

Easter as Promise

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He was a young law student, retreating to his favorite spot in the mountains of western North Carolina to work for the summer as a counselor in a boys' camp. Late one night after the campers had finished their pranks and were fast asleep, he talked of his reservations about Christianity. "The church," he said, "claims too much. It makes these sweeping statements about how things have changed because of Jesus, but in fact they haven't changed. A preacher says in an Easter service how Jesus' rising from the dead has completely altered the human situation, and then you sing the 'Hallelujah Chorus.' But the world on Monday is no different. There are still crimes, broken families, and as much injustice as there has ever been. There's no real reason for all that rejoicing, unless you close your eyes to things."

The law student of course has a point. Easter in particular can become a time of unrealistic celebration. The story of the empty tomb seems so stupendous that we spokespersons for the faith make outlandish claims for what God has done for the world. After all, the two men walking to Emmaus are thoroughly transformed by the hidden presence of the risen Christ walking with them. But such transformation is not evident everywhere, and our extravagant claims simply don't make sense in the face of human suffering, violence, and threats of war. Ironically, the miracle of miracles so easily breeds a strain of triumphalism that ignores the distasteful and the untransformed and protects the celebrants from the need for self-criticism. As Douglas Hall puts it, the message of a risen, reigning Jesus, when sung in the presence of the victims of our common life, takes on an unreality "that has all the depth of a singing commercial."¹

I

How then can we celebrate Easter without triumphalism? The apostle Paul in his letters to the Corinthians faces just this dilemma. In light of the resurrection of Jesus, his readers are claiming too much. Their enthusiasm has led them to think they have already reached the goal of salvation. In baptism they have been endowed with a heavenly, spiritual body and thereby have lost any sensitivity to the fragile, incomplete, tragic dimension of human existence. The struggles of the pilgrimage are past; the goal has already been reached. They seem untouched by the nitty-gritty issues of community and social life. "Already you are filled! Already you have become rich!" (1 Cor. 4:8). The readers' theology apparently approximates that of the later Hymenaeus and Philetus "who have swerved from the truth by holding that the resurrection is past already" (2 Tim. 2:17-18). In short, the readers embrace "a realized resurrection."²

In the remarkable but complex argument of 1 Corinthians 15, Paul addresses the readers' faulty theology by declaring that the resurrection of Jesus is not so much a fulfillment of a promise as it is a promise to be fulfilled.³ The chapter begins with a restatement of the gospel that Paul has previously preached among the Corinthians and that they have already accepted. In a manner familiar to the readers, he recites the order, "that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures" (15:3-4). It is neither an idiosyncratic nor controversial message, just the commonly shared ABC's of the faith. In this basic creedal affirmation, Easter fulfills the ancient texts.

But then in the ensuing argument, the element of resurrection is turned in a different direction—toward the future. No longer merely the third element in a sequence, Jesus' resurrection is inextricably linked to the general resurrection of the dead, linked so completely that to deny the one is necessarily to deny the other. Christ is "the firstfruits," the first installment, which inaugurates and pledges the ultimate offering of the total crop (15:20). The term signifies both something incomplete and yet something hopeful. Christ's resurrection is *only* the first fruits, but as first fruits it *assures* the whole. The two resurrections are seen as only one, revealed in two temporal stages, the first promising the last.

Throughout the chapter, the consequences of denying the promissary character of the future are laid out. Though the argument is somewhat circular, it becomes clear that if no resurrection of the dead can be affirmed, then: "Christ has not been raised" (vv. 13, 16); "our proclamation has been in vain" (v. 14); "your faith has been in vain" (vv. 14, 17); God has been misrepresented (v. 15); "you are still in your sins" (v. 17); "we are of all people most to be pitied" (v. 18).

Though initially connected to death and burial, the raising of Jesus primarily functions in the argument of 1 Corinthians 15 in relation to God's future consummation. As Chris Beker has cogently put it, for Paul Jesus' resurrection is not the closure event on the incarnation but the inauguration of the new and final day.⁴ It anchors the promise of God's future. Paul's initial readers, who do not question Jesus' resurrection but think the future has already become present, have missed the word that Easter is fundamentally a promise.

It is worthwhile at this point to note the difference between a prediction and a promise. The former is a statement in advance that a particular happening will occur or a specific result will follow. We tend to search for predictions from wise people who can make "objective" and unbiased predictions, people who know the situation well but have no stake in the outcome. They are less likely to confuse the prediction with wishful thinking. A promise, however, is a pledge to do something specific. The one who promises gives his or her word to keep faith with the pledge made. The promiser is deeply involved in the fulfillment.

In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul is not concerned with predictions. In fact, the more specific he gets about the future the more opaque he becomes. Instead, he is concerned about a promise—not his own promise, but what he deems God's promise to be. The resurrection of Jesus is God's unconditional

commitment to an ultimate triumph over death, the last in a series of enemies to be subdued.

II

This apocalyptic understanding of Jesus' resurrection is not peculiar to 1 Corinthians 15. It appears in a variety of literary settings in Paul's letters and undergirds a number of different arguments. The audiences and their needs change, with the result that the promise of Easter is "heard" in differing ways. When one contemplates preaching the resurrection, it is helpful to isolate at least four types of "audiences" to which the promise is addressed.

First, there is the community at Corinth (mentioned above), with its unbounded spirituality. To such a group the notion of Easter as a promise acts like a brake to say, "Hold on! Not yet!" Set over against the future, the present is unfulfilled, incomplete, transient, for the time being. Paul's word puts space between now and the consummation, space during which the community's attention is directed away from speaking in the tongues of angels to the struggle against rulers, authorities, and powers throughout the world.

To readers who relish living a kind of heaven-on-earth and who are eager to avoid confrontation and transcend the sordid, Easter as promise is bound to seem like a downer. It spoils the illusion of a limitless fulfillment now. To the "I-want-what-I-want-when-I-want-it" types, whether of the materialistic or spiritual variety, it comes across as a damper on their ecstasy. Paul, in fact, does not see it that way. Knowing Easter as a promise enables adherents to view the present with sober eyes but at the same time not to blink. It keeps them from constantly discovering mirages on the horizon and makes them suspicious of proposals that smell like a quick fix. It energizes and liberates and makes possible a persistent and positive engagement with the present. "Therefore, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the word of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (15:58).

A second audience is the fatigued, who border on hopelessness, whose weariness with ministry or even with life itself leaves them at the edge of their resources and void of vision. In writing a later letter to the Corinthians Paul speaks autobiographically about such dilemmas. He thrusts himself into the argument as an example of the way ministry often goes. Ministry is marked by distress, anguish of heart, and tears (2 Cor. 2:4). It is vulnerable to affliction, perplexity, persecution, knockout punches, a veritable giving-up-to-death for Jesus' sake (2 Cor. 4:8-11). A catalogue of Paul's ministerial experiences tells a woeful story (2 Cor. 6:4-10). There is more than enough reason to change vocations, to get another cause, to find a safe haven among family and friends.⁵

But remarkably, the intent of these texts is to encourage readers and to offer hope. In the midst of the afflictions, a renewal is taking place that has its source in the unseen and still future eschatological glory. Throughout the discussion of ministry in 2 Corinthians, mention is repeatedly made of confidence and boldness (3:4, 12; 4:1, 13, 16; 5:6), indicating that the difficulties, though real and harsh, are not ultimately intimidating. The secret is stated in 4:14. "We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us with Jesus, and

will bring us with you into his presence." Easter is God's pledge that the future is worth waiting for, something beyond description, something that not only prevents burnout but provides incredible energy for the colossal tasks at hand.

A third audience addressed in Paul's letters is those who are grieving and perplexed about death. They fret about the delay of Jesus' return. The tombs of their deceased family members and friends make them doubt the future. Apparently, some members of the Thessalonian community in their struggles have reached a crisis, making their grief resemble "others who have no hope" (1 Thess. 4:13). Paul's pastoral strategy hinges on Jesus' resurrection. "Since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus God will bring with him those who have died" (4:14). The dead first and then the living are to be united with the returning Lord, a word intended to be repeated in the community for mutual support and comfort (4:18).

Earlier in 1 Thessalonians, modern readers have learned about the Thessalonians' faith (which unlike the Corinthians' theology anticipates Jesus' parousia and does not bask in the rays of a supposed fulfillment): "how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming" (1:9-10). In both chapters one and four of 1 Thessalonians, what is promised by Easter is not specifically the resurrection of the dead but Jesus' return. The stress in both, however, falls on the sustaining and invigorating power of hope, which enables the readers to move beyond energy-sapping grief to a life pleasing to God (4:1).

The fourth audience may seem a strange one in relation to the other three. This apocalyptically oriented theology of Paul's is aimed at those who disdain the physical character of human life. Apparently at Corinth as well as in other communities, certain people clung to the dualism of their Hellenistic culture. They drew a sharp line between the human body and the human spirit. Some thought the body was the source of evil and something to be suppressed, leading them to an ascetic style of life. Others, operating off the same premise, drew an opposite conclusion. They thought the body of no consequence in light of the spirit and thus embraced a misguided freedom. It was easy for them to turn Christian liberty into license.

In Paul's letters a number of texts express a link between Jesus' resurrection and the future in contexts dealing with the "body" (e.g., Rom. 8:10-11; 1 Cor. 15:35-44). We shall note one--1 Corinthians 6. When the issue of immorality is confronted, the text reads: "The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body" (6:13). The reason the body is not to be defiled by prostitution is because it will be raised. "And God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power" (6:14). This eschatological anticipation, based on Jesus' resurrection, provides one of the pillars for what Leander Keck calls Paul's "body ethics."⁶

This connection drawn by Paul confers immense significance on the concreteness of human existence, especially if one understands the "body" not merely in individualistic terms but as "that piece of the world which we ourselves are and for which we bear responsibility."⁷ Paul's usage here refers to the body in its relatedness, as part and parcel of the created order, in its

functioning in connection with other “bodies.” Easter as promise, somewhat ironically, undergirds a this-worldly ethic, a call to responsibility regarding the structures and relationships of human life. Rather than encouraging a suppression or an ignoring of the body, it demands an accountability for the physical character of both our corporate and individual life.

III

A brief survey of these four “audiences” addressed in Paul’s letters reveals the powerful as well as the promise-ful character of the Easter message. Jesus’ resurrection as the pledge of God’s future is a message whose edge cuts in amazingly varied ways. It is multidirectional in its intent and with an extraordinary vitality addresses groups as diverse as unrestrained spiritualists, faithful servants threatened with burnout, believers paralyzed by grief and perplexity, and converts who have a difficult time appreciating their God-given bodies. The texts insist on having their own say—and still do. They address yet other audiences, modern audiences, not necessarily parallel to Paul’s readers. They offer a reenvisioning of the present because of God’s vow about the future.

The young law student was right to be wary of a Christianity that claims too much. Even the miracle of Easter is no reason for undue celebrations that ignore the massive injustices in our world or the hordes of hungry people or the countless stories of personal tragedies that cry out for resolution. There was a black Friday before there was an Easter morning, and at least some of the early Christians could not let the latter erase the memory of the former. But Easter *promises* something big. My friend did not like to sing the “Hallelujah Chorus” on Easter Sunday, but its words put the promise well:

“The kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of our Lord and
his Christ,
And he shall reign forever and forever.”

NOTES

¹ Douglas J. Hall, *Lighten Our Darkness: Toward an Indigenous Theology of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 140-41.

² The Corinthians no doubt had other problems as well, but this wrong-headed eschatology is at the root of Paul’s critique.

³ A fuller treatment of 1 Corinthians 15 can be found in my *A Theology of the Cross: The Death of Jesus in the Pauline Letters* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 80-108.

⁴ J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 156. Beker speaks of Jesus’ resurrection as “both crucial and provisional. It is crucial because it marks the beginning of the new creation; it is provisional because it looks forward to the consummation of that beginning” (159).

⁵ Alexis de Toqueville defined individualism as “a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself.” From “Of Individualism in Democracies,” cited in *Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, eds. Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 11.

⁶ Leander E. Keck, *Paul and His Letters* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 111-16.

⁷ Ernst Käsemann, *New Testament Questions of Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 135.