

Preaching Resurrection

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Although the church is at the present time hardly to be distinguished from a dead or at best a sick man, there is no reason for despair, for the Lord raises up his own suddenly, as he waked the dead from the grave. This we must clearly remember, lest, when the church fails to shine forth, we conclude too quickly that her light has died utterly away. But the church in the world is so preserved that she rises suddenly from the dead. Her very preservation through the days is due to a succession of such miracles. Let us cling to the remembrance that she is not without her resurrection, or rather, not without her many resurrections.

(John Calvin, Commentary on Micah 4:6, as cited by Karl Barth in his essay, "The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching"¹)

As has often been noted, there is no account in the New Testament of Jesus' resurrection. What we have are stories of the risen Lord appearing to his disciples. There is simply no telling the story of Easter apart from the community of faith that the risen Lord engenders. Whether it is the terrified women fleeing the empty tomb or the despairing disciples encountering a stranger on the road to Emmaus or a painful conversation about feeding Jesus' sheep, the Easter story astonishes in no small part because it has so little to do with Jesus alone and so much to do with those whom the risen Lord insists on pulling into this mysterious event. This fact ought to serve as a clue for the way we think about Easter and proclaim its message today. As the Calvin quote implies, whatever else we are as the church, we are a "resurrection people," a community whose dying and rising, as made clear in baptism, constitutes our primary identity. The church lives in and from this dying and rising, the scariness of which the women in Mark's Gospel rightly recognize and the joy of which pervades even the disciples' disbelief (cf. Lk.24:41).

Yet receiving and entering into the death and resurrection of Jesus is about more than terror and joy. What is created in this event is a community that is sensing for the first time its liberation from the hard labor of saving its own life. Self-preservation is the currency in which the wages of sin are paid. In being raised from the dead, the risen Lord radically deflates that currency. For, if death does not have the last word, what are we to do with our fear of death, with all our strategies of self-preservation, all our contrivances for avoiding the inevitable, all our witting and unwitting tributes to this final tyrant? "He is risen!" can only mean that Jesus' words to be not anxious, far from being at the periphery are, rather, at the core of his gospel message.

Which oddly enough makes death rather useful. Being raised from the *dead* is the way God shapes a people, as Israel learned in the Wilderness, as the church has had to discover again and again. This way is so hard and so counter to our own self-preserving inclinations that the only way we can see this miracle is, as Paul noted, through another, through the gift of being baptized into Christ's death, indeed, of being buried and raised with him (Rom. 6:3,4). What saves these words from being merely pious rhetoric is Paul's insistence that there is no resurrection that is not a

resurrection from the *dead*.

The church has always wanted something less miraculous. We would like a resurrection that would be more like self-improvement, a resurrection that would not be so messy, so intrusive, so threatening. For that matter we would like a church that did not have to depend upon a succession of miracles, whether manna in the Wilderness or bread and wine at the table, for its own life. Yet the church's life, as Calvin makes clear, is nothing if it is not a miracle, as miraculous in its own way as the resurrection itself. And just as the resurrection was a resurrection from the dead, so the miracle of the church involves a lot of dying. Indeed, dying, as a witness to the Easter victory, is the service that death is allowed to render under the reign of the risen Lord. We come to see the gift of Easter in just this way, a gift that cannot be received in any cheaper manner. Death, as George Herbert knew, is the dust God blows into our eyes whose powder enables us to see.² There are some things that only death can teach us. It is that strange "learning experience" without which we cannot discern the dimensions of the risen Lord's sovereignty.

To be sure, the gospel never proclaims the virtues of dying, the blessings of death. The kind of dying that is rendered serviceable here is not a despairing act of defiance, a self-chosen martyrdom that seeks in the end to have its own way. A suicidal church, even a noble and generous one, is only a witness to itself, not to the risen Lord. Resignation is not faithfulness anymore than despair is hope. No, death remains the "last enemy" and an enemy against which we are powerless, but just so it is an enemy which has something to teach us, and in light of Jesus Christ's victory over death, it is not to be feared. Indeed, one can properly view the true threat and true mystery of death only in light of Jesus' victory on the cross. That is why, though Paul does not flinch in talking about death and even more about the resurrection from the dead, he can finally do so only by singing: "Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" (I Cor. 15:54, 55).

Preaching resurrection cannot be undertaken then apart from the cross, apart from the dirty, ugly fact of Jesus' death. That is where the victory is won. On the cross. Easter is merely (!) the revelation of the Victor. The risen Lord identifies himself to his disciples by his wounds. They serve to indicate that it is the Crucified who has won this victory. Death, for all its power, has no power over him.

So what does this mean for our preaching, our life together as those who have been pulled into this story by this same risen Lord? The Easter texts almost without exception indicate that the risen Lord found the disciples in a state of fear and anxiety. Perhaps that is what one might expect given the events of Good Friday. In any case, the women in Mark's Gospel were terrified at the message emanating from the empty tomb. The disciples on the road to Emmaus were in despair before having their hearts singed by the one who fed them with word and sacrament. The women in Matthew's Gospel fled from the tomb with "fear and great joy," an oxymoronic mixture of emotions that the Easter message continues to evoke. And in the Fourth Gospel, Mary Magdalene, Thomas, and Peter all find the risen Lord a difficult figure at best, whose overcoming of their fear, resentment, and shame astonishes, even as they find themselves drawn into a more mysterious world of witness and service.

"Fear not" may be the gospel's most persistent message from beginning to end, but it is never an easy message to hear, and it is an even more difficult message to speak. The words are all too susceptible to bromidic reduction. The fears of these

disciples were not nothing. A triumphant crowd did not go to the empty tomb, but a few apprehensive women, and they were charged with what must have seemed an impossible message from an unbelievable source. The pilgrims to Emmaus had witnessed the recent events in Jerusalem and saw all too clearly the power of death's own certainties. They had reason to despair. Mary, as the gospel song only too eagerly celebrates, was in the garden *alone*, and Thomas' doubts grew out of his own separation from the others. Fears grow in the night. Fears grow in isolation. Fears grow in the face of death, whose power to render us ultimately lonely is fearful indeed.

The "Fear not" of the Easter message is not a declaration that there is no reason to fear or that our fears are illusions which we can ignore or wish away. It is not even a message that tells us that death has no power. No, these Easter stories take the disciples' fears very seriously. Their fears were rooted in the acknowledged power of death to render us all isolated and alone. That is the fearful world in which death seems to rule. The reason we are told to "Fear not" is not that there is no reason to fear, but that amidst our fears, amidst our running away in terror, our walking in discouragement and isolation, there is one who has broken through the imprisoning bonds of death, one whose fellowship has overcome that deep loneliness that death intends for all of human life, one whose risen life is always a life together. In the Christian Year, it is Pentecost that is often called the "birthday of the church," but in truth, it is the risen Lord who in his post-resurrection appearances mysteriously gathers the isolated and afraid and draws them into his fellowship and sends them into his service. The roots of the church are to be found here in the words "He is risen. He is risen indeed!"

In the largely affluent West, we find ourselves living in a strangely lonely culture, a world in which death seems to make more sense than resurrection from the dead, a world where we have gotten used to our loneliness and have resigned ourselves to a general sense of hopelessness. It is not that hard. This way is broad, not narrow. There are comforts. Our anger and resentments can be given full expression in the realm of death in the numerous ways we contrive to separate ourselves from each other. In a lonely world, it somehow makes sense to do that, securing ourselves with the comforting truths we allow to be told to us by those with whom we already agree. So we divide and grow smaller and more righteous, oblivious to the gift of our life together made possible in the life of the risen Lord. Resigned to the realm of death, we not only lose hope and joy, but worse, we miss the gift of Easter's bracing reality and find ourselves falling for the illusions that death is more than happy to purvey, the chief of which is that we need not bother ourselves with it, need not consider it, or even speak of it. So does our fear of death render us silent and teaches us to think about pleasanter matters. Modernity is in many ways founded on this denial of death. Strange that Easter should be so impertinent in this matter, blurring out its news of the crucified Lord—"crucified, dead, and buried" as the creed so unhesitatingly puts it—who is risen, who in being raised from the dead, displaces death, making death serve him in the true reality of his gracious rule.

This world is suspicious, and rightly so, of religious or political exhortations to a hope that is not rooted in this resurrection from the dead. Such exhortations have grown tired. That is why on Easter especially, the church, rather than growing anxious about its future or pretending to some strategy or program or therapy that will provide content to its hope, does better to celebrate the resurrection life that the risen Lord has drawn us into through the eschatological community he has created. The church

is itself constitutive of the gospel's story. It is not the whole story by any means, nor is it the center of the story. But the story of the risen Lord cannot be told without it, and to a culture eager to celebrate its own religious virtuosity as well as its private resentments, the church can rightly be seen as the way the gospel cuts most incisively into our world today. It is the church that is the risen Lord's surprising Easter gift to us, the strange way he insists on giving himself to our world, seeding hope not through disembodied exhortations or programs of well-endowed foundations, but through his own life-engendered communities of faith whose witness to him breathes resurrection hope into this world. "Practicing resurrection"³ means, surprisingly then, to be the church and to be happily so, that is, to be that joyful people who, trembling in the face of this risen Lord, bear witness to his presence in the world and celebrate that presence through their own life together. The primary calling of the church is simply to be a sign of this resurrection life, to be a witness against death and its many surrogates in our world. Here what is appropriate is joy. Here what it means to preach the resurrection is to sing. Here what Easter has to give us is a neighborhood of hope, a *communion* of the saints.

There is a kind of love for the church that is idolatrous, whether it be clothed in the prayers of piety or robed in the vestment of ecclesiastical authority. But there is also a kind of silly arrogance that despises the church and seeks a faith uncluttered with institutional baggage or ecclesial commitments. It is true that the Holy Spirit gives no guarantee of denominational stability or even future witness. As Calvin might remind us, the church has known and continues to know many resurrections, and therefore many deaths. But the stories that rehearse the resurrection appearances of Jesus do not direct us to an un-ecclesial life. Rather they tell us of Jesus' gathering his own, breathing his Spirit upon them, feeding them with word and sacrament, and sending them into his world "to make disciples," that is, to bear witness to the living Lord whose life is un-lonely and whose gospel directs us to the community he calls into being and sends into his service. That community is not to be despised anymore than it is to be worshipped. It is the gift of his own body. And as that gift, it can only be received in gratitude and in love, as constitutive of the gospel itself, the proclamation of which cannot be undertaken without it.

Notes

1 Karl Barth, "The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching," *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (Pilgrim Press, 1928), 134-135, citing John Calvin's *Commentary on Micah* 4:6.

2 George Herbert's, "Ungratefulness," *George Herbert: The Complete English Poems* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 75, in which praising God for redeeming us from the grave, the poet notes that the gift of God's trine life is hidden from us "till death blow the dust into our eyes: for by that powder you will make us see."

3 Wendell Berry's, "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front," *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry* (Berkeley California: Counterpoint Press, 1999), 89.