

Preaching Easter in the Age of Twitter

Mark Ramsey

Macedonian Ministry, Atlanta, Georgia, and

Derek Starr Redwine

Fairmount Presbyterian Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio

“More than 70 percent of Americans identify as Christian,” a recent *New York Times* article stated, “but you wouldn’t know it from listening to them. An overwhelming majority of people say that they don’t feel comfortable speaking about faith, most of the time.”¹ The author, Jonathan Merritt, commissioned a survey by the Barna Group about patterns (or lack thereof) of spiritual conversation among American adults. Included in the results: “More than one-fifth of respondents admit they have not had a spiritual conversation at all in the past year. Six in 10 say they had a spiritual conversation only on rare occasions—either ‘once or twice’ (29 percent) or ‘several times’ (29 percent) in the past year. Seven percent of Americans say they talk about spiritual matters regularly.”² As Merritt summarizes, “Here’s the real shocker: Practicing Christians who attend church regularly aren’t faring much better. A mere 13 percent had a spiritual conversation around once a week.”³

In this spiritually fraught landscape, does Twitter—and all it represents—help or hurt? Imagine that it is Easter morning in Anytown USA, and disciples of all ages and stages settle in for yet another Easter sermon. Some are sitting expectantly, more than a few are bored, some are annoyed, several are uneasy in an unfamiliar space, several are just tired, but most—even if tentatively on their own terms—are ready to participate in a conversation framed within the walls of sacred space. Of course, in the age of Twitter, another conversation—a bigger conversation—is also happening on Easter morning that is not limited by walls or boundaries; it is a digital conversation, an egalitarian conversation where every voice, every perspective, is given equal weight and attention, and the way into this conversation is via a smartphone, which is likely in everyone’s hand, even on Easter. Make no mistake about it, whether it is a Boomer playing Candy Crush, or a Gen-Xer going over a to-do list, or a Millennial posting on Pinterest, or a young member of Gen-Y jumping from app to app, nearly all on Easter will listen to the sermon with phone nearby, ready to either engage more deeply or escape more quickly the sermon they are about to hear. In one congregation, sitting right up front—not her choice in the crowded sanctuary—a recent college grad who grew up in church sits with her parents and her sister as she begins an invisible, digital conversation in real time with a larger community of worshippers who are connected not by geography, but by mutual connection. To the extent to which spiritual conversations are happening today, some take place in this way that was unimaginable just a few years ago. In time, she is soon joined by several others, not all worshipping in the same room or the same church:

Sue Smith @suedoc23

About to hear my 25th Easter sermon.

Hoping for a fresh take.

#eastersermon

John Wilson @jw2010
You at the church?
@suedoc23 #easter2018

Sue Smith @suedoc23
Of course. With the fam.
It's Easter. WYA?
@jw2010

John Wilson @jw2010
Back right corner. Reading all the Easter memorials.
I can't stand the smell of lilies. You?
#lillyhate #insertsin2018? @suedoc23

Sue Smith @suedoc23
Not favorite smell. Front pew. Got here late.
Kid sister took 4VR!
#easter #makinganentrance #whynotroses

John Wilson @jw2010
You hear this preacher before?
#eastersermon @suedoc23

Sue Smith @suedoc23
"Yeah. She's good. IMO @jw2010
#eastersermon

John Wilson @jw2010
TBH, never understood resurrection @suedoc23
#nowwhat

Sue Smith @suedoc23
SMH. Me either. Not sure if I believe it.
Maybe she'll enlighten me.
#hope #eastersermon @jw2010

Jen Walsh @spiritnoreligion2017
Don't count on it. @suedoc23 @jw2010
#eastersermon

Sue Smith@suedoc23
.@spiritnoreligion2017 You here?

Jen Walsh @spiritnoreligion2017
Nope. Went to sunrise service.
#alreadydone #easterbrunch @suedoc23 @jw2010

Sue Smith @suedoc23
Good move. @spiritnoreligion2017

Jen Walsh @spiritnoreligion2017
She telling story about the butterfly?
#newlife @suedoc23 @jw2010
#eastersermon

John Wilson @jw2010
Not yet. Anyone out there hearing an Easter sermon in 280 characters?
#eastersermon #brevity @spiritnoreligion2017 @suedoc23

Sue Smith @suedoc23
I bet it would be good.
#brevity @jw2010

Hank Williams @notthathank2011
Our preachers are doing a partner sermon. That count?
#twoisbetterthanone #eastersermon

Carol Lead @seminary222
Jesus. Born. Lived. Loved.
Taught. Served. Challenged.
Died. Rose again.
Reign. Story is yours too.
Born to: Live. Love. Teach.
Serve. Challenge. Die. Rise again. Reign.
#eastersermon #brevity #gospel

John Wilson @jw2010
. @suedoc23 Why is everyone laughing?

Sue Smith @suedoc23
Don't know. Missed it. Distracted.
Kid next to me is playing fortnight.
#fortnight @spiritnoreligion2017

Jen Walsh @spiritnoreligion2017
Love fortnight. Whose your favorite character?
@suedoc23 #easter

* * * * *

Mention Twitter, in this case a stand-in for the larger digital world, and you face a house, or a congregation, or generations, divided. Just one sample of “Pros and Cons of Twitter” yields an ever-flowing stream of opinions:

Pros: easy to use...share ideas and access to news...#hashtag power...predict

the future based on what people post and when... self-promotion (conjured as a good thing in this case).

Cons: time waste... 280-character limit... everyone is watching... time-sensitive/ tweets easily overlooked... criticism... too much/boring tweets... fake news worries.

Rather than spending pages debating what digital life does and doesn't do well, here is another question: What are some of the imperatives about how we communicate as preachers in the digital world? What do we know—and what do we know that we don't know—about how to communicate in this context? For this is the context in which our congregants are being marinated most every day.

There are at least four lessons that Twitter can teach us about preaching Easter, and they all intersect in how the Easter message is heard today in a world like ours. Say what you will about Twitter and the digital age, there are learnings here about simplicity, about what it takes to break through the mundane of everyday life, about what a less carefully modulated form of speech does and doesn't offer a reading of Easter, and about the specific need of people in all seasons and walks of life to have a word they know by heart and can repeat in any moment.

The movie *Groundhog Day* is about a self-absorbed man, played by Bill Murray, forced to live the same day over and over. When *Groundhog Day*'s director, Harold Ramis, died a few years ago, actor Stephen Tobolowsky, who appeared in the movie, remembered:

When we were at the end of the first week of shooting, Harold shot a huge scene when Bill Murray realizes time has stopped and he is living in a world with no consequences. Bill Murray spray-paints his room at the inn. He cuts his hair into a mohawk. He chainsaws the place in two, knowing that in the morning, all will be back to normal. It was difficult and expensive to shoot that scene: It took three days. Everything that was destroyed had to be rebuilt. Paint had to be cleaned off of walls. The set had to be restored for different camera shots. Bill's mohawk toupee cost thousands to make. Harold shot the scene, looked at it, and threw it away. He replaced it with simplicity itself. Bill is about to go to sleep. He breaks a pencil and puts the two pieces on his nightstand. Cut to Sonny and Cher on the radio. Bill wakes up. The pencil is whole. When I saw this in a packed theater, the audience gasped. Harold had the courage to tell the story his way.⁴

How many of our Easter sermons are some version of the *Groundhog Day* script? Rhetorical pyrotechnics and paragraph upon paragraph of trying to recreate the importance and magnitude of the moment. With Twitter, there is literally no space for such lavish exposition. That rhetorical constraint can, with different intentions or focus, lead to coarse words and shallow gestures. Or, Twitter can be the simplicity of the broken pencil, saying everything in one OMG.

Our preaching task on Easter should not be—and cannot be—an attempt to recreate Easter in any size, scope, or impact. Our role as preachers is to act as witnesses to what God has done. We tell what we have seen and heard, not just early one morning in the first century, but more importantly, in our lives and the lives of our congregations and our world today. An Easter sermon does not need to aspire to be a rhetorical Passion Play. Digital life—its look, its fonts, its use, its intuition—thrives in simplicity.

This can be a gift to those who have to walk into the pulpit on Easter.

As preachers, we cannot assume that the Easter message will be received as unambiguously good news. Late in his life, the celebrated preacher Edmund Steimle was preparing a sermon for *the day before* Easter. The text from Lamentations reads: “God’s mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning.” As he explored this passage, Steimle quipped, “At my age, this promise of newness every morning is at best a mixed blessing. I have come to the point in life when I really don’t want anything new in the morning. I want my slippers right beneath my bed where I left them the night before; I want my orange juice and bran flakes for breakfast, as normal. In my advanced years, I can do without a lot of newness, especially in the morning.”⁵

Life offers us well worn, packed down paths. Our own may not be the path of greatest depth or nurture, but it is the path we know. Easter overturns all that. Because we like things the way we like them, most of us are on guard against disruption. The very abrupt nature of many tweets—and much digital communication—while often used in harmful ways, can also be used in service of “roughing up what is smooth” so that it can be heard anew. G. K. Chesterton once wrote, “Our spiritual and psychological task is to look at things familiar until they become unfamiliar again.” To speak an unfamiliar word into a familiar terrain is an important approach to Easter preaching, especially in days like ours.

Easter preaching in the digital age is swimming against a strong current: both the trend to sensationalize and trivialize the hardest parts of life and death all at once, and a need for things so simple that complex narratives of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead are hard to proclaim to impatient ears. Truly there are some messages best left to much more than 280 characters. Easter has a context, and that context is Good Friday. As Fred Craddock once memorably and simply reminded us, you can’t have a resurrection if nobody is dead. A challenge of Easter preaching is to hold the dual truths of Christian faith—Good Friday and Easter—in a way that does not sensationalize or trivialize. And we have to do it on a Sunday where people have conscientiously made it to worship, perhaps for the first time in a while, but also have family, kids, trips, bonnets and brunch on their minds as well. The Easter narrative in each of the gospels can clash with carefully displayed lilies and rows of brass players brought in for the occasion.

In Flannery O’Connor’s story *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, her character, “The Misfit,” is a horrible and notorious outlaw who has terrorized and murdered a family after they had an auto accident on a lonely rural road. The Misfit is now holding hostage the grandmother. She is grief stricken and afraid for her own life, and she cries out, “Jesus....Jesus!” The Misfit answers, “Jesus was the only one who ever raised the dead, and he shouldn’t have done it. He’s thrown everything off balance. If he did what he said, then there’s nothing for you to do but throw everything away and follow him. And, if he didn’t—then it’s nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you’ve got left the best way you can by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him.”⁶ Gruesome as it is, The Misfit tells the truth. If Christ is not risen, then Easter faith is a horrible hoax, and nothing makes much sense in our world where things fall apart. The often-asymmetrical communication of tweets—from “odd people at odd hours and odd directions,” as one critic has said—may be an ally in the challenge of Easter preaching today.

Forty years ago, the late writer John Updike wrote a poem “Seven Stanzas for Easter,” which says in part:

Let us not mock God with metaphor,
analogy, sidestepping, transcendence;
making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the
faded credulity of earlier ages:
let us walk through the door.

The stone is rolled back, not papier-mâché,
not a stone in a story,
but the vast rock of materiality that in the slow
grinding of time will eclipse for each of us
the wide light of day.

And if we will have an angel at the tomb,
make it a real angel,
weighty with Max Planck’s quanta, vivid with hair,
opaque in the dawn light, robed in real linen
spun on a definite loom.

Let us not seek to make it less monstrous,
for our own convenience, our own sense of beauty,
lest, awakened in one unthinkable hour, we are
embarrassed by the miracle,
and crushed by remonstrance.⁷

Above all, Easter needs to give each of us—and all of us together—not remonstrance but a word of hope and life and vitality and power that we can know and repeat by heart. We don’t need just to fill Easter sermons with “faded credulity” or inspiring stories of good people trying to make the world a better place. That is not a word to know and repeat by heart in a world with so many forces working against Easter hope. In any time of despair, stress, injustice, and heartbreak, we need a word of hope to carry within us. We need the gospel in its fullness and in its simplicity.

In 1994, in the opening round of soccer’s World Cup, the United States team faced Colombia, who was heavily favored to win the cup that year. But Colombia suffered a shocking first-game loss to Romania. This meant that they had to defeat the United States in the next game. In the first half, in a scoreless tie against the US, Colombia suffered another devastating blow. Colombian defender Andres Escobar, trying to deflect a ball out of bounds, instead accidentally kicked the ball into his own goal. It gave the US a 1-0 lead, and Colombia never recovered. They lost the match and were out of the World Cup. Andres Escobar, the player who scored against his own team, was their star player, their captain, and a person of quiet demeanor and exquisite play. After the game, Escobar was naturally devastated. What was difficult for Escobar, however, soon became tragic. Drug traffickers had bet lots of money on Colombia to win the World Cup, and Escobar’s blunder had robbed them of their money. So, days after returning to Colombia, Escobar was shot and killed by a drug

cartel. His death rocked the country. Thousands lined the street for his funeral, with Escobar's grieving family in the front row.

How does one go on, in the face of such a senseless killing? Shortly after Colombia lost, but before he was shot, Escobar had written a letter to his country, published in a national newspaper. Andres Escobar was known as a person who believed that soccer fields could be places of forgiveness in a land that was soaked with blood and violence. In his letter, trying to put the game into perspective, Andres Escobar had written, "Let us please maintain respect. My warmest regards to everyone. It's been a most amazing and rare experience. We'll see each other again soon, because life doesn't end here."

After his murder, Escobar's fiancé was consumed with anger. She wanted justice, she wanted revenge, but she said that Andres's words—"life doesn't end here"—attached themselves to her heart. Life doesn't end here. "Eventually," she said, "life leads to Andres's words. No matter how difficult, we must stand back up. Life doesn't end here."⁸

However we preach Easter in the age of Twitter, in whatever setting we find ourselves, we need to cut through the mundanity and triviality by which we too often find ourselves surrounded and offer the Easter proclamation full-throated, unambiguous, without qualification or hesitation. Every one of us—in pulpit and pew—needs an Easter word we can know by heart and repeat in the hardest times.

But memorization is not in vogue these days. A favorite of ours, Seth Godin expresses it this way:

How not to teach someone to be a baseball fan: Starting with the Negro leagues and the early barnstorming teams, assign students to memorize facts and figures about each player. Have a test. Rank the class on who did well on the first two tests and allow these students to memorize even more statistics about baseball players. Sometime in the future, do a field trip and go to a baseball game. Make sure no one has a good time. ... Obviously, there are plenty of kids (and adults) who know far more about baseball than anyone could imagine knowing. And none of them learned it this way.⁹

Yes, memorization in the Google universe is questionable. Why put our time toward that? But, in the Age of Twitter, people are memorizing something—*LOL*, *OMG*, *IMHO*, *WYA*, *SMH*, *#almost anything*. The reasons to be skeptical of rote memorization are legion. Until the bleakness of a life needs an imposing word of hope. Until the feeling of Good Friday surrounds us to the point of choking. Then—again—we need an Easter word that we can know and repeat by heart. It is a word that disrupts our attempts at keeping life carefully composed. It is a word that will not be tamed by the expected or the mundane. No other word will do—this word of simplicity and power, this word of hope and holy presence: Christ is Risen. Shout Hosanna!

Notes

1 Jonathan Merritt, "It's Getting Harder to Talk About God," *The New York Times*, October 13, 2018.

2 Barna Group, *Spiritual Conversations in the Digital Age*, 2018.

3 Jonathan Merritt, *op cit*.

4 "Stephen Tobolowsky remembers Groundhog Day Director Harold Ramis," www.slate.com, February

28, 2014.

5 “Growing Old and Wise on Easter” by Thomas G. Long, *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2001.

6 Flannery O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971, pp. 67-68.

7 <https://genius.com/John-updike-seven-stanzas-at-easter-annotated>, accessed October 28, 2018.

8 <https://www.theguardian.com/football/blog/2014/mar/25/world-cup-moments-andres-escobar-death>, accessed May 4, 2018.

9 <https://medium.com/@thisissethsblog/stop-stealing-dreams-4116c7dbff7b>, accessed November 29, 2018.