

Fears Within and Without: Easter Preaching to the Fearful

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“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” Franklin Delano Roosevelt¹

“Almost everyone is afraid of being afraid.” Barbara Brown Taylor²

In May 2015, my last intimate love relationship ended badly and painfully. The details matter only to me, but the impact on my health was immediate. My autoimmune disease flared to the point of threatening my life, leaving me many days in a fetal position, wracked with pain. The doctor initially misdiagnosed another symptom as cancer. My “hidden” diseases of hypertension and diabetes also became uncontrollable. I was a ball of fear-filled pain and despair. I could not imagine continuing to live. So I started cleaning out my apartment in an effort to make my imagined impending death easier for my children. I gave away collectible art and keepsakes that had given me joy through the years. I made sure my will was in place and all my paperwork in order. I burned or threw away private letters that I had kept for years. I cleaned my closet and drawers down to what I thought would be the bare necessities. For a brief moment, I considered suicide. Suicidal thoughts were not regular or raging demons, but I could see how people, gripped by fear, might decide to take their lives. I ate and slept, exercised and prayed, and waited for death. My waiting was accompanied by dread—not of dying—but of dying alone.

The season of my not dying was also the time I began to understand fear more fully. I became aware of all the things I did to distract myself from my emotions. I watched as others did the same. For me, it was binge watching on premium channels or playing board or card games by myself. My fear grew as I tried to avoid it. And, when I spoke about fear with others, we seemed all to be saying the same thing. We were all afraid of being afraid as much as we were of the pain or despair that was enveloping us. In fact, the fear magnified all struggles. Fear is an amplifier.

I don’t know that our times are more fearful than any other eras. I have been reading history and biographies lately in order to put the twenty-first century in perspective. The elections in 2008 produced fear in one segment of the United States; the elections in 2016 produced fear in another sector. The political and economic worlds, what with the up-and-down of market forces, make us afraid. Sickness and chronic illnesses make us afraid. I remember the fear of Y2K, when predictions of the world being thrown into chaos because of the turn of the clock from 1999 to 2000 produced fear. Fear, it seems, has been the low grade fever that keeps company with us in society, and it seems, in other parts of the world. This reality is no less true in the church.

It is in this context that preachers are asked to preach during Eastertide. How do we preach hope in the face of fear? How do we make the gospel truth of God’s resurrecting power live in its wake? That is the challenge for preachers at Easter. Preachers who take a text and boldly speak a vision of the resurrected One, past the first ending of the book of Mark, must do so as an act of resistance to the fear. Preachers

proclaim a truth about God's willingness to confront the grave and the fear of it with resurrection. This proclamation takes a boldness that may even scare the preacher who must speak regardless, "even if your voice shakes," as Maggie Kuhn, founder of the Gray Panthers, once declared.³

The lectionary offers us several texts on which to reflect on the resurrection, the point of Easter. None of these texts imagines the fear in which they would be heard in our times, as best I can tell. But I can imagine that those first disciples knew fear. Their teacher was dead. Many of them would declare him risen on the word of some other disciple (e.g. the disciples on the road to Emmaus, Luke 24:13-27). Some male disciples would ponder the women disciples' report that sounded like a fairy tale to them (Luke 24:11). Fear, no doubt, stalked them as well. But they spoke it. That is what we see in the Acts text that the lectionary gives us. The disciples were under duress and persecution, but Peter stood in the face of fear to preach that God made this resurrection life available to all.

Acts 10 is a hopeful story, a testimony to speaking while shaking. Peter preaches that God does not show partiality, that the life Jesus promises in resurrection is not limited to one ethnic group or religious understanding. It is boundless and borderless. The sermon begins that way while recounting the story of Jesus' encounter with death. Jesus' struggle with death. Jesus' overcoming of death. Peter says (10:42) that it is Jesus who "commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead." The disciples were commanded to preach as personal witnesses to God's work through and in the life of Jesus, and that it was the continuing witness from the prophets that they, too, were testifying about Jesus.

I should tell you now that as an Old Testament/Hebrew Bible scholar, I often resist this Christian reading of the ancient texts. I have been shaped by the lectionary and the Christian version of the story, so to resist it is to be almost—if not emphatically—heretical. It's also why the Isaiah 65:17-25 pericope does not make sense to me as a lectionary text in this moment. That text is a promissory love song to ancient Israel, coming from under the burden of exile or the scramble of having to remain in the land that had been plundered. Isaiah's words speak to me, but not through a christological lens. And, I suppose that means that I really can't see how what Isaiah says "fits" into this Easter story. But here it is, promising a "new heaven and a new earth," not for Christians, but for our religious forebears. These promises do not forego struggle; they only suggest that struggle and pain, even, will have a purpose toward ancient Israel's (and by extension, our) thriving. If we could hold on to such a vision as Easter people, it might not end our fear, but it might tamp it down enough for us to believe in the resurrection, as we claim.

I feel the same way about the Psalm that is attached to Easter. I grew up in a small, country Baptist Church where portions of Psalm 118 were recited weekly. We only had to learn the "his mercy endureth forever" (always the King James Version in the church of my youth). The NRSV now translates that phrase as "his steadfast love endures forever." Should I tell you that I miss the word "endureth," mainly for nostalgic reasons only. But v. 17 seems especially out of place on Easter: "I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord." Jesus *did* die, and if life follows its natural form, so will you and I. I know these words were sung in ancient times as a sign of confidence in God in the time of illness and war, but they are braggadocios

or blustering words, designed to speak of confidence in God's ability to deliver the psalmist. But they are not befitting of Easter. Yes, I also know that the psalm bears v. 22, "the stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone." This verse has been used in ways that might be described as anti-Semitic. Christians who are supersessionists apply it to Jesus as having been rejected by Jews and accepted by Christians. The Revised Common Lectionary follows this theological read of Christianity as "the New Israel," and has been designed as such.

It is the commitment to supersessionist thinking that has made it hard for me to write. It's not even supposed to be the point of this article; the point is supposed to be "how do you preach Easter to a fearful people?" Or as Michael Coffey noted that after the November 2016 election we had "to fully prepare for what it means to preach resurrection in this time of empire gone awry and extreme disorientation."⁴ Not everyone shares this sentiment. There are plenty of people who believe that Trump is God's man in the White House, and that we are to follow the mandates of Romans 13:1-7 and "obey all authority." There are people who wonder why we have to make any mention of the geo-political climate in which we live, believing as they do that politics has nothing to do with the Bible, with the gospel. So writing about Easter and how to preach to a fearful people reminds me that people are fearful for different reasons in this system.

Much has been made of the divide in the nation, how pronounced it is, how intractable it feels.⁵ But the point for me is that fear presses against all sides of the divides. Fear and despair trumps some of our joy and hope many days. Writing these words in Advent makes them especially poignant for me. I don't imagine that fear and despair will dissipate by Easter. How, then, will the preacher push up and through that fear and despair to point to an inbreaking of life after despair, after death—or maybe life and joy in the midst of death and despair. That I believe is the real task of the preacher: to lead us to experience and know God's resurrection in the midst of the stench of death and in the presence of gut-wrenching fear. Such preaching may seem improbable or fanciful to some, rather than what it is, i.e., a pointing to the "not yet" and soon to come of the final inbreaking of God, in which a New Heaven and New Earth is the promise (Isaiah 65:1, 2 Peter 3:13, and Rev. 21:1). This new reality is where righteousness lives and where we long for a world so radical from the one we know that the old one is passed away completely. Preachers point to such a hope, even as they acknowledge the gripping dread of fear around people.

Let me offer this example. I am not a fan of the television series "The Walking Dead," now in its ninth season on the AMC network. But every now and then I see an episode with friends. It is gruesome, scary, and improbable. The thing about the series that is compelling is that the walking dead keep coming for the living, desiring to make them a part of their ranks, to eat or suck some of the life from them. But those who survive the end-of-world horror fight for the right to live. They fall in love, they take care of their children, and they fight off the walking dead. In this current season, the character Jesus is killed. There is no hint that he will be resurrected. But horror lovers are not bothered. It is the death and the suspense of death that whispers to those viewers.

The Christian preacher has to resist this love for horror, the whisper of death. It is so easy to "descend into hell" with the crucified Jesus and never "ascend into heaven" with him, where, in the words of the Colossians writer, our lives are hidden

in him (Col. 3:3). Fear will keep us in hell, if we have no way to break through the fog. The goal of Easter preaching, as Coffey reminds us, is “engendering a profound trust in God’s capacity to bring new life out of death, especially new life out of the death we must face now under empires of death, as we renounce them, resist them, and rejoice in the Gospel despite them, accompanied by our resurrected brother and Lord Jesus, the crucified one.” Jesus on “The Walking Dead” TV series may never come back. But we are commanded to believe against belief in a Jesus who is ever present with us, and is coming again. Pushing to a belief of such a Christ will of a necessity push against this fear. And yet, I confess, that if we are waiting for fear to dissipate, we might not live as resurrection people.

Once, while walking on the Green Belt in Austin, Texas, my son who was very young at the time started quoting Psalm 23, the section about walking through the valley of the shadow of death. He added the word *quickly*. He had been running ahead of us, but night was descending, and he suddenly was afraid. “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death *quickly*, I will fear no evil,” he said. He recited it mantra-like. He had hit upon something that has stuck with me more than 20 years later. Fear descends when we cannot see where we are going or know what the dark shadows harbor. This darkness is not evil; it is merely the coming and going of the 24-hour day. Night is as necessary as day. But we have been taught to fear it, to fear the unknown in all its forms. Easter preaching must recalibrate our expectations, even of the grave and the darkness. It must help us embrace the mystery and the fear that comes with it.

Death is inevitable. Death is a part of life. Death may have lost its sting and the grave may have lost its victory, but true Easter preaching has to own up to the reality of death. It’s the only thing that will save us. On December 16, 2017, I wrote the following on Facebook: “It is easy to be descriptive of the fear, the anger, the hopelessness people feel in this dystopian moment. But description is not prophetic. Describing is merely diagnostic. The goal in every sermon is to peep the presence, the power, the possibilities of the Divine in human history. Or, at least it should be.”

Our words should be, I maintained, “graced with a compelling vision of what can be for the flourishing of all creation. I pray this in the name of the One who created and longs for us.” This statement, to me, is the heart of preaching the Easter message as fears swirl. We cannot just describe what is going on in the world, thereby heightening the anxiety and fear people feel. I’m convinced that we don’t have to describe individual “sin” any more than we need to describe “systemic evil.” We see it; we experience it.

Preparing for Easter 2015, Guy Sayles wrote, “As Holy Week of 2015 approached, I heard the whispers of an insistent invitation: ‘Face as fully as you can the fact of your death and embrace joyfully the gift of your life.’ I knew that these two tasks were intricately intertwined, because we only begin to live, truly live, when we come to terms with the stark reality that our lives will end.”⁶ Battling cancer and facing his mortality in real ways, this truth of life-and-death in tandem actually provided the fodder for faith, his doubting faith. It was Brown Taylor who reminded me of the wonders of the darkness and how much I cherished it—even the fear it engendered—when I was a small girl in the countryside of Central Alabama. I have memories of climbing the antenna alongside the wall of my grandparents’ cinder-block house at night in order to see the stars in all their glory. It required the starkness against dark to see

their beauty. So, I learned to cherish the dark as much as the twinkling stars. That, I think, is what it means to preach in the midst of fear during Easter. We are called to embrace our fears so that they do not consume us. It is that embrace, I believe, that will help us hear and respond to the call to “fear not!”

Easter lets us live with contradictions, if we embrace them. While we celebrate the power of resurrection, we often also find ourselves by the bed of the dying. My mother died just a little over a month after Easter, in May 2002. Her impending death frightened me and steadied me at the same time. When my mother told us to do nothing extraordinary to try to save her life, she often followed this command with, “I actually believe in the resurrection.” She was staring at death and proclaiming life. Once, in the dwindling days of her life, I visited her, and while I pushed her in the wheelchair for a walk, she told me she was tired and ready to go home. I instinctively knew that she did not mean back to the apartment she had shared with my father in an elder care unit in Atlanta. Nor was she longing to return to the house they had shared in Alabama when she was vibrant, healthy, and a school teacher. She longed for “a city called heaven,” a New Heaven and a New Earth. I did not expect such a statement from my mother, but it came with a welcomed relief. Serving as a hospice chaplain in Texas at the time, I knew in that moment that she had made peace with death and therefore embraced her life. It is the sweet enigma of Easter. It makes little sense and all the sense in the world. Know death intimately; let it’s fear grip you. Then, in the end, surrender to life. That is the gospel truth preachers must proclaim in every season of fear.

Notes

1 Franklin Delano Roosevelt, “Only Thing We Have to Fear Is Fear Itself”: FDR’s First Inaugural Address,” <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5057/>.

2 Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in The Dark* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2015), 4.

3 Maggie Kuhn & Women’s History Month, Presbyterian Historical Society: The National Archives of the PC(USA), <https://www.history.pcusa.org/blog/maggie-kuhn-womens-history-month>.

4 Michael Coffey, “Renounce, Resist, Rejoice: Easter Preaching in the Age of Trump,” *Journal for Preachers*, 41 no 3 (Easter 2018), 3-9.

5 Consider that famed journalist Bob Woodward has written an ode of sorts to our fear in his book, *Fear: Trump in the White House* (Simon and Schuster, 2018).

6 Guy Sayles, “Never Sure to Preach Again: Cancer and Easter Hope,” *Journal for Preachers*, 39 no 3 (Easter 2016): 22-16, 13.