if you don’t have a greater narrative of life beyond death, what Martin Luther King Jr. talks about as God making a way out of no way. There are no dead ends with God, despite what it feels like to us, and with environmental catastrophe and looming authoritarianism in this country, that’s something I personally desperately need to hold onto.” In this spirit, another commented: “I think you would have to acknowledge the suffering part of the cross. In this world where there is so much suffering (outwardly and inwardly), I think I would approach it by recognizing the pain and violence present in the world, not shying away from its harshness. This can honestly create and form a connection with those who are currently struggling, making the message more relatable. We see in scripture where suffering is evident. Making the connection and acknowledging that human suffering has always been a part of life helps the message of the Resurrection become more life-changing, as it provides a hope to the people of God, as well as others.”

Facing a congregation from the Easter pulpit is full of complexity, as most of our respondents acknowledged. This complexity finds its way into our Easter messages as well, as one observed: “My approach to the resurrection is to help our community appreciate the complexity of Jesus’s sacrifice as we seek to understand our own suffering and celebration. Often, we see life through the lens of celebration or suffering when it is both happening simultaneously for the glory of God. Jesus’s death, although physically painful, was spiritually liberating, just as our death to our former lives becomes liberating when we choose to follow Christ. This spiritual liberation empowers us and reassures us that we are on the right path. Too often, our reflections center on the either/or rather than the both/and. Life is complicated and can often feel unjust, but through our trials and tribulations, we are blessed with messages that can uplift and transform.” Another in this vein:

“In preparation for Easter preaching, I try to pay attention to the community around me, listen to the voices in my setting, watch for those being muted, pray, and try to listen and watch for God’s movement. I wonder if God is calling the congregation to hear more of an invitation to ‘come to the table’ and break bread together or be prepared to hear God coming to us in the darkness that surrounds us. How, or where, or why do we see the Easter hope when there are no lilies in sight?”

Many preachers held this tension of the world of today and the world of Easter promise with integrity. As two colleagues reflected: “I’d like to consider what it means to live the resurrection as a frame of mind and heart, to be able to hold the pain and despair and injustice of the world with honesty and empathy without letting go of the promise that God makes everything new. New life is possible whether or not we can see how. What does it look like to hold space for that to be true?” And: “I used to enjoy approaching Easter Sunday as a time to celebrate ‘our’ story as an ‘in house’ event. I have come to appreciate Easter Sunday as an opportunity to whet people’s appetite for the larger story and to avoid ‘bottom lining’ those who hear—whether they are familiar with the story of Jesus or not. I now approach Easter with a greater sensitivity to the trauma that appears in the text and the trauma that may be resting in the bodies of the hearers. It is good news to us because we are so far removed, but how long did it take for it to be good news to the disciples and the crowds?” And this: “I tell the congregation and others that are believers that they need to give up the milk and it’s time to eat meat, because the Bible makes it clear that there will be rumors of war and wars but be of good cheer because our Savior has already overcome.”

This complexity of reality and transcendent hope is summed up in one colleague’s reflection: “One thing that strikes me in the Easter story and the traditional Easter liturgical texts is that there is a deliberate movement into the darkness and emptiness of the tomb that always precedes the encounter with light and the hope of the resurrection. In a sense, the flow of these resurrection narratives depicts the nature of real hope. Hope is not a flight from the darkness that animates our lives and our world. And Easter is not a momentary occasion where we drape pastels over the dark and broken places in our lives and in our world and pretend that it’s not all that bad. Rather, Easter is an invitation to come into the tomb and face the worst of it, death. To practice an unfiltered honesty about how bad and hopeless some things really are. And paradoxically, it is that kind of honesty and posture wherein we discover those places can become the *doorway into* or *ground zero for* resurrection hope to break in. Easter is good news only insofar as it has something to say when our worst fears are realized. And it does: He is not here; He is risen.”

5. ***God is present in the Easter event, seeking to change lives.*** This is a straightforward proclamation, but several preachers noted that all that accompanies Easter worship and plans can obscure that truth if we are not attentive. “I think my approach can be summed up like this,” a pastor notes, “in all this—whatever our ‘this’ is—God is present so that we can remain present, even when death and/or end is inevitable. For resurrection people, an end is merely the preamble to a new beginning.” And: “I would say, speak the gospel with power and conviction, knowing the message itself is enough to turn the world upside down.” Again, this power to sense the presence of God and the obedience to follow resurrection hope where it leads us to change our lives is not our work alone. This is what God seeks and wills for us in power and presence. In this light, another preacher noted: “The hope of Easter is that God moves ahead of our actions and our perceptions, and though the world continues to groan in long labor pains which perhaps began with the groaning of the Israelites in the wilderness, the power of the Risen Lord is afoot before us, beckoning us to join within and without to the indefatigable work of redemption in Jesus Christ.”
6. ***“You can’t have Easter unless someone is dead.”*** This straightforward declaration leads us to a final cluster of reflections on preaching Easter. There is a particularity and a specificity to Easter proclamation that prevents us preachers from settling for “Easter as beautiful metaphor.” Years ago, in Easter worship in a congregation, the well-meaning preacher said amid the Easter sermon “and to illustrate this, I found a wonderful story this week on the internet.” At which point a companion leaned over and whispered, “I thought we were here today because God has already given us the most beautiful story of all time.” An experienced Easter preacher offered this wisdom: “How do you name and connect and evoke the big, big story of Easter in a way that is accessible to folks who either know the story too well or are in the room against their better judgment? It’s tough. I don’t want to make the story small in order to make it more accessible. On the other hand, staying big and expansive and up in the theological sky will just leave folks feeling unconnected to the good news.”

On anchoring Easter proclamation in the real world of suffering and hope, we are grateful for long-time *JP* contributor Tom Long to offer this: “This Easter I will be preaching about the resurrection, of course, but I will be emphasizing as forcefully as I can the resurrection of the *body*. The promise of a bodily resurrection—Jesus’s and ours—is not a magic trick but an affirmation that all that Jesus was and all the he did—the words he spoke with his mouth, the healings he did with his hands, the places of service to which

his feet took him, the offering of his own body on the cross—have been glorified and gathered up into the victory of God. And the bodily resurrection is a promise that our embodied sacrifices in the name of Christ are not in vain. I will be counseling against all dainty and spiritualized notions of the resurrection of the soul alone. As the Black biblical scholar Esau McCaulley has written, “The depiction of the afterlife in which we live apart from our bodies gives physical suffering the final word. If a Black body can be hanged from a tree and burned, never to be restored again, what kind of victory is the survival of a soul? The mob, then, would be able to take something that even God cannot restore.” My sermon this Easter will have in full view the bodies of those who have suffered and died in places like Gaza, Israel, Palestinian refugee camps, the Congo, a high school in Georgia, hospice units, and many others. As faithfully as I can, I will be shaking my fist in the face of Death and saying, *Where O death is your victory? Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*”

With deep gratitude for all who responded to our query about Easter preaching, we are struck by the faithfulness and focus expressed by nearly all those pastors as they considered their approach to Easter preaching. Inherent in nearly every response was the sense that the task of preaching Easter is the same as it has always been. The Gospel is eternally relevant, just as it is urgent for today. Whether one suffers as a victim or as judgment is of little consequence. What is most important is faithfulness in its declaration of this Good News that finds and meets us where we are but will not leave us there. There is grace for all of us. As the epistle reminds us:

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to God’s great mercy, God has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials. (1 Peter 1:3-6)

We are both challenged and encouraged by the faithfulness and sensitivity of those who are bold to step into the role of proclamation on Easter. It seems, then, that the great challenge of this season is not one of creativity—God’s work has Easter power and presence for this and every time. But our greatest challenge is one of conviction. We hear the bold proclamation that “Christ is Risen!” as we move through the darkness, through the fear, and through the despair. Easter hope calls us forward, holding us up, holding us together until we come through on the other side. Easter hope reminds us that we are held in the light, love, and the new life that the Resurrection guarantees.