

But Early Sunday Morning!

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It begins with two words spoken by almost any African American preacher inside almost any African American church—*but early*. At first the words are spoken in a normal tone—*but early*. However, those two words are all that is needed to begin an antiphonal chorus between pulpit and pew—*but early*. The phrase is pronounced again, only this time with an increased passion and an escalating volume—*but early*. The congregation joins in and answers back, already knowing where this path is heading—*But Early*. Again, the phrase is spoken, and the thunder seems to roll as the words fall on the congregation, and this time two words become a major affirmation of faith echoed in African American churches of every denomination across the country—*but early Sunday morning He got up with all power in His hands*.

Make no mistake about it, this is the central theme, the organizing principle, the theological touchstone of the African American religious experience—*but early Sunday morning He got up with all power in His hands*. Neither “We Shall Overcome” nor “Let my people go” hold the same sacred space in the African American church as this phrase which does not have to wait until Easter to be pronounced—*but early Sunday morning He got up with all power in His hands*.

Before Martin Luther King, Jr. and those who worked with him could organize a Civil Rights Movement, African American Christians were drawing strength from this phrase. Before James Cone gave shape and texture to a Black Theology of Liberation, and before Katie Cannon, Jacqueline Grant, and Delores Williams gave birth to Womanist Theology, African American Christians were drawing strength and comfort and hope for the future every time they heard these words—*but early Sunday morning He got up with all power in His hands*.

I am in no way minimizing the freedom struggle to end social injustices. That has been a central task of the African American church since its birth in the 18th century. Ending oppression and injustice is a crucial undertaking. However, while that work goes on, there remains a need to sustain and encourage people while they are going through those struggles. In ways that only those who fully know how harsh and uncertain life has been for African Americans since our arrival on these shores in 1619, there is something in these words that connects us to the power of God in a visceral and existential way. Only the first two words are needed to unlock the hope that lies within us in the face of the almost constant horror that has surrounded us for four hundred years: “*but early*.”

The preacher will often play with this phrase to give it even more meaning.

Caiaphas, Herod, and Pilate thought they had put an end to this troublesome son of Nazareth, but early Sunday morning He got up with all power in His hands. The old spiritual says, they nailed him to the tree—the blood came streaming down—they pierced him in the side—he hung his head and died, but early Sunday morning He got up with all power in His hands. Roman soldiers sealed him inside the tomb to be sure that no one would

try to steal his dead body. But early Sunday morning Jesus got up with all power in His hands.

The women came to the tomb with spices to cover the smell of decaying flesh. All they were expecting was a corpse. The disciples, having run away from the Garden of Gethsemane and retreated to the Upper Room, were overcome with grief in the death of their leader and shame in their cowardice when he was taken into custody. For them, the three-year journey was over. But early Sunday morning He got up with all power in His hands. The grave could not hold him down. Death could not sustain its grip on his body. When they crucified my Lord, the forces of evil were saying *no* to the message of Jesus as well as to the messenger himself. But early Sunday morning God said *yes* both to message and to the messenger. Jesus was raised from the dead with all power in His hand.

This was the transformational moment in the life of the early church, not his crucifixion, but his resurrection. *Now is Christ risen from the dead, the first fruits of them that sleep....O death, where is thy victory? O grave, where is thy sting?* The crucifixion was brutal, and Jesus did cry out “It is finished.” He did die, just as people condemned to the cross are meant to die, from asphyxiation, loss of blood, overcome by the baking heat of a midday sun as they hung for hours, sometimes for days. Everything went as the execution squad had planned. However, something happened that those battle-hardened Roman soldiers were not expecting.

Hear the preacher shout out to the congregation, “Somebody say *early!*” That is the refrain that has brought many a sermon to a tumultuous conclusion in an African American church, *but early Sunday morning He got up with all power in His hands.* The preacher might continue, and with the preacher so also the congregation:

He died. Didn't he die? He died until the sun refused to shine. He died until hell's foundations were shaken. He died until the angels in heaven had to turn away from the sight of the Son of God hanging on that cross. I tell you, he died. But early Sunday morning, He got up with all power in His hands. The devil thought he had won and the hounds of Hades rejoiced over what they thought was their conquest of God's purposes on the earth. But early on Sunday morning He got up with all power in His hands.

Why is African American preaching so fixed on the resurrection of Jesus? Some say that every sermon in an African American church is heading for the cross by one road or another. But that is only partially true. It is better to say that African American preaching goes by the way of the cross to its real destination which is the empty tomb and the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Left to itself, the cross is not “mission accomplished.” If the only things that happened to Jesus were that he was crucified, dead, and buried, then his experience is no different than any other human being. All of us will die.

One could make the case that the death of Jesus is unique if viewed through the lens of the Old Testament practice of substitutionary atonement where the sins of all are forgiven through the death of another. You could invoke the language and imagery of Isaiah 53:5 and the Suffering Servant and say about the death of Jesus that “He was wounded for our transgressions. He was bruised for our inequities. The chastisement

of our peace was upon him. And by his stripes we are healed.” We could say with John the Baptist in John 1:29, “Behold the lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world.” The cross taken by itself is sufficient if what you seek is forgiveness of sin.

However, there was much more at stake when Jesus was nailed to a cross. The events that occurred at Calvary were an opening act of a longer and more consequential drama. Yes, he died on the cross, “*but early*.” Yes, as the songwriter puts it, “At the cross, at the cross, where I first saw the light, and the burdens of my heart rolled away.”¹ However, that is not the entirety of the Passion Narrative. The power and the purpose of the death of Jesus is not fully grasped and not fully declared until two words are spoken, “*but early*.” That is what Paul insists upon in I Corinthians 15:14-15 when he says,

But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised.

Paul continues and suggests that Christ as Suffering Servant and Lamb of God, but not as risen Lord, is an insufficient outcome for God’s plans and purposes and for our faith as Christians as well. He says in verses 17-20,

And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

Paul considered anything else we may say or believe about Jesus to be insufficient, even insignificant, if we cannot say “*But early Sunday morning He got up with all power in His hands*.”

That is especially true for the African American church and for African American preaching as a form that can be studied and analyzed as an intentional theological practice. When they speak about *early Sunday morning*, they are talking about the *promise*, the *power*, and the *presence* of God that has sustained African Americans amid the hell and horror of 246-years of chattel slavery and the subsequent 156-years of sharecropping, segregation, second-class citizenship, and state-sanctioned terror that stalks and torments their lives to this very day.

The promise of God is that death does not get the last word. The grave is not triumphant. There is a deep-seated faith in the African American church that “death is swallowed up in victory” (I Corinthians 15:54). It is an unswerving declaration of faith when an African American preacher stands before a family at a funeral and says, “Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands” (II Corinthians

5:1). We receive that as a promise from God.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this focus on life after death was defined by Benjamin Mays as “compensatory religion.”² That meant that conditions for African Americans in this country were so harsh and hopeless that their only alternative was to remind themselves that death did not have the last word. Referring especially to the 19th century Spirituals, Mays notes, “No idea of God is so dominant in the Spirituals as the belief that God will make things right in heaven.”³ They sang:

There is plenty good room in my father’s kingdom,
So, choose your seat and sit down.”

They sang:

I got shoes, you got shoes, all God’s children got shoes.
When I get to heaven gonna put on my shoes,
Gonna shout all over God’s heaven.

Then thinking about their so-called Christian owners and overseers, they would add this line:

“Everybody talking about heaven ain’t going there.”

They also sang:

Before I’ll be a slave, I’ll be buried in my grave,
And go home to my Lord and be free.

Tragically, the hatred and hostility experienced by African Americans that resulted in compensatory religion continues into the twentieth-first century. As such, it is still important when an African American preacher stands to invoke the *promise* of God concerning resurrection on the Sunday after the brutal deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland, Walter Scott, Martin Luther King, Jr., Emmett Till, or four girls in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. Something of great comfort and hope is being offered when the congregation is reminded:

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. (John 14:1-3)

I make this claim about the importance of the bodily resurrection of Jesus within the life of the African American church, mindful that not all Christians agree on this fact, and some even mock the notion of a bodily resurrection. One progressive faith leader said, “Christians for whom the physical resurrection becomes a sort of obsession, that seems to me to be a pretty wobbly faith.”⁴ This dismissive approach to a tenet of the

Christian faith held to so strongly in our churches has caused many African American students at “progressive” or “liberal” seminaries and divinity schools not to question their faith, but to question that school’s approach to theological education in relation to the faith tradition from which they came to seminary and to the communities of faith to which they return after graduation. Many is the day when African American students leave some seminary classes and say in the words of Mary in the garden in John 20:13, “They have taken my Lord away, and I don’t know where they have put him.”

Seminaries want their students to know about the *Sitz im Leben* of the biblical texts. However, those who teach at seminaries would do well to better understand the *Sitz im Leben* of their African American students seeking to do ministry in a white supremacist country and culture. They should be aware of the recurring instances of police violence against unarmed African Americans. They should be aware of the relentless attempts to limit and even take away voting rights. They should understand the triple burden of race, class, and gender bias carried by African American women.⁵

They should understand what it means to be disproportionate victims of COVID-19 due to a multitude of pre-existing conditions and social determinants such as food deserts, inaccessible and unaffordable health care, jobs that could not be done from a home office and that forced many African Americans to work as bus drivers, store clerks and cashiers, non-medical professional jobs in hospitals, and first responders while the pandemic was raging and before vaccines were available. When the risk of death from so many different directions lurks as closely at your door as it does for so many African Americans, it is good to be reminded about *but early*. We need the *power*, the *promise*, and the *presence* of God in those moments.

A wobbly faith? African Americans have needed a faith suited to their dilemma in American society in every century since their forced arrival on these shores in 1619. They needed a faith they could hold onto when African American women were exploited as much for their womb as for their work during slavery and beyond.⁶ They needed a faith they could take with them into jail cells in Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and even Chicago. They needed a faith they could carry with them when they sought to desegregate schools, lunch counters, workplaces, and all-white neighborhoods in New York and New Orleans, in Cleveland, Ohio, and Cleveland, Tennessee, and in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Philadelphia, Mississippi! They would have been left physically and emotionally wobbly if they had not carried this faith with them into those places where racist taunts, physical violence, and even death lurked around every corner. They believed then and now that God was with them even unto death and beyond.

The list of grievances extends back to the Tuskegee Experiment between 1932 and 1972, when effective medicines were withheld from 399 African American men diagnosed with syphilis to see what its effects would be on their bodies. Dozens of men died, and dozens more wives and children were infected and received no treatment.⁷ It goes back to the Scottsboro Boys trial in 1931, when eight young men were accused of raping a white woman and spent years in prison for a crime it was known they did not commit.⁸ It goes back to the Tulsa, Oklahoma massacre of 1921, when an entire African American community was burned to the ground and between 150-200 African Americans were killed over jealousy at the idea of black people prospering

because of their own initiative and hard work.⁹

It involves the thousands of African American men, women, and children that were lynched, shot, or burned alive between 1895 and 1935,¹⁰ a time the historian Rayford Logan referred to as the “great nadir,”¹¹ the darkest and deadliest time to be alive for African Americans.

When you have lived under these conditions for hundreds of years, you need to know beyond the shadow of a doubt that the God who had the power to raise Jesus from the dead also has the power not to let death have the last word in your life. That is why for most African Americans, the resurrection of Jesus is not something to be analyzed, debated, and disputed. It is the *promise*, the *power*, and the *presence* of God on full display in the resurrection of Jesus. As a result, they have been able to say to themselves down through the years,

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.... Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Before someone speaks about a wobbly faith, let them pray every day when they send *their child* off to school through streets patrolled by rival drug gangs, that the child is not killed by a random act of gun violence. Let them pray every time they get pulled over by the police—if they are ever pulled over by the police—that it will not end up with the police shooting them because something they said or did made police officers “fear for their own safety.” Let them pray that *they return alive* when they go for a jog in Brunswick, Georgia, like Ahmaud Arbery, or go to buy a bag of candy and a soft drink in Sanford, Florida, like Trayvon Martin, both of whom were shot by white vigilantes using “stand your ground” and “citizen’s arrest” statutes first established to capture and return runaway slaves.

Tragedy is not the only circumstance when African Americans have relied on the promise of *but early*. There is the simple trust that however it occurs, death does not have the last word. I observed this trust in the resurrection at my home church in Chicago, Illinois, when we gathered every year on New Year’s Eve for a Watchnight service. The idea of the Watchnight service can be traced to December 31, 1862, when African American people waited in hopeful expectation for the release of the Emancipation Proclamation from President Abraham Lincoln that would go into effect the next day. That tradition has continued in many churches to this day.¹²

At 11:45 PM, the pastor would begin calling the names of members of the congregation who had died during that year. What happened next puzzled me in my youth. With the calling of each name, a voice could be heard crying out “Thank you, Jesus.” Name after name extending month after month, and the response was the same. Some one has died, and the surviving friends and family would say, “Thank you, Jesus” or “Bless the Lord,” or “It’s all right now.” Honestly, I thought there had been some bad relationships in that church, and people were glad that someone was finally dead.

I could not have been more mistaken. Something far more significant was going on that I had not yet fully grasped. However, when I returned many years later to preach at that Watchnight service, I finally found out why people were offering up their words of faith and praise in the face of death. After the names had been called,

and after the responses from the family had been spoken, there was a song that united that congregation in a faith that took us back two-hundred years to the faith forged by our ancestors in slavery.

I looked over Jordan, and what did I see,
But a band of angels coming after me.
I looked all around me, it looked so fine,
I asked the Lord if it all was mine.
If you get there before I do,
Tell all my friends I'm coming too.
Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home,
Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home.

There was only one reason we could sing that song on New Year's Eve: *but early!*
And there is only one reason African Americans are able to keep the faith today in this MAGA environment. It is the *power*, the *presence*, and the *promise* of God captured in the words *but early!*

Notes

- 1 Isaac Watts, "At the Cross," *The New National Baptist Hymnal* (Nashville, TN: National Baptist Publishing Board, 1977), 79.
- 2 Benjamin E. Mays, *The Negro's God As Reflected In His Literature* (New York: Atheneum, 1968).
- 3 Ibid, 24.
- 4 Nicholas Kristof, "Reverend, You Say the Virgin Birth Is a Bizarre Claim?" *TheNewYorkTimes.com*, April 20, 2019.
- 5 Jacqueline Grant, "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Experience as a Source for Doing Theology," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History volume 2: 1980-1992*, edited by James Cone and Gayraud Wilmore (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 278.
- 6 M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 34.
- 7 www.tuskegee.edu, The U.S. Public Health Service Syphilis Study at Tuskegee, www.cdc.gov.
- 8 "Scottsboro Boys," *History.com*, January 16, 2020.
- 9 www.tulsahistory.org: 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre
- 10 Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York: Random House, 2002), x-xii.
- 11 Rayford Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro* (New York: Collier Books, 1956), 107.
- 12 Joan R. Harrell, "Watch Night Service in the Black Church in America: 150 Years After the Emancipation Proclamation," *HuffingtonPost.com*, December 31, 2012.