

Preaching after Easter

In grateful memory of Charles Cousar

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I.

During the years that I taught at Yale Divinity School, I had a regular arrangement with Pilgrim Congregational Church in the Fair Haven area of our town. For years Pilgrim was pastored on a half time basis by divinity school students, and for three of those students over almost ten years, I was the designated substitute preacher.

Like so many preachers, the pastors appropriately always wanted to preach on Easter Sunday, and like so many preachers, they also wanted to take the next Sunday off. So we reversed the usual pattern where seminary students always preach the Sunday after Easter, and I preached that sermon.

We will return to that fairly narrow construction of the title I was assigned for this essay—how do you preach and what do you preach on the first Sunday after Easter. I want, however, to start with looking at two ways of considering my assigned title from somewhat broader perspectives.

First we need to note that of course we always preach after Easter. Were it not after Easter, we would not preach at all. It is not only that Sunday is our day of worship, the Lord's Day, because it falls on the third day after Friday, on the first day of the week. It is also that were it not for that first Easter, we would have no church and nothing to preach about.

Apart from Easter, it is unlikely that anyone would have remembered Jesus any more fully than we remember other purported Messiahs from the turn of the centuries. At best the Good Friday narrative would be as memorable as Socrates and the hemlock, but since in fact none of Jesus' disciples came close to Plato as a memoirist, it seems unlikely that we would have even that.

Easter is the presupposition of our conviction that Jesus was and is God among us, and despite all those genuine Christians who think we would be better off with just the sermon on the Mount and no problematically spectacular events on Easter, I am quite sure that without the faith in those spectacular events, no one would have bothered to pass the Sermon on the Mount along, generation to generation. And Matthew, who wrote our favorite version of those teachings, did so under the firm conviction that the teacher was and is with us, till the end of the age—an entirely Easter based conviction.

So in the growth of the Christian faith, Christmas is after Easter. Lent is after Easter. Good Friday is only good because we celebrate it in the Easter conviction that Jesus is Lord. Lenten piety that pretends to wonder "Can we ever be forgiven?" and Good Friday preaching that pretends that it's all over for us and God are just playing a kind of silly game of make-believe. That does not mean that we haven't much to repent and even much to mourn, but not as those who have no hope.

II.

A further way to ponder the ways in which we preach after Easter is to remind ourselves that we can only preach because of our faith in Easter. Bultmann and some

of his disciples sometimes seem to claim that Christ is risen only in our preaching. I want to claim rather that he is risen *also* in our preaching. On the third day to be sure, but also every day that one of us stands up and dares to proclaim our interpretation of the word.

I know I am preaching to the preachers (rather harder, incidentally, than preaching to the choir), and I know the title of this journal. So I remind us of what we already know, that we are never really adequate to the task and the call and the gift of preaching. What the risen Lord said to Paul, anxious about his own inadequacies, is still the word for us: “My grace is sufficient for you and my power is made perfect in weakness.”

We remember that it is the risen Lord who says that. This is not an assurance based on the reminder that Jesus was a great teacher and an exemplary martyr. This is an assurance based on the assurance that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is with us all, not least when we get up to preach. Because he is risen.

George Herbert wrote a magnificent poem on the plight and the hope which a preacher brings to the pulpit every time—every Easter and every Sunday after Easter.

Holiness on the head,
Light and perfection on the breast,
Harmonious bells below, raising the dead
To lead them unto life and rest.
Thus are true Aarons dressed.

Profaneness in my head,
Defects and darkness in my breast,
A noise of passions ringing me for dead
Unto a place where is no rest.
Poor priest thus am I dressed.

Only another head
I have, another heart and breast,
another music, making live not dead,
without whom I could have no rest:
In him I am well dressed.

Christ is my only head,
My alone only heart and breast,
My only music, striking me even dead;
That to the old man I may rest,
And be in him new dressed.

So holy in my head,
Perfect and light in my dear breast,
My doctrine tuned by Christ, (who is not dead,
But lives in me while I do rest)
Come people; Aaron's dressed.

The claim that Christ lives in our preaching while we do rest is the assurance that keeps preachers going after Easter.

III.

With this confidence in mind, we come to looking at the New Testament lectionary texts for Eastertide. John 20:19-23 is the brief but powerful story of Jesus' appearance to the disciples on the evening of the first Easter. When our text talks about the "fear of the Jews," it can unfortunately reinforce the ways in which we separate ourselves from our Jewish neighbors in ways that can move quickly toward the hateful. John's gospel was almost surely written by a Jew for Jews who believed in Jesus as Messiah. It was certainly written about a Jew.

From time to time when I preach from the Gospel of John, I start by saying a few words about the problems raised by John's feuds with his fellow Jews, the language he uses that can too easily translate into deeply unchristian claims of Christian superiority. But if we want to avoid preaching on "fear of the Jews," we want to acknowledge the value of preaching about fear. Of course all of us deal with personal fears on a regular basis, but in this text, the fear seems to be a fear based on the assumption that the crucified Jesus has been finally and entirely defeated and that we are without hope in the world.

I am not alone in noticing that in the United States, especially since September 11, 2001, we are often driven by fear. It finally struck me just recently that it takes two to make a terrorist. There is the person who does something destructive or threatening, and there is the person who is terrified.

If we are to fight a war on terror, perhaps we need to begin with the terror in ourselves—terror that concedes cherished rights and enduring principles because we are afraid. And what we are afraid of is that Christ is not risen; that God is not Lord; that history has somehow slipped out of God's hands, taking us along.

It does not take too much imagination to see how in our contemporary political discourse we are eager to follow the example of the terrified disciples and lock the doors. The fortress country locked against immigrants, the fortress church locked against the threats of secularism, the fortress soul locked against the possibility and the promise that Jesus keeps appearing just on our side of every locked door.

What he says of course is "Peace," "Shalom." That is a traditional Jewish greeting in the first century as now, but it also has the deeper meaning of peace, well being, confidence. The gift of God that drives away fears; the key to unlocking our doors. Jesus shows them his wounds, reminding us that the risen Lord is always the crucified Lord. Resurrection does not eliminate atonement; resurrection affirms and completes atonement.

When Jesus gives the power of forgiveness to the disciples, he gives the same power to us. The community that forgives sins is the embodiment of the shalom that Christ brings. The community that forgives sins casts out fear. It is a community that lives with open doors, that lives in the light of Easter.

John 20:24-31 is the familiar story of Thomas. Sometimes the story seems almost too familiar. What can we say about it this year? Of course many of the most important stories are the familiar stories. Of course we tell of Jesus' birth and crucifixion and empty tomb time and time again. There is no harm in thinking again this year about Thomas and saying the things that we have said before. Christ did not condemn

the doubter but blessed him. Thomas is a foreshadowing of so many of us on all the Sundays after Easter. We are all invited to share in the blessing of hearing about the great miracle that Thomas saw.

But perhaps there are a few less familiar insights to help our preaching. Because we are thinking about preaching after Easter, notice that the Gospel sets our story on the first Sunday after Easter. We can guess that in John's church, already the first day is resurrection day—both the first Easter and the first Sunday after Easter and every Sunday after that. John's gospel reminds us that on the day we gather, Christ is present too.

Some years ago I noticed that this pericope is not only a story about doubting Thomas; it is a story about disappointed Thomas. He was away on the great day of the first resurrection appearances, and he feels his own loss. Try reading the text with slightly different italics than usual. "Unless *I* see the mark of the nails in his hands and put *my* finger in the mark of the nails, and *my* hand in his side, I will not believe." He is disappointed.

Years ago I attended a Billy Graham rally with members of my church, including one woman who had always seemed to me an absolute model of confident piety. Billy Graham preached as he was wont to do about knowing Jesus as our personal savior and having an experience of the living Lord.

Afterwards, driving home, the woman who was so regular in her service to the church confessed, "I've been a Christian as long as I can remember, but I don't think I've ever met the living Lord or had Jesus in my heart." I know the language is peculiarly Baptist, but the sentiment is ecumenical: she was disappointed.

With my friend in mind, I have tried to preach Thomas for those who are disappointed. It is not that they don't believe resurrection is possible; it is that they are always left out of those resurrection appearances. I ask how Christ can be present in ways that are perhaps not so traditionally individual, but more communal. I ask whether there are more quiet assurances than the great evangelist's stress on a particular personal experience. I hold out hope that though we now see in a mirror darkly, one day we shall see face to face and know even as we are known.

Perhaps most important, in this sermon as in almost every sermon on Thomas, I move to the final blessing. "Thomas, have you believed because you have seen? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

In the Gospel of John, the first disciples are the eyewitnesses, and all the rest of us are ear-witnesses. We come to believe not so much because of what we have seen as because of what we have heard. By the time we get to the Sunday after Easter, our congregation is pretty much back to those who without trumpets or lilies have heard the Gospel week after week. Like all of us, they may be disappointed from time to time, but they keep showing up. John tells us what we need to tell them on the Sunday after Easter. (Maybe what we need to tell ourselves.) "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come—or are coming—or are hoping—to believe."

IV.

During the Sundays after Easter, we notice that the Revised Common Lectionary omits readings from the Old Testament and includes readings from the Book of Acts. As is so often the case with the lectionary, we notice the difference between lectionary time and canonical time. In the canon the story of Pentecost comes before Acts 3,4,

8, or 10 and is the presupposition that illumines and shapes those other stories.

In the lectionary we get to Acts 3, 4, 8, and 10 before the Holy Spirit descends in Jerusalem. Of course just as Easter is the presupposition of every sermon about Jesus, the first Pentecost is the presupposition of every story about the church. However, it may be helpful if you are preaching Acts to point out how the narrative unfolds in Luke's work in contrast to how it unfolds in the lectionary readings.

Alfred Loisy said famously that "Jesus preached the Kingdom and got the church." Loisy clearly assumed that this was a major disappointment, but for Luke and Acts, the church is a parable of the Kingdom—a foreshadowing and indeed a kind of embodiment of the fullness of what God intends for creation.

The Acts text for the second Sunday of Easter.

Acts 4:32-35, understandably concludes before the somewhat frightening cautionary tale of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11 but inexplicably omits the exemplary tale of Barnabas, whose practice, like his nickname, should provide encouragement for our congregations. The assigned text itself inevitably casts the shadow of Marx over the practice of the apostles—from each according to his or her capacity, to each according to his or her need. Whether this represents a normative early Christian practice or a little blip on the march toward a more entrepreneurial economy, the text rightly reminds us that the Easter life claims all of us, even our wealth, for the sake of the Risen Lord and his Kingdom. The church becomes the parable and the prophet of that claim.

The Acts text for the third Sunday of Easter is Acts 3:12-19.

As is too often the case, the suggested lection removes Peter's speech from its context. He is responding to the crowd's excitement at the healing of the crippled beggar. The sermon is an example of the theme of Pentecost preaching; Peter speaks what Pentecost declares, "God's deeds of power" (See Acts 2:11). Peter's speech itself makes entirely clear the link between God's mighty act in raising Jesus from the dead and the mighty act of the healing that has just taken place. While many of us are cautious about claiming physical healings or even religious reorientations as signs of God's transcendent power, Acts is entirely clear. Christ is risen. In part Christ is risen into the church. And when church heals or restores, it is witness to the gift of resurrection.

The Acts text for the fourth Sunday of Easter is Acts 8:26-40.

The story of Philip's baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch is one in a series of stories of how the power of the resurrection spreads, starting with the first witnesses at Easter, then Jews of every tongue at Pentecost, then the eunuch, perhaps a Gentile whose interest in Judaism has brought him to Jerusalem, and finally, as we shall see on the fifth Sunday after Easter, the power of Easter extends to touch the Gentiles as well.

As a professor of homiletics, I am pleased by the fact that when Philip evangelizes the eunuch, he starts by explaining a biblical text. This passage, which includes word and baptism, provides a nice balance to the story of the road to Emmaus in Luke 24, which includes word and meal. More than any other Gospel writer, Luke asks what it means for Christ to be present in the life of the church and says (among other things) what the magisterial reformers said: the risen Christ is present when the Gospel is

preached and the sacraments celebrated. Luke does not write about resurrection and then church; he writes about resurrection into Church. That is not all that resurrection means for Luke, but it is an inescapable implication of his two volume narrative.

For the fifth Sunday of Easter, the text from Acts is Acts 10:44-48.

These versions are the conclusion to the remarkable story in Acts 10 where Peter is persuaded that the good news of the risen Lord is intended for Gentiles as well as for Jews. In these verses the Holy Spirit validates that claim, descending upon Jews and Gentiles alike. It is of course entirely right to think that Acts 10 is about inclusion, but Luke always preaches inclusion for the sake of the Gospel. It is not just that we all come together; it is that we all come together under the power of the Spirit and in praise of the risen Lord. So we do not inclusively proclaim the goodness of inclusion; we inclusively proclaim the power of the God who raised Jesus from the dead.

The text for the sixth Sunday after Easter prepares us for Pentecost, just a week away.

We have already noted that Resurrection and Pentecost are both presuppositions for the texts from Acts assigned for the preceding weeks, so in an odd way, as far as Acts is concerned, we are ending at the beginning. The reading, Acts 1:15-17 and 21-26, somewhat strangely omits the sad story of the fate of Judas. The omission of these verses, along with the decision not to include the story of Ananias and Sapphira in the readings for the Second Sunday of Easter almost makes it seem as if those who design our lectionary want to keep our readings child friendly, or soothingly untroubling. Omitting judgment from Luke's narrative can make it inaccurately seem that God no longer insists that unfaithful actions have fateful consequences. Luke would be amazed.

In the choosing of Matthias, however, we have a concrete instance of what I claim Luke is about. The resurrection witnesses must continue because the resurrection continues. The way we bear witness to the ongoing resurrection is, of all things, to get our church structure right.

Resurrection faith is always more than loyalty to Christ's church. But it is never less than that. Neither the church nor the loyalty is optional.

V.

Finally, part of what we are pondering in this essay is not just what the preacher preaches after Easter, but how the preacher is able to preach after Easter. Despite all our attempts to celebrate every Sunday as the Lord's day and every Lord's day as resurrection, we preachers inevitably feel a kind of letdown after Easter or after any service and sermon that seems miraculously to show forth the Risen Lord. Inevitably, before we know it, it's Monday morning again, and there are only six days before we are supposed to do it again.

Maybe we can let church be a promise not only for our people, but for us. Maybe we can remember that this is not just the community where we minister, but the community where we receive ministry. This emphatically does not mean that the sermon is the place to turn yourself into a client and your congregation into therapists or that confessional preaching is a matter of confessing my ennui rather than Christ's triumph. But we need to find the ways and the corners of our church life where we are

supported and sustained and know the power of the risen Lord. In my own present pastoral experience, I have been astounded to discover that a small group I reluctantly agreed to lead has become an essential manifestation of the Body of Christ in my own life.

I think we need to be open to that kind of Easter surprise, maybe even expect it, certainly keep an eye open for it. If it is just too hard to find that in your own congregation, sneak over to Saint Anne's to take the eucharist some morning or catch the choir concert at the church across town. Let clergy groups be part of church for their members or take a Sunday sabbatical and go to Friends Meeting and sit there and don't say a thing. I think you will discover that Christ is risen indeed.