

Words from Faithful & Fractured, Bookended with an Essay on Preaching Easter

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Dear Preacher,

You are preparing to preach Easter once again. This is the reason you got into ministry: you were convinced that God raises the dead, and you wanted to be part of the raising. You knew it would be hard, that people could be mean, that the money would be minimal, but you also knew Jesus asks us to bear a difficult cross. You were up for it. You still are.

So why is preparing to preach Easter such a slog sometimes? It might be that you have preached it so many times you're out of stuff. Easter is a whole season of nearly two months' worth of weeks, and it's hard to be up for that every year. I remember an older mentor complaining about hitting the woman at the well text in the lectionary for the 8th time in her career. She was out of stories about Samaritans and Jews and salvation and living water. How much more so when Easter seasons get to stacking up over the decades?

What's worse is you may feel guilty about all of this. Easter is the heart of Christian faith. So why does it invite an annual eye roll? The church folks can't know this. Maybe even spouses and close clergy colleagues can't know it. To confess "Easter bores me" would be like denying climate science or walking out on a marriage: you only do it if you're serious, and ready for serious rejection.

If I have described you well, dear reader and gentle preacher, then my colleague Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell and I wrote *Faithful & Fractured* just for you. It is a book for clergy and for anyone who cares about clergy. It presents the best research we have to date on the status of clergy health. Rae Jean and other scientific-types did the research. I write around their work, patching in with anecdotes and personal experiences. Normally the latter is all we have on clergy health ("Wow, my colleagues look even worse than I do!"). But the plural of anecdote is not data. Now we have data. Rae Jean and friends studied the health of Methodist ministers in North Carolina over several years and compared it to North Carolinians generally (not a healthy bunch, that).

The bad news first: we are in *worse* health than the average North Carolinian. And that, fair friends, is hard to do. My state is known for a lot of things: slavery, tobacco, illicit pot, barbeque, diabetes. We watch a lot of basketball, but it's not clear we keep on playing it. Anyway we're not a particularly healthy state. And Methodist ministers are worse off health-wise than their neighbors. We eat worse, exercise less, have higher blood pressure, higher stress, rounder bellies, the works. The anecdotes tell a truth. We're bad off.

And we live longer than the average North Carolinian. Put that in your pipe and smoke it (metaphorically, please).

Rae Jean and scientist friends don't trust this finding. They say it will level off. There is no way for people to be unhealthier and live longer at the same time. Ministers used to be healthier than populations generally, as far as we can tell with limited data.

We were well educated, had good access to health care, and died less often in accidents and had less venereal disease. Being boring has its benefits. But that was before the onset of cheap, easy-to-acquire calories and more sedentary lifestyles generally, air conditioning, and driving as the only form of transport. Where I'm from, in the US South, folks used to know how to work a long day in a field or garden. They had calloused hands, bad backs and knees, but when they sat down to eat, they'd earned the calories in that fried chicken. Now we still eat that way without the work. This is not a good combination. Plus, as a pastor, every gathering has food. And if you skip somebody's contribution to the potluck, we fear they'll notice and feel hurt. Plus we don't allow ourselves many outlets. We don't drink or chew or go with girls who do, the old saying goes, so we eat. Too much.

And yet we live longer. I like to say that's because the church is so healthy for you; spending as much time in it as we clergy do offsets the terrible health effects of our industry. Because joining a church is really, really good for you. If you can convince a 21-year-old to join a church, that person will live, on average, seven years longer. Find me something else she or he can do to produce that sort of outcome!

Rae Jean and others are cautious about that sort of number. They can't be sure whether folks who are natural joiners aren't the ones who join churches and so see the "benefit" they would have seen had they joined Kiwanis or a Kung-Fu club. Spending our lives with other people is good for us. It makes us happier, healthier, more fulfilled. Plus, if you go down with a heart attack, you're more likely to be with other people or be noticed as missing and found on the floor, not-dead-yet. Researchers are good at explaining away anomalies so as to avoid magical thinking. That's their job.

As a preacher of Easter, my job is magical thinking. We think a dead rabbi got out of a grave on the way to leading all creation out of a grave. So it doesn't surprise me at all that church is good for you, seven years good for you even. (It pleases me that this is like 1/10th of a natural life span. Tithe and you'll get a tithe of your life back!) In the gospel, health and salvation are indelibly linked. Jesus is a first-century Jewish faith healer and exorcist before he is anything else. His healings are signs of the outbreaking of God's kingdom. The eucharist was spoken of in the ancient church as the "medicine of immortality" from very early days. There is a reason the most emotionally moving parts of our liturgy have to do with prayers for healing: anointing with oil, prayers for the sick, the works. We all love someone who is ill. We are all going to die ourselves. There is no way off this train. To know that Christ is on it with us, and indeed will undo death and raise the dead, is a hope so spectacular we hardly dare believe it most of the time. It is appropriate to struggle to find words to preach on Easter. It is God we're talking about. There are entirely too many cheap words about God afoot in our world. Struggle away: it is a worthwhile fight against shoddiness, shabbiness, glib toothy happy-faced Christianity. We follow a man on a cross, carrying a cross of our own. But that is not the final word. Not ever.

One key image in our book comes from St. Irenaeus in the ancient church. He speaks of the glory of God as a human being "fully alive." He is thinking first of Jesus Christ, the most fully alive one, the source of life itself. But then derivatively he is thinking of those joined to Christ in baptism and becoming like him in holiness. Jesus Christ is "the life that really is life," in one of scripture's most delightful phrases (1 Tim. 6: 19). So why do so many of Christ's servants among the clergy carry themselves as if in a way of death, rather than life? There are complex reasons for

this that we delve into in the book. But one theological reason is that the life “that is really life” is not here yet in full. Death still reigns. Disease still intervenes. We tell stories of miracles and pray for more of them in our midst, but we don’t hold our breaths. And ministers show the “groaning” of this world in our bodies a bit more than our neighbors do (Ro. 8:22). There are versions of Christianity afoot that suggest enough belief will make for favor both financially and physically, as if God were a Pez dispenser and all you have to do is believe hard enough to make God do what you want.

The Bible tells another story. God creates the world glorious and beautiful. Humanity breaks the only rule we have ten minutes into our existence. And God gets busy restoring what we ruin right away. Christians can explain every ray of goodness in our world: God never ceases being good; creation never stops being wonderful, even if marred. And we can explain every ounce of sadness in our world: these are groans on the way to the new creation God promises. Christian faith has to be up front and honest about both the way the world is and the way God will one day make it. So preachers need to engage in what Otis Moss III calls “blue note preaching”: it can sing the blues over the hash we make of the world. Its music allows us to feel deeply the sorrow of the ones singing and playing and being described in the music. And then we can find joy along with the blue notes, positive emotion alongside the negative. As one blues musician said, “I took the energy I usually use to mope, and I wrote a song instead.” The gospel is not that there is no cross; it is that there is a resurrection after that cross.¹

One suggestion to explore in Easter preaching is leaving a bit of the darkness in the story intact. Easter is a brilliant light, but not all darkness is irradiated yet. There is no light in this world without just a touch of darkness in it; just as there is no darkness yet without at least a “thread of grace.”² Some folks only come to church on special occasions like Easter, much to the frustration and chagrin of us professional religious-types (though I begrudge Chreasters less than those who turn up only for fake holy days like Mother’s Day and July 4). If the only thing folks hear from us on Easter is about the light, we’ve missed the story. What darkness remains? What tombs are still filled? (hint: most of ours, excepting Jesus’ alone). In the logic of *Faithful & Fractured*, even the healthiest ministers and people die young sometimes; even the coarsest in self-care sometimes push through well past the Bible’s hoped-for “70 years, 80 if we are strong.”

Another angle would be to preach on friendship. Jesus spends the last chunk of the Gospel of John opining on the subject, in the presence of friends who will soon abandon, deny, or betray him.³ One of the few times Jesus mentions a person’s name in the gospel of John is his famous address of Mary in the resurrection story of John 20. His mother gets no name. The writer of the gospel gets no name. Mary does. The friend searching frantically for a dead body hears instead her name spoken again in a voice she had thought forever silenced. There is a darkness in every human friendship. I think daily of friendships I lament having lost. Yet there is light in that friendship exists at all, as a sign of God’s goodness. Friendship restored even after death is an audacious hope of the resurrection gospel. Most audacious of all is the claim that Jesus calls us friends. God will not have slaves or subjects. God will only have partners, “equals” even, companions, friends. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

In *Faithful & Fractured* one of our key recommendations to those who love pastors is to see to the quality of their friendships. Are they spending time with people who have loved them for years? Do you praise them and their work when their friends turn up for worship? Are they properly resourced to find time away with friends for retreat, pilgrimage, study, and prayer? I don't just mean vacation. I mean the sort of friendship about which Jesus speaks in John 13-17 and then demonstrates with his resurrection. Friends are those who call something better out of us than we thought possible, with whom we love a common good, without whom we are diminished. As a pastor I find friendships with fellow clergy across the world the most sustaining good in my life besides my immediate family. The church needs to see those friendships as integral to their pastor's health, to celebrate them, ask about them, see to their flourishing. Your pastors will be as happy as their friendships are healthy, and vice-versa.

A final suggestion for a fresh approach to Easter is this: focus on the food. "Breakfast is ready," according to the raised Jesus, cooking on the beach for the fishing disciples.⁴ Jesus eats again with disciples who had abandoned and betrayed and restores table fellowship that they, and death, had fractured. Ever since, Christians have gathered at table to feast with and on the resurrected Lord. This is as embodied as faith can get. It is also as strange as faith can get. We eat together and, in Augustine's matchless image, the normal process of eating is reversed. Normally we eat, digest, and the food becomes part of our body. In the eucharist, we eat and the *food digests us*, and we become part of the body of Christ. No one can explain that. It is the meat of our faith.

Pastors are in poor health partly because we eat poorly. But we preside over a table that is God's own paradigm for food, and so for life. At this table all have enough. Those at the lower places are brought higher, and those who elbow their way to the seats of honor are escorted lower. No one pays. All is provided. And Christ himself is host, guest, food, feaster.

It is no new observation that Jesus of Nazareth eats his way through the gospels. Try opening any two pages of the gospels where Jesus is not eating—it is hard to do. His miracles often involve food. So do his controversies. His teaching involves food. So does his betrayal. His resurrection involves food. So, Augustine thinks, does his crucifixion. "I thirst," he says from his cross—because he longs to drink up those present and make them all part of his body with us. St. John Vianney is reported to have said that if we really understood the eucharist, we would die with joy. For through a body as fractured as this, we have a wholeness as resplendent as this. It is delicious.

Every minister has a favorite presiding story, if you'll indulge me mine. One year we had a new sunrise Easter service to which almost no one came. I did my standard: berate myself, consider leaving ministry, heap opprobrium on my head, and forget about it and move on. But by then the machinery of the church was already in motion, and the service was planned again the next year. I muttered on my way to church in the dark, "This is a busy day. Why am I here this early? No one else will be here."

To my shock, surprise, and delight, the chapel was full. Where we'd had 2-3 the year before, we had 150 this time. I preached through barely contained glee, kicking myself for having kicked myself, and then pivoted to the table. I lifted the cloth and beheld there a loaf of bread barely the size of a dinner roll. It was the right amount

of bread for last year's crowd, but most certainly not for this year. Ok, I thought, tear off as small pieces as possible and maybe everyone will have a bite. I did. "The body of Christ, broken for you. The body of Christ, broken for you. The body of Christ, broken for you." People I loved came forward, ate, smiled, prayed, and returned to their seats to be digested by Jesus. I looked down when I was done, and I swear there was still bread left over. It wasn't a miracle of a metaphysical variety, I'm sure. But there is something in those stories of Jesus taking, blessing, breaking, and giving away. There is something in the stories he was reared on of there being not enough oil to burn in the temple, and then, miraculously, there being enough. We show this anew with every eucharist in fact: there is always enough of Jesus for all of us, worldwide, through time, until he comes.

Clergy are in poor health, indeed. But there is good news even here. Rae Jean's research suggests we feel depression and stress at higher rates than our peers. But we also experience joy at a greater clip than our peers. Rae Jean thinks the depression figure works this way: clergy are those kids who feel the depths at a more profound level. Some of us find our way into the church, where we find meaning, consolation, and grace, and so we stay, and lead others. The church doesn't make us depressed—rather we're depressive sorts who find healing among Christ's people, and linger to offer it to others. We also report higher levels of joy than those in many other professions. We feel life in a greater spectrum of colors than others. That's a deal worth making.

That is not the best of good news, of course. Jesus' resurrection is that, in all its resplendent, unimaginable beauty, worthy of a thousand more sermons and then a thousand times that. As long as we are given the health to do so.

Notes

1 I take some of the wording here from *Faithful & Fractured* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018), 108.

2 I take the line from Mary Doria Russell, who draws on a story from the rabbis (Ballantine, 2005).

3 I owe this observation to Victor Lee Austin's forthcoming book *Up With Friendship* (Baker Academic).

4 In Eugene Peterson's translation of John 21:12.