

Easter Preaching in Secular America

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A long time ago I was sitting in a coffee shop in Princeton talking to a visiting scholar who was in town for the year on sabbatical. The professor was joining our congregation for worship each Sunday, so I was looking to offer a pastoral welcome of sorts. What I didn't expect was a conversation that changed how I thought about preaching resurrection hope. Our casual get acquainted conversation turned challenging and intriguing for me as I listened to the scholar's stingy critique of the church's proclamation on Easter and at most funerals. The gist of the argument was that preaching resurrection should not sound like the content of a greeting card. Examples given ranged from preaching that denies the reality of death to sermons full of kitschy illustrations that promote the concept of immortality of the soul. Something along the lines of "he is not dead; he's just gone to the other side of the lake to fish" is what comes to mind. I think about that conversation while writing most funeral homilies and every time Easter rolls around. Every time that scene in the coffee shop comes back to me in my study, the professor's concluding remark both inspires and haunts me a bit in my sermon writing: "Resurrection hope has to be more than whether you and I get to heaven!"

I know I am not the only pastor preparing for an Easter Sunday sermon this year having preached the last two Easter mornings in an empty sanctuary. Resurrection proclamation via livestream with no worship participants in the sanctuary was certainly not unplugged, but it was unadorned. No standing room only. No brass quartets. No choir. There were flowers that only worship leaders could smell, but there was no array of Easter hats and children in bright colored new clothes. As difficult as it was for preachers (yes, it was very difficult), the opportunity to preach Easter unadorned resulted in the unexpected opportunity to homiletically ponder the promise of resurrection hope and power liberated from the church's piety. Yes, the conviction that the promise of the resurrection of Christ is far beyond our Easter morning finery is not new. It's just that the last few years, preachers have had the chance to lean into it.

Easter preaching that expands the listening congregation's understanding and experience of resurrection hope and power is not simply optional. These days it is required. That old Easter morning sermon from fifteen years ago just doesn't preach anymore. Our world, our nation, our communities have been redefined by the magnitude of suffering and death amid the pandemic. The vitriol, hatred, and bitter division have left a stain from school board meetings to the rhetoric of the public square. The rise of Christian nationalism wedded to white supremacy in the land has elevated the term "culture war" to a frightening level. Families and congregations have been divided, and pastors have been driven out of congregations or have left ministry completely. So yes, on Easter morning the followers of the risen Christ will come craving a timely comforting, expanding, liberating word of resurrection hope. And once again the preacher will rise to speak. The preacher will dare to rise and speak to the broken world because, as Karl Barth often put it, God has spoken. God has spoken in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The world must thrive on Easter preaching in the church that serves up greet-

ing card poetry and relies less on content and more on the festival worship of the morning. It is not because the powers and principalities pay much attention to the church at all. Rather, such tepid resurrection proclamation by definition nurtures the unfaithful view that separates the church from the world, faith from politics, and the life of discipleship from life in secular America. So the demand for the preacher to expand the resurrection imagination comes with a strong sense of urgency. Yes, Easter preaching in the world and the nation these days has to be about more than whether we will all get to heaven.

The place for the preacher to start this Easter is the place where the preacher was taught to start. The opportunity to preach a more robust resurrection hope begins with the biblical text and the narratives that tell of that first Easter morning. Weary pastors know these same biblical texts come around on Easter year after year, whether we want them to or not! Yet, the power and the wonder of proclaiming the Living Word comes when the preacher brings the world to bear on unsuspecting, sometimes time-worn biblical texts. In a season when so much of the sermon listeners' context seems to be imploding in so many ways, the preacher can also seize the opportunity of bringing the oh so familiar biblical text to bear on the world. Faithful Easter preaching doesn't come from finding a fresh illustration or retelling an old story one hopes the congregation has forgotten. Faithful Easter preaching starts with the text—yes, even these gospel texts that really never get old.

According to the Gospel of John, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb “while it was still dark” (John 20:1). The other three gospels are very clear that Easter starts at the break of day. Each refers to the dawn or the sun rising. But in John, when Mary gets to the tomb, it is still dark. Really dark. Darkness in John's gospel has little to do with the time of day. Darkness has everything to do with all that is opposite to the mighty works of God, all the powers and principalities that work to destroy life or at least life in its fullness. Mary came to the tomb when it was still dark. In John's gospel darkness *is* death. Tomb. Dark. That is death squared.

This is not dark as when a theater or concert hall is empty for the evening with nothing scheduled. “The hall is dark.” This is not dark as in attending a Chekhov play and listening to the characters shout at each other about the misery of the human condition. “This play is so dark.” No, the darkness of Easter morning in John is the kind of dark that comes amid the bright lights of a hospital waiting room as you wait for the doctor, trying to tell yourself it is all a bad dream. It is the kind of dark that comes as the person you love most starts to fade before your eyes, dark like that walk from the car to the grave in the cemetery that no one can avoid because of the absolute finality and boundless reach of death.

It was dark, and Mary was alone. Peter and the other disciple had come and gone. Mary was alone again. There is no mention of other women in John. In all that darkness, Mary stood alone outside the tomb weeping. She was not full of fear and great joy. There was no terror and amazement. She was not perplexed. Four times John tells the reader Mary was weeping. Mary's tears were the kind of tears you can hear. She didn't bend over to look into that tomb. She must have been doubled over in grief, anguish, and lament. Humanity's brutal force had killed Jesus and taken him away, too. He was gone. Everything was gone. It was finished. Mary weeps not just for herself, but for everyone, for every single one who has stood alone, surrounded by death and darkness and who has wailed in the face of the utter absence of God.

After the Risen Jesus calls her by name, Mary recognizes Jesus and reaches for him. It had to be more than grabbing a hand. It certainly would not have been a pandemic elbow bump. With tears still in her eyes and running down her cheeks, Mary had to be going in for an embrace. Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’” (John 20:17). He doesn’t tell Mary to go and tell that you have seen the Lord or to go meet him in Galilee. Jesus tells her to tell them he is ascending.

Careful readers of the Gospel of John will note that John doesn’t privilege the resurrection. The glorification of Jesus in John comes through his suffering, his death, his resurrection, and his ascension. They all go together. The sequence is the total package, which means when Mary reaches for the Risen Jesus and goes for the embrace, Jesus’ work is not done yet. His salvific work is not complete.

The victory over death and the world’s darkness comes when John’s Jesus is seated at the right hand of God in all power, honor, and glory. Mary wants to hold on to the way things were. She wants to touch the Teacher who healed the sick, sat with outcasts, welcomed sinners, and both taught and modeled what a faith-filled life should be. But Jesus says, “No, it won’t be the same.” Mary wants to cling to the Jesus of her world, that world of an Easter morning when it was still dark. But the Risen Jesus wants to usher in a new world. As Barbara Brown Taylor put it, “He was not on his way back to her and the others. He was on his way to God, and he was taking the whole world with him.”¹

With Christ’s departure comes the promised presence of Christ redefined: the Advocate, the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth. His ascension brings his presence: the presence of Christ in and through the lives of those who follow him; the presence of Christ unleashed in a world as the poor are cared for, the grieving are comforted, the powerful are brought low, truth is proclaimed, and love carries the day; the presence of Christ alive in the world as life conquers death, light shines where there once was darkness, generosity squelches greed, swords are smashed into plowshares, forgiveness stomps out hatred, and the hungry push away from the table now full; the presence of Christ made known to the world in and through the Body of Christ—Christ’s resurrection people.

Easter preaching in a secular world is the call to the resurrection people of God to stop clinging to that world that seems to never change and start pointing to that which God knows is yet to come. It is a liberating word challenging the listeners to stop clinging to the world as they want it to be and start working for the world God promised it would be. Preaching on Easter morning offers the chance for the congregation to rise together, put a finger in the world’s chest, and shout “No, No, No! There is a more excellent way!”

It is in the Gospel of Matthew that the Risen Jesus tells the women who came to the tomb to tell the disciples to go to Galilee and meet him there (Matt. 28:10). If the disciples had raced to the tomb in Matthew after hearing from those first Easter preachers, one could presume that the Risen Christ would not be there. No, they would not see him until they went back to Galilee. Scott Hoezee has pointed out the significant and often overlooked shift in location from Jerusalem to Galilee. He points out it is a distance of about eighty miles and concludes it would be at least a two to three day trip on foot and probably longer.² So the disciples would not have seen

the Risen Jesus until long about Wednesday. In John, it is the evening of the day of resurrection in the Upper Room. In Luke, the two walking along the Emmaus Road see Jesus later that same day. In Mark, well in the shorter ending of Mark, no one sees the Risen Jesus. Here in Matthew, if you define the New Testament experience of Easter as an encounter with the Risen Christ, then for the disciples, Easter was on a Wednesday!

“Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him” (Matt. 25:16). Matthew doesn’t name the mountain where the Easter encounter and the ensuing Great Commission happened. It could have been the same mountain that Jesus climbed when the devil showed up. It could have been the Mount of Transfiguration where Jesus took Peter, James, and John when Elijah and Moses showed up. But it must have been the Mount of Beatitudes where Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount. After all, in the Great Commission, Jesus tells the disciples to teach the baptized of all nations “to obey everything that I have commanded you.” It just makes sense that they would meet back at the teaching mountain with the disciples remembering everything Jesus taught them even as they are told to remember “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20).

The Easter encounter for the disciples in Matthew brings together the eleven, the Risen Jesus, and his entire body of work that is the kingdom of God. His resurrection shines now through all his teaching, every healing, every touch: letting your light shine, turning the other cheek, laying aside your worries, and doing unto others. The exhortations now come with access to resurrection power, death stomping courage, and a life-giving, life-sustaining hope. Trusting in God, seeking first the kingdom of God, shouting hosanna, save us, losing your life in order to save it; it is all undergirded, infused, founded on, nudged along by Christ’s resurrection spirit.

It is one thing to preach in a secular America on Easter Sunday. But it is all the more important to proclaim resurrection hope on Wednesday. This place and time in the nation are demanding that preachers help listeners to see the Risen Jesus long about Wednesday — yes, his presence, his strength, his death conquering, sea calming resurrection power on Wednesday. That spirit of the Risen Jesus that lifts the soul and fills the heart, that teaching of the Risen Jesus that inspires and commands and lights the way, that grace of the Risen Jesus that offers salvation, that love of the Risen Jesus that will not let us go, we are going to need it on Wednesday.

Because life in the nation these days feels a lot less like a Sunday morning of Easter brass and finery and lot more like a month of long, never-ending, gut-wrenching Wednesdays, preachers of this generation most likely agree that preaching on Sunday mornings has never been more difficult. But giving witness and pointing to a resurrection hope that the followers of the Risen Jesus can claim and experience on Wednesday has never been more important, for Jesus Christ and the promise of his resurrection power is so much more, so much bigger, so much better than one Easter Sunday. The women who first preached Easter said, “Christ is Risen! But he is not here! He is in Galilee and he will meet us there.” This means, yes, the Risen Christ will meet us right in the thick of all...this.

All of the disciples of Jesus do not experience resurrection joy first thing in the morning in the Gospel of Luke, either. According to Luke, later in the day, two of the disciples “stood, still looking sad” along the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:17). It is

more common for preachers to preach the Emmaus Road text on one of the Sundays following Easter. So, it is easy for folks in the pew to forget that the conversation the two disciples had with the Risen Jesus happened “on that same day” (Luke 24:13). They did not recognize Jesus until he broke bread and gave it to them. Their discussion of all that had happened in Jerusalem left them in despair. It is, however, still the Day of Resurrection. This walk, talk, and be sad moment occurred on the first Easter Day. It was Easter Day, and they had not heard. They still did not know that Christ had risen from the dead.

In Luke, joy does not come until the end of the day. If one follows the timeline of the day in Luke 24, the word *joy* does not show up until the Risen Jesus stood among the disciples as they heard what happened to the two of them along the way. “While in their joy,” Luke writes, “they were disbelieving and still wondering” (Luke 24:41). Easter joy in Luke is a joy delayed, a joy that comes later, a joy that comes down the road, a joy that has a future.

The fire in Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris in 2019 happened on a Monday. It happened on the Monday of Holy Week. Many people tried to make the fire all the more upsetting because it happened in Holy Week. That seemed more than a bit ironic in a world that pays little attention to Easter, let alone Holy Week. The truth is that fire, destruction, and devastation happen somewhere, someplace, pretty much every Monday. Every Monday there are folks whose lives are turned upside down, whose world is rocked, who are standing knee deep in ashes far away from any Easter morning trumpet blast. Every day some of the followers of the Risen Jesus find the joy of Easter hard to find and wonder if joy has a future.

That Holy Week in 2019, there were other church’s that burned as well. Three historic African American Churches in Louisiana’s St. Landry’s parish were burned to the ground. The houses of worship were burned to the ground not by an electrical problem, but by an evil act of hatred, bigotry, racism, white supremacy, and terror. I remember seeing a news story that told of the congregation of the Greater Union Baptist Church. That story included a photo of the thirty members of the congregation and their pastor all gathered in front of the ashes. All of them were looking right into the camera, and in the middle of the group was a young girl holding a bouquet of white flowers. The reporter told of the congregation standing together as a body, unbroken and undamaged, as a witness to the force of love in a time marred by hate. In other words, the congregation gave witness to a resurrection faith with a future. While doing some research for this article, I read that the pastor of Greater Union Baptist Church died suddenly in January of 2020. An article described members of the congregation once again pointing to that resurrection faith. One of the church’s deacons is quoted: “Reverend Richard’s legacy is going to be one for the nation. His legacy is going to be leading us in the right direction when the world tried to tear us apart.”³ Put another way, the preacher was pointing the congregation to the future God intended for them as the world was trying to rip it away.

More often than not, resurrection proclamation doesn’t come with an Easter morning trumpet blast. Preaching Easter to the world shouldn’t always come as an all dressed up, victorious, triumphant fanfare. Sometimes the resurrection promise of God shows up in the vigil of companionship with a friend of forty-five years now a widow. Or maybe it comes in the dinner every couple of weeks with an old college roommate whose marriage crumbled away, who cannot fathom what the future will

hold. Living resurrection promise in the world often comes without words. It also often comes later in the day. Resurrection hope comes with the kind of forgiveness that surprises the world and defies human understanding. Resurrection joy comes in the peace that the world does not give, a peace that comes deep in the soul of one who has reason to be anxious. The most meaningful and powerful witness to resurrection promise, hope, and joy doesn't come with a trumpet blast. It comes at the end of day, and it comes with a future. At a time when the nation's future seems bleak to so many, maybe the best Easter preaching ought to come not with a shout, but in the whisper of the lives of God's resurrection people.

Maybe it could be left unmentioned, but Easter preaching is every Sunday preaching. Every Sunday preachers stand before their congregations to proclaim the hope and promise of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the church and to secular America all at the same time. In a sermon given at Union Presbyterian Seminary, Brian Blount persuasively argued that when it comes to preaching that expands the listener's resurrection imagination, pastors really have no choice. "Live resurrection in the present like you are certain resurrection is coming in the future. Fight the resurrection fight. Paul declares that the resurrection fight is a fight we have been given the ability and the obligation to join."⁴ Joining the resurrection fight by definition includes preaching to the secular nation in and through the lives of God's resurrection people. Secular America will never listen to this preacher or that preacher. But the church, the body of Christ, empowered and inspired by bold Easter preaching can bring change, work for justice, and sow seeds of righteousness in the land. The resurrection infused followers of Jesus unleashed on the nation praying for and working toward the world God intends. Or as Martin Luther King Jr. proclaimed at the very end of his sermon "The Drum Major Instinct," working to "make of this old world a new world."⁵

Notes

1 Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way* (Cowley Publications, 1999), 111.

2 Scott Hoezee, "Matthew 28:1-10 Commentary, Easter Day A," Center for Excellence in Preaching, cepreaching.org.

3 Megan Wyatt, "After church set ablaze, Obelousas congregation unexpectedly loses pastor," *The Acadiana Advocate*, theadvocate.com.

4 Brian Blount, "Raise the Dead" in *Invasion of the Dead: Preaching Resurrection* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 103.

5 Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Drum Major Instinct," Ebenezer Baptist Church, February 8, 1968, kinginstitute.stanford.edu.