

Save Us from Our Spirituality: Fleshing out Easter

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Now when grace fills the soul, that soul rejoices and smiles and dances, for it is possessed and inspired, so that to many of the unenlightened it may seem to be drunken, crazy, and beside itself. . . . For with the God-possessed not only is the soul wont to be stirred and goaded as it were into ecstasy but the body also is flushed and fiery, warmed by the overflowing joy within which passes on the sensation to the outer man, and thus many of the foolish are deceived and suppose that the sober are drunk. Though, indeed, it is true that these sober ones are drunk in a sense.

Philo of Alexandria, First Century CE

Being a Pentecostal on Easter is like being a first grade child on Christmas morning. The pent-up energy is overwhelming. The whole day is so enchanted. I am not always outwardly emotional, yet I struggle to keep it together during the services. Every Easter Sunday, I fight tears from the first note of the gospel choir. But when those in my camp stand to preach on this holiest of days, we have to check our sensitive sides at the door. Christ has risen, and this calls for a sermon that might peel the paint off the walls.

A little-known fact about global Pentecostalism is that we build our faith communities around the centerpiece of preaching. A lot of people fail to realize this because it's our spiritual fireworks, not our sermons, that tend to get noticed and make our movement distinctive. But this is mistaken. The Jews have often been called the People of the Book. We Pentecostals might be called the People of the Preacher.

It was Martin Luther who introduced preaching as the centerpiece of Christian worship during the Protestant Reformation, with his emphasis on *sola scriptura* as the proper foundation of true faith. Still, the difference between a Lutheran worship service and a Catholic mass is not immediately apparent today for the uninitiated. Although a radical, Luther held on to a bunch of the Roman church's accoutrements: a high view of the sacraments, prayers of call and response, goblets, robes, lectionaries, glum paint, manuscripted sermons. Pentecostals, for better or worse, dispensed with all these things. If there is a Hammond organ and a preacher, church can be had. I once worked at one of the largest Pentecostal churches in Atlanta, with a huge staff and a fancy new building. Occasionally, our senior minister used to exclaim, "We don't need this building. Just put me and the music director in the parking lot and they'll come." He was probably right. You might say that we Pentecostals have always held onto the protest in Protestantism with greater extremity than Martin Luther.

As a result, it is practically a truism to say that Pentecostal preachers go all out. The message cannot be divested from the physical presentation, the forceful flesh and blood of the preacher. If you are not a Pentecostal, you cannot imagine the things that I have seen.

There is the sheer decibel level of our preaching, of course. Many of our preachers do not believe that preaching is preaching unless the sermon is shouted at the top of the lungs from start to finish, always into a microphone. I have heard preachers in tiny sanctuaries with a dozen people, and they still use a microphone. The heightened

decibel level is often said to be that which distinguishes preaching from teaching. It's perfectly fine if you aren't shouting much; you're just teaching, and we value that too. But if you claim to be preaching, then you'd better bring the heat.

There is the athletic nature of Pentecostal preaching as well. In our tradition, preaching can take a toll on the body. Some of our preachers carry a towel on their shoulder throughout the sermon, like a heavyweight boxing coach, just to keep the sweat out of their eyes. I've seen our preachers sweat through double-breasted suits like they were undershirts, royal blue jackets deepening to midnight navy by the time of the altar call. Our preaching calisthenics are myriad: jumping, dancing, running, crying. Sometimes we create impromptu skits by pulling people from the congregation, like a comedy sketch show. "Whose line is it anyway?"

There is the dialogical nature of Pentecostal preaching often associated with African-American Christianity but normative for Pentecostals everywhere. I was in Haiti two years ago teaching pastors at a Pentecostal seminary, and I was immediately taken aback by the intensity of the questions routinely shot at me from the class. It seemed to me that the students were sparring with me rather than creating discussion (my translator referred to the experience as the "shooting range," which didn't help me feel better). After I adjusted to the new scene, I realized that the Haitians were just living out their Pentecostalism in the classroom. Since our movement eschews experts, truth must emerge from dialogue. I was a preacher to them, not a professor, so interruption was the ultimate compliment.

The Pentecostal preacher testifies like a witness to the jury. There is an unction to it that involves movement and sound, flesh and bones. No one can remain, no one must remain still and silent. "Well!" "Preach it, preacher!" "Alright now!" "We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard," Peter and John protest in Acts 4:20. The sermon is not really a sermon, in the sense of a presentation people listen to. Instead, it is a dialogue that all participate in. It is a contact sport, a "language event" not a PowerPoint, with the requisite calling back and forth, the energy transferring from one side of the room to the other until no one and everyone is the preacher.¹ When it is done, the physicality doesn't stop. Pentecostal preachers have this phrase: "Shake it out." You do that when you are alone after the service, wringing out the last drops of passion from your bones.

If "the medium is the message," as McLuhan famously remarked, I have been thinking about how this Pentecostal medium of physicality might uniquely contribute to any preacher's understanding and appropriation of the Easter story. Modernism gave to us the medium of intellectual cognition with its natural message of rationalism as the primary method of discerning truth. Doesn't this modernistic medium and message diminish the way that we read and proclaim Easter texts? What might it mean, from top to bottom, with every sinew of ourselves, to join the Pentecostals of Acts 2 and "flesh out" Easter?

Fleshing Out Our Stories

One of my favorite seminary classroom tools is a rare gem in historical Jesus studies: the so-called Bar Ma'jan Parable. Found in the Palestinian Talmud, the folk story of Bar Maj'an apparently antedates Jesus, allowing us a small window into Jewish storytelling in and around his time.²

In this simple tale, a young Torah student and a rich tax collector named Ma'jan

meet their fate in the afterlife. The Torah student was so socially insignificant that his death goes unnoticed, while Ma'jan, the wealthy tax gatherer, is given a hero's funeral. This strange dissonance is caused by the fact that before his death, Ma'jan threw a great banquet and invited all of the poor, so that the people forgot all about his shameful lifestyle. In hazy dreams of paradise, however, the student is enjoying gardens and fountains, while Ma'jan is unable to cross over.

I love to watch the eyes of my classroom students when they are introduced to this story for the first time. There is typically a pregnant silence while they process the elements of the story that they already know from several parables of Jesus. Bar Ma'jan becomes a pathway into glimpses of Jesus that are often brand new. It begins to dawn on them that Jesus didn't just float around Galilee, a semi-conscious oracle of divine speech. Jesus had a brain. Jesus had a context. Jesus reworked new stories out of old ones in order to share his theological opinions. In short, Jesus was a real, flesh and blood human being who lived, really lived, among other real human beings.

But the flesh of Jesus is not only apparent in his engagement with other rabbinic voices; the stories of Jesus themselves have an inherently fleshly quality. Bar Ma'jan is simply not alive enough for Jesus, so in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, he takes the elements of the story and vivifies them. Jesus turns their grainy analogue signals into roaring high definition. This vivification is intensely physical. In fact, the introduction in Jesus' reworked parable is not only about the rich man's fashionable outerwear, but includes a depiction of his fancy underwear, made of "fine linen." This image of fine linen caressing the clean body of the rich man is contrasted with the hunger pangs and skin sores of Lazarus. As if this vivid physical suffering were not enough to behold, Jesus paints in some stray dogs that lick Lazarus's sores for sustenance. Taking in such a description of Lazarus in an oral culture must be something like watching the recent film *12 Years a Slave* today. You just want to look away, such is the brutal imagery.

The remainder of the parable doubles down on the physicality of the characters. Lazarus comes to rest in the very breast of Abraham, while the rich man suffers in torturous fire and focuses on a particularly painful speck on the tip of his tongue. There is a spatial chasm that separates them. This fixed space, like a raging river, simply cannot be crossed. And perhaps most creatively, Jesus does not conclude the story with moral platitudes or ethical principles. While the Ma'jan parable leaves the listener hanging, Jesus fills in the blanks. The point of the story is the set of scrolls that are a part of the rhythms of life for Jesus' audience: the pen-and-ink Bibles. "They have the Pentateuch and the Prophets," Jesus concludes. "The scrolls are right down the street at the synagogue. Go and handle them." Jesus' focus on the fleshliness of the rich man, and Lazarus is the vehicle toward a more visceral reflection on an object that Jesus' audience could see, touch, hear, venerate. It's always weird to me when people call Jesus a great philosopher. In my reading, he seems so ardently literal about things: "Go and do likewise."

What does this have to do with Easter? Easter puts preachers in the shoes of Jesus in that each year we must retell, rework an older story. This story has been with us for many centuries; what do we say about it now? Could it be that the pulse of contemporary Western culture challenges us to reinvest these narratives with a profound physicality? Perhaps we can render the Church a great service by taking some preaching cues from Jesus' parables and fleshing out our resurrection sermons.

Fleshing Out Spirituality

On September 18, 2012, the world of early Christian scholarship was jolted by Dr. Karen King's announcement of the discovery of a groundbreaking papyrus. Presented in the shadow of the Vatican, the Coptic fragment was received with much media fanfare, including interviews with major news networks. The lines of the relic are broken, but one clearly reads, "Jesus said to them, 'My wife....'" King claimed that the fourth century papyrus was copied from a second century Greek text, so although it held no relevance to the historical Jesus, it did supply "a new voice within the diverse chorus of early Christian traditions about Jesus that documents that some Christians depicted Jesus as married."³ Turns out that the scholarly consensus now considers the papyrus a medieval forgery, and not even a very good one at that. I am not seeking to throw Dr. King under the bus. Her paper is quite nuanced, but I do contend that our newfound fascination with Gnostic understandings of Jesus that has birthed a cottage industry reflects contemporary leanings of spirituality as much as it does a unique niche of historical inquiry.⁴ For those who would seek to endow early Christian Gnosticism with the status of an authentic expression of our faith, albeit a different denomination, perhaps we should look not only to the past, but also to the present. Our culture's spirituality is Gnostic, and it is failing.

Barth Ehrman describes early Christian Gnosticism broadly:

According to Gnostics, the world is a place of imprisonment for sparks of the divine that originated in the divine realm but have come to be entrapped here. These sparks want and need to escape their material entrapment. They can do so by learning the secrets of who they really are, where they came from, how they got here, and how they can return.⁵

Just like some Nazi scholars somehow separate Jesus from his Jewish lineage, the Gnostics divested Jesus of his "material entrapment," his physicality.⁶ What resulted was not necessarily some liberation of the soul, but rather the denial of the significance of the body. The Corinthian church took some baby steps toward what would later become Gnosticism with their libertine cat call: "All things are permissible!" Such a posture led them to downplay bodily ethics (see 1 Corinthians 5-6). The Gnostics were "spiritual but not religious" long before the question made it onto census reports.

Where do we see the substance of Gnostic Christianity today? Look no further than Facebook, where the ethereality of opinion and affiliation take the place of lifestyle, of embodied action. We may not keep our knowledge secret anymore like the Gnostics of old, but we encamp around it, imbuing it with the secret powers of hatred, xenophobia, and pride. Listen to the current political rhetoric (if you can stomach it) which champions the closure of the physical borders of this nation to those in physical need, offering whimsical notions of distant moral support instead. Even the financial support we will send to them isn't physical, but rather another clever maneuver on the public debt sheet.

And the people that we preach to, what Gnostic messages constitute their diet? On a more popular level, look no further than the "spiritual leaders" of blathering Hollywood, those who substitute an external God with a concrete history for a voice inside our heads. Martin Buber, the famed Jewish philosopher described this descent

into spirituality:

But if it is the castle of separation where man conducts a dialogue with himself, not in order to test himself and master himself for what awaits him but in his enjoyment of the configuration of his own soul—that is the spirit’s lapse into mere spirituality. And this becomes truly abysmal when self-deception reaches the point where one thinks that one has God within and speaks to him. But as surely as God embraces us and dwells in us, we never have him within.⁷

All of it seems Gnostic to me: religion devoid of concrete history, belief devoid of an external ethic, bounded community subverted by individual interiority.

Enter the Bible, which revels in the physical world so much so that no Hebrew term even correlates with the great modern divide of the “spiritual” (vs. the secular). From the beginning of Genesis, God revels in physicality, declaring the earthy creation to be “good” at every turn. Man and woman do not emerge from some divine spiritual realm. They are hued out in the dirt. Jacob’s body slams God, and God fights back with bone-wrenching vengeance. Moses hits a rock with a stick with the result that he isn’t allowed to set his old feet upon the Promised Ground. Levitical priests mediate what can be eaten, touched, and tithed. Likewise, the Temple is constructed with marked specificity: measurements, metallurgy, and the pots and pans all matter. In the Bible, holiness is not holiness unless it occupies a space. As Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “Matter matters to God.”⁸ Are there not over two hundred muscles in the head of an ordinary caterpillar to tell us such a thing?⁹

Fleshing out Easter

When I was in graduate school, I took a seminar on ancient Greek texts that might help to illuminate features of the New Testament due to their proximity or contents. One of the texts that we translated was the *Life of Numa* by Plutarch, who wrote just after the Apostle Paul. In Plutarch’s story, Numa was a king in the distant past of Greece’s glory, known for prudence and wisdom. I must admit that I kept wondering what Numa had to do with the New Testament even as we chronicled his kingly exploits. Finally, during the last session of the semester, we translated Numa’s grand finale. In the end of Plutarch’s tale, 500 years after the death of Numa, a flood sweeps through town and opens his tomb. Surprisingly, no body is found there. In the corpse’s place are piles of books. No resurrection is heralded and no appearance occurs, just books in place of the bones. With five minutes left in the class, it seemed clear that everyone agreed: “The resurrection of Jesus is not unique in ancient literature. We need to forget that confessional nonsense. Have a great Christmas break!” I understand that these matters are complex, but it still felt like the professor cursed my momma.

For Christians, the apex of the biblical story arch that begins in Genesis is the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus’ resurrection is the great surprise of the metanarrative, the ace up God’s sleeve that no one saw coming. Easter is the joker in the pack when the chips have all been lost. At the empty tomb, God takes the conductor’s wand and brings the symphony to its point of triumph. On Easter Sunday, we realize first and foremost that we regular humans have been simple newborns for millennia, glimpsing

shades and colors of reality, but not distinct shapes; hearing echoes and cadences that we have barely begun to translate into anything discernable. Easter is our disorienting birth where we have to navigate a brand new outside world.

Unsurprisingly, the physicality of the resurrection event prevails in the gospel narratives. In John's account, the grave clothes have been laundered. In Matthew's telling, the guards tremble, are stupefied, then run. In Luke's story, there is a pronounced emphasis on food and eating. In Paul's account, over a thousand healthy eyeballs see the resurrected Lord at one time. In all the accounts, the stone has been rolled away and Jesus seems fixated on walking the same old dirt roads with his old friends. "Reach out your hand and put it into my side," Jesus says in John 20:27. But this time he is not refortifying a withered hand; he is challenging the disciple to touch. "Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have" (Luke 24:39). And ultimately, in the ascension, Jesus enters the firmament as a body, uniting the heavens and the earth. In the words of fine artist Makoto Fujimura,

Some say that such "resurrection" is one's memory of the disciples' desire to speak of Christ, to continue to remember him. To me, the Resurrection is a physical imposition, not merely a psychological recognition. Christ's sacred reality invaded ours, embedded in the abundant physical reality. The Resurrection is a new generative paradigm, full of the aroma of Christ, that replaces the old limited-resource reality. Our limited minds and perceptions cannot *see* yet the fullness of that reality.¹⁰

The resurrection of the gospels is not some Gnostic secret, but a physical triumph.

Without slipping into unnecessary fundamentalism, maybe it is this physicality that can save God's people through our Easter preaching. For heaven's sakes, is not all preaching sanctified conjecture? So was it the same heart that was broken for the sins of the world that revived with new life inside the rocky enclave that Easter morning? Was it the same feet that were pierced by the nails that laid claim to the grave floor and shook off the linen garments? Was it the same lungs pierced by the spear that inhaled the damp air of resurrection life with a start? Was it the same hands that were driven to the cross by real Roman hands that dislodged the stone from the tomb's entrance with a shove? Was it the same head bloodied by the thorns of scorn that disappeared into the early morning fog, the unlikely herald of the new creation?

In the Pentecostal tradition, we recognize we weren't there to know exactly how Easter happened or what it looked like, but we have a phrase for such rhetoric: "That'll preach!" In our cultural moment, we know that our ahistorical spirituality is neither anemic nor on life support. It is already dead. Let's invite the resurrected Jesus to the memorial service, even as he smells of sweat and spices, fresh and unsightly scabs upon his brow. Let's wrestle with him as Jacob did and dodge his dislocating jabs. Let's allow the holy temple of his body to sanctify our space. Let's watch him play in the dirt.

This Easter, may we not stand before a phantom, a parable, or an idea. May we stand before a resurrected person, shocked and awed, yet not struck dumb. May we have the bravery to look deep into his wounds, then to shout with Thomas, "My Lord and my God!"

If we think there is even a chance of such a miracle among us, we might run the aisles like Pentecostal evangelists, just as sure as Peter and John ran for Christ's tomb.

Karl Barth said that every Christian worshipper, saint and skeptic alike, is stricken by one question in her heart of hearts: "Is it true?"¹¹

Notes

1 I borrow this phrase from Eta Linnemann, cited by Peter Rhea Jones, *Studying the Parables of Jesus* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 1999), 6.

2 See Jacob Neusner, ed., *The Talmud of the Land of Israel, Vol. 20: Hagigah and Moed Qatan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 57. On the origins of the Bar Ma'jan story, see Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (2nd ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1954), 183.

3 Karen L. King, "Jesus said to them, 'My wife...': A New Coptic Papyrus Fragment," n.p. (2012). Online: http://www.gospel-thomas.net/King_JesusSaidToThem_draft_0917.pdf For the later published article see *Harvard Theological Review* 107, no. 2 (2014): 131-159.

4 For perhaps the most famously sympathetic reading of early Gnostic traditions, see Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage, 1989).

5 Barth Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (New York: Harper One, 2014), 304.

6 On the former, see Walter Grundmann, *Were Ist Jesus von Nazareth?* (Weimar: Verlag Deutsche Christen, 1940).

7 Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970), 152.

8 Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith* (New York: Harper Collins), 228.

9 See Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper, 2013), 19.

10 Makoto Fujimara, "Friends, Haven't You Any Fish?" in *What Did Jesus Ask?: Christian Leaders Reflect on His Questions of Faith*, ed. Elizabeth Dias (New York: Time Inc. Books, 2015), 274.

11 Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (New York: Harper, 1957), 97-135.