

Preaching on Easter

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Although Easter is one of the most important days in the Christian year, preaching in Easter can be challenging. Many congregants come to worship thinking they know the Easter stories when, in fact, they have in mind a few details from the different empty tomb and resurrection appearances which the people have harmonized and to which they add some Easter platitudes from the local coffee shop or popular religious telecast. Such people often take their seats or tune in to the Facebook Live service already expecting a message in line with these preconceptions.

Worship planners, buoyed by the singular character of Easter Day, plan extra elements to the service—anthems and solos, instrumental music, bells, liturgical dance, chancel drama, PowerPoint meditations, and the like. These things often lengthen the service and prompt the preacher to reduce the length of the sermon. How does a preacher address the “more” of resurrection when having “less” time to do it? Even if the Easter crowd does not overflow as it did a couple of decades ago, the worship space is fuller than usual, and when combined with the awareness of the theological significance of Easter, preachers find their adrenaline racing and feel an extra nervousness about the service. Over it all hangs the fact that someone coming back from the dead is likely outside the experience of preacher and congregation.

This article cannot resolve the many issues that intersect when preaching on Easter. But it does provide some background to the end-time notion of resurrection, and it can consider how the empty tomb story, Mark 16:1-8, functions in the Gospel of Mark. Along the way, the article sets out some theological and hermeneutical possibilities the preacher might consider in this incredibly complex moment of history: the pandemic, the bizarre political situation and its hyper-partisanship, the movement for justice that took to the streets in the summer of 2020, a significant number of people unemployed, a struggling economy, and the many other uncertainties and tensions ranging from working at home through e-learning to lines getting longer at food banks.

But first, two prior considerations. For one, I put this together after the Presidential election of November, 2020, but before the inauguration in January, 2021. Who knows what might happen between writing and publication? For the other, I am aware of the many criticisms that have been leveled against historical criticism over the last decades, but I continue to think a chastened approach in this mode can work with literary and theological criticism to help us respect the otherness of the biblical text.

The Notion of Resurrection in the World of Mark

The Gospel of Mark is apocalyptic in orientation, like the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, the writings associated with Paul, the Book of Revelation, and many other pieces of Jewish literature roughly 300 BCE to 200 CE. While Christians have sometimes viewed end-time literature as escapist or “pie in the sky by and by,” it is important to realize that the apocalyptic hope emerged as a way to affirm the promises of God in the midst of intense social struggle.

The ancient apocalyptic theologians reasoned that after the Fall (Gen 3), history proceeded in a broken fashion with Satan and the demons playing prominent roles in disfiguring humankind and nature. This old age is a time of idolatry, injustice, fractiousness in human community, exploitation, sickness, violence, and death. In order to keep the divine promises, so the thinking goes, God would destroy the old world and replace it with a new age—often called the Realm of God—in which God’s generative purposes would shape every heart, relationship, and social system. The new creation would be a time of true worship, mutual care, the reunion of divided peoples, health, peace, and eternal life. The transition from the old age to the new would take place by means of an apocalypse—forces from God would invade the present world, destroying the old and replacing it with the new.

In a turn of thought with strikingly contemporary resonance, apocalyptic thinkers imagined the powers deforming the old age inhabiting social systems. Satan and the demons, for instance, could work through empire. The Book of Revelation, for instance, thinks of the Roman Empire as something like the body of Satan in a way analogous to the church as the body of Christ. From the end-time vantage point, the suffering of the old age—and, in particular, the suffering of the innocent and the witnessing community—is an injustice and a challenge to the idea that God is faithful. God moves towards the new age as a matter of justice and to demonstrate God’s faithfulness.

In the final and full manifestation of the Realm of God, the faithful would have resurrection bodies. To my mind, the best description of the resurrection body in antiquity is in 1 Corinthians 15:35-58. The resurrection body is a material entity that, unlike the human body in the old age, will never decay. The resurrection body and its larger context of end-time theology is not “pie in the sky” but is part of God’s re-creation of the cosmos so that all things manifest God’s purposes of love and community.

Before leaving this section, we should note that apocalyptic literature typically includes not only the Realm of God but also a place of punishment, referred to with names and expressions such as hell, Gehenna, place of weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. At the apocalypse, a great judgment takes place with those who have witnessed faithfully to God being welcomed into the Realm while those who have served idols, have exploited others, and have engaged in wanton violence are consigned to punishment. Popular language today can refer to almost anyone who is suffering as “being in hell,” but in the ancient literature, hell is specifically a place of punishment for the disobedient.

Over the course of preaching and teaching, ministers need to help congregations think about what they *really* believe about this apocalyptic world view. Some Christians accept it outright. Many set it aside in favor of a quasi-Platonic notion of the soul ascending to heaven at death, keeping in mind the possibility of a later cosmic destruction and reconstruction. Some Christians view apocalyptic language as metaphorical. Still others contend that the modern and postmodern worldviews do not allow for apocalypticism’s bifurcation of history with an apocalypse as its climax, and they seek other ways of relating God’s purposes to history (e.g., process theology).

The Easter sermon is probably not the place to take up the believability of the apocalyptic world view as the focus of the message. But as a matter of integrity, the preacher should respect the apocalyptic otherness of the biblical text and bring that

otherness into conversation with the theological worldview of congregation and preacher.

The Gospel of Mark in Apocalyptic Perspective

Mark likely wrote the Second Gospel about the time the Romans sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the temple in 70 CE. Mark tells the story of Jesus to speak to a community of Jesus' followers living in the chaos that resulted from the Roman malevolence. Mark narrates the Gospel through an apocalyptic lens. John the Baptist frames the ministry of Jesus as bringing about the Realm of God in apocalyptic terms (Mark 1:2-11). Jesus announces his ministry in this very language in Mark 1:14-15. Most scholars today think that Jesus' message in Mark has a present-future time dimension: Jesus brings some aspects of the Realm into expression in the present, but the Realm will finally and fully come only at Jesus' apocalyptic return (Mark 13:24-27).

Many interpreters today regard Mark 13:1-37 as a window into the historical setting and theological purpose of the Gospel. Mark sets the discourse as if Jesus spoke it during his own lifetime to foretell the future. But Mark uses the discourse in the mode of "prophecy after the fact" to interpret the situation of Mark's community in 70 CE. The social conditions Mark describes in 13:1-20 are the social conditions of Mark's own world: the appearance of false messiahs (Mk 13:6, 21-22), war (Mk 13:7-8), conflict between the disciples and the Jewish and Roman authorities (Mk 13:9-11), conflict within families (Mk 13:12-13), the Roman desecration of the temple (Mk 13:1-2, 14), and uncertainty about what to do (Mk 13:15-16). All of these things occur in a context of suffering.

These chaotic and destructive circumstances seem exactly opposite of circumstances associated with the Realm of God. Indeed, the oppressed situation of Mark's congregation is the epitome of conditions of the old age. Consequently, many members of the Markan community are in danger of giving up. They are tempted to turn away from faithful witness in order to get away from as much of the struggle and suffering as they can. They look at the world around them and essentially think, "The Jesus tradition told us we would be part of the coming of the Realm of God. We did not expect this suffering. Perhaps the tradition is mistaken, and we would be better off returning to our previous religious commitments, Jewish or gentile."

Beginning in Mark 8:31-9:1, Mark seeks to maintain the loyalty of the congregation—and to encourage their continuing witness—by emphasizing that Jesus' witness to the Realm leads to conflict with the powers of the old age that eventuated in his suffering and death. The disciples can expect their witness to result in similar suffering (cf. Mk 9:30-32; 10:32-34). Mark offers this line of thought in the mode of pastoral guidance as if to say, "When you follow Jesus on the way to the Realm, you need to be prepared for struggle as the powers of the old age seek to repress your witness."

In 13:4-20, Mark makes a decisive interpretive move: the intense events of suffering in Mark's generation are the definitive signs that the apocalypse will occur soon, certainly within Mark's generation (Mk 13:28-31). Although the community cannot know the exact time (Mk 13:32), they must continue to witness, for "the one who endures to the end will be saved" (Mk 13:10; cf. Mk 13:33-37). In the Second Gospel, "enduring" and "keeping alert" are not passive activities. The disciples are to announce the presence and coming of the Realm, to invite people to repent and

join the movement, to live according to the values and practices of the Realm, and to demonstrate its power. This mission includes welcoming gentiles in the community as part of the great reunion of the human family (e.g., Mk 13:10; cf. 7:1-23).

The preacher needs to be discerning when considering relationship between the kind of suffering Mark has in mind and churches today. Some congregations, especially in the historic churches, do experience tension with the larger culture when they witness to the Realm of God. Many preachers experience tension with parishioners when they speak and act in behalf of the Realm. In such situations, Mark's narrative offers encouragement. Yet, other churches effectively identify with the values and practices of the old age. Indeed, these churches sometimes denigrate churches attempting to point to the Realm and contribute to the suffering of the world by reinforcing old age perspectives. Mark's narrative is a challenge to such situations.

Mark 16:1-8 as Vindication, Motivation, and Guidance

In today's English versions, Mark 16 contains 20 verses. Scholars almost universally agree that Mark 16:8 is the original ending and that later editors added the "shorter ending" and the "longer ending" (Mark 16:9-20). The most likely reasons for the addition are that (1) while 16:1-8 tells the story of an empty tomb, it does not put forward a full-fledged resurrection appearance, and that (2) Mark 16:9-20 gives the later editor an opportunity to place the imprimatur of the Gospel over the practices of the editor's community, including casting out demons, speaking in new tongues, handling snakes, drinking poisons with effect, and laying hands on the sick. I imagine a fair number of readers of this journal join me in being glad that snake handling and drinking deadly things are not part of the actual biblical record. But a preacher might take the editor's additions as a jumping off point for reflecting on the fact that from the very beginning, the church has taken diverse routes in interpreting the significance of the resurrection.

Mark calls attention to the fact that Jesus was dead. D-E-A-D. (Mk 15:44-45). Mark wants the reader to have no doubt that Satan and the rulers of the old age exercised power in the most definitive way they could: they put Jesus to death. Death is their strongest weapon.

The disciples received the body late in the day on Friday, evidently just in time to entomb it before sundown and the beginning of the sabbath, but not with enough time to anoint the body in accord with Jewish custom. Mark pictures the tomb as typical of burial places of the time—a room hewn out of rock with the entrance covered by a stone to discourage grave robbers and to limit the odor. The women come with spices to anoint the body, thus completing the burial according to the expectations of the old age. The narrator reinforces their old-creation perspective by recalling their conversation regarding who might roll away the stone. They expect to find a closed tomb and a body.

This part of the story gives rise to a point that begs to be included in today's sermon: many of us come to the possibility of the Realm of God with old-age expectations. The narrator had earlier told the Markan listeners—and by extension, subsequent generations including our own—to look for signs of the Realm in the world and to respond accordingly with witness. By way of personal confession, I have to say that much of the time I think of my own life, the lives of the people with whom I interact, and the larger life of the world in terms that expect little more than the old age. Most

every morning, so to speak, I get up and reach for the spices to take with me to the tomb.

When the women enter the tomb, they behold a young person dressed in a white robe sitting on the right. The color of the robe evokes the whiteness that was a sign of someone from heaven at the transfiguration (Mk 9:8). The right side is the side of power and authority and is associated with rulership in heaven in Mk 10:37, 12:36, and 14:62. The figure in white in the tomb is a representative of the heavenly world! The women do not know the meaning of the presence of this figure. No wonder they are alarmed, again.

By beginning to address the women with the phrase “Do not be alarmed,” the heavenly messenger invokes the literary-theological genre of salvation oracle so common in the Torah, Prophets, and Writings. In the English versions, these oracles typically begin “Fear not . . .” These rhetorical devices seek to assure beleaguered people that God will act to save them. Consequently, the oracles encourage the community to live in hope. Mark invokes this purpose with the words “Do not be alarmed.”

The messenger continues, Jesus “has been raised.” The passive verb “has been raised” is an idiom for “God raised him.” I mention this because occasional Easter hymns, songs, and liturgical pieces imply that Jesus raised himself. More importantly, this use of *raised* refers specifically to resurrection in apocalyptic terms. The messenger does not refer to Jesus as a resuscitated corpse that has come back to the same body as in the old age. The messenger describes Jesus as a being who is transformed into the qualities of life of the new creation.

The Markan Jesus announced that the time of the great transition from the old age to the new is here. He invited people from across the social spectrum to participate in the movement towards the completion of the Realm. This Jesus has demonstrated the limited presence of the Realm in miracles and exorcisms. Jesus has faithfully continued this witness through conflict, betrayal, and crucifixion. The resurrection is now the definitive vindication that the witness to the Realm is true. The announcement that Jesus is risen means that he is now able to return as the Apocalyptic Redeemer (NRSV: “Son of Man”) of Mark 13:24-27.

Beyond vindicating the claims of the Second Gospel, Mark hopes this evidence will persuade members of the community to endure so they, too, will share the resurrection life as part of the cosmic renewal that unfolds under the aegis of the Realm of God. In the backdrop is Mark’s belief, described above, that the apocalypse will be accompanied by the final judgement and the separation of those who have stood with God over and against Satan, the demons, and those who collude with them from those who align themselves with the values and practices of Satan. The latter will be “thrown into hell where their worm never dies, and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:48). The question is, which route would the listener rather follow—a present life marked by suffering in response to the witness to the Realm followed by an eternity in the Realm, or a present life marked by power and comfort at the expense of others and of the common good, followed by an eternity in hell?

Scholars and preachers have spilled a great deal of ink over Mark 16:7. One reason for the ink is that many Christians are so accustomed to the reference to communicating the message to the disciples and Peter that we do not get the stunning quality of this statement (Mk 16:7a). Mark paints the disciples as thick and slow to understand the nature and activity of the Realm of God. Indeed, they often respond

to Jesus and to the message of the Realm from an old age point of view. For instance, in Mark 10:35-45, James and John seek seats on Jesus' right and left hand after the apocalypse in the hope that they can exercise power in the Realm in a way comparable to Roman officials and others in the present evil age. Jesus chastises them and offers them a revised vision of the exercise of power in community: the disciples are to be servants, i.e., they are to serve the purposes of the Realm. One of the twelve betrays Jesus (Mk 14:10-11, 43-50). When Jesus is arrested, they flee (Mk 14:50). Peter actively denies Jesus (Mark 14:26-31, 66-72). They have stumbled. The directive to tell the disciples and Peter that Jesus has risen is a redemptive word of the first order. Given the ways in which many of us think and act in resonance with the disciples and Peter, especially in being reticent about witnessing to the Realm, this is a redemptive word for us, as well.

The second point in Mark 16:7 occasioning discussion is the meaning of the phrase Jesus "is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as [Jesus] told you." In Mark 14:28, Jesus himself said that after the resurrection, he would go before them to Galilee. Interpreters tend to see these statements referring either to a resurrection appearance that will take place in Galilee or to Jesus' apocalyptic return that occurs in Galilee. The former—a resurrection appearance—seems to fit the narrative more than the notion of the apocalyptic return. The heavenly messenger in the tomb does not directly use language that refers to the apocalypse, as in Mark 13:24-27 and 14:62. Not only that, but Mark anticipated that the second coming would be a cosmic event which everyone on earth could see (Mk 13:24-27). The disciples would not need to be in Galilee to see it.

While Mark indicates that the apocalypse would occur "soon," Mark does not indicate that it will be immediate. Indeed, Mark says only that the event will occur before that generation passes away (Mk 13:28-37, esp. v. 30). In the meantime, while awaiting the cosmic transformation, the vocation of the community is to continue to witness to the realm. Seeing the Risen One in Galilee would help empower the congregation to continue to witness in the face of destruction, chaos, and death.

Preachers, of course, quickly pick up on the notion of Jesus going ahead of the disciples as a way of speaking about Jesus going ahead of the church today. The resurrection, as we have noted, is not just something that happened to Jesus but represents the world-remaking power of the Realm of God.

A resurrection appearance embodies the power of the Realm present and working in the world. This power is always going ahead of the church, manifesting the possibilities of the Realm in the world. A preacher can help the congregation identify ways in which the risen Jesus and the Realm are ahead of the church and the world today, that is, are offering the possibilities of the Realm to communities and contexts that currently live according to old age assumptions and actions. Every congregation has its Galilee. The preacher can help the congregation find it and move toward it. Toward this end, here are key questions for the preacher. Where is Galilee for our congregation? Where do we need to go to participate in the renewal that the risen, realm-initiating Jesus is already working towards? What do we need to do, that is, what witness do we need to make, and how?

A Key Question

The Second Gospel ends in a way that causes many listeners to shake their heads,

wondering whether they have just heard what they think they have heard. Mark 16:8 says that the women fled from the tomb, having been overwhelmed by a combination of terror and amazement. They are afraid. In their fear, they say nothing to anyone. Why are they afraid? Why do they not do what they are directed to do?

Preachers often get side-tracked by focusing on the emotions of the women as if they are historical characters. Mark's purpose here is not to call attention to their interior lives but to use their fear and silence as a prompt for the listening community. Mark wants the congregation to consider how the women reacted and to ponder the question "Will we do the same?" Will we be overwhelmed by fear and immobilized from engaging in mission? Or will we do what the messenger says, namely go and tell those who, like the disciples and Peter, that life according to the qualities of the Realm is possible? Will we invite those who continue to live in the deformed and destructive old age into the possibilities of the Realm?

In the world of Mark, this question was quite muscular. Judea, Galilee, and Samaria were in chaos from the Roman war. Judaism was splintered, its diverse groups vying with one another to be the leading Jewish voice in the post-Temple generation. The Romans ruled by threat of violence. Life was one great net of tensions. Satan, the demons, and their allies in the Roman Empire and in other institutions continue to rage against the possibility of the Realm. To continue to witness—to continue to invite others to repent and join the movement towards the Realm—is inevitably to walk into conflict. The words of the Markan Jesus of 8:34-9:1 continue to interpret the everyday experience of the community. The resurrection is not the end of the Gospel story but the definitive sign that a power is in the cosmos greater than Satan, the demons, Rome, and all the rest. Mark wants listeners to come away from the Gospel in the confidence that the Jesus who is pictured in the narrative is still at work in the world. The Gospel invites the congregation to join in that witness. Today's preacher might do the same.