

Easter Preaching in a North American Context

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Introduction

Of all sermons, Easter Sunday sermons must be the most difficult to prepare and preach no matter where you are in the world, but in North America the difficulty is surely multiplied. The universal problem of preaching on Easter has to do with the realization that if the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the unique miracle and mystery that faith believes it is then it must by no means be “explained” in a sermon! The first Christians didn’t *explain* the resurrection, they *proclaimed* it. Yet sermons unless they are to devolve into sanctimonious froth, must make some attempt at a reasonable interpretation of the faith. How, then, can the preacher honour the essential mystery of what occurred on “the third day” and at the same time do justice to the inherent need of faith to “seek understanding” (Anselm)?

In Canada and the United States, this universal dilemma is complicated by a cultural factor which, while it is not exclusive to our context, is particularly prominent here. I refer of course to the public expectation, built up over the past century or two, that Easter Sunday is *the* day that Christians give heart and voice to their own particular version of our society’s official optimism. Not discounting the probability that some Easter-Sunday-Christians are at worship for genuinely Christian reasons, large numbers of North Americans both in and outside the churches still look to Easter to undergird their essential faith in “the system.” They want to hear that “our way of life” is after all right and good; that “every cloud has a silver lining,” that “it will all come out in the wash,” that “you can’t keep a good man down!”

There is of course something entirely human about craving that sort of confirmation, and particularly at a time when there is so much evidence to the contrary! But it does complicate matters for preachers of the Christian gospel on Easter Sunday morning in North America. Because the *kerygma* isn’t just a stained glass version of New World optimism, the positive outlook in pietistic packaging. And when Christian ministers give in to the temptation to let it be that (and it *is* a temptation!), they need to consider carefully what they are doing.

Apart from distorting the original message of the Christian movement, they are providing yet another occasion for North Americans to avoid any serious self-examination. They are offering comfort instead of truth, cheap hope instead of authentic hope, that is, the kind that must be worked out in full consciousness of the things that make for despair.

I think I would resent it if I were someone working hard to turn the North American mind toward reality - say, a member of Amnesty International- and I heard Christians at Eastertime saying that God had set everything to rights again by bringing Jesus back from the dead. There are some encouraging signs in our society today that we could become people more sincerely oriented towards truth, and not just “the pursuit of happiness.” Ecologically-minded Americans and Canadians have begun to make their point about our wasteful and wanton ways with nature; movements concerned for world peace and justice have begun to sensitize us about the often dubious role our nations have been playing in the global community; native peoples, blacks, and other minorities have caused many middle-class whites to

wonder whether the civilization Columbus and company brought to these shores was all that superior, after all; women have raised questions about sexual harassment and unequal treatment that few males can wholly ignore. The church performs no good office within this society when, perhaps without intending to, it conveys the message that everything is just fine.

And precisely that is the message that is conveyed by Easter Sunday preaching that has not been hammered out on the anvil of a genuinely *contextual* theological reflection. Contextual theology asks not only what is present in scripture and tradition, but how particular variations on what is there *function* in a given society. Easter Sunday sermons that have not reckoned with the fact that this particular Christian festival, even more than Christmas, is one that has been co-opted by a society that wants to continue promulgating a highly “upbeat” self-image may well end by casting the pearls of the tradition before the swine of the image-makers and advertisers!

In this short statement, my intention is only to draw attention to some of the things that ought, in my opinion, to be considered by Christians in North America charged with the responsibility of bearing witness to Jesus Christ on Easter Sunday.

A Matter of “Sheer Grace”

The resurrection of Jesus is a matter of sheer grace, not of nature. It has nothing to do with “the flowers that bloom in the Spring, tra-la” or the thought that “if winter comes, can spring be far behind?” (Shelley). The evangelists may on occasion use nature to illustrate aspects of the meaning of Jesus’ death and resurrection (John 12:24, e.g.), but both the Gospels and Epistles are clear that the resurrection was God’s possibility, not in any respect a “natural” occurrence.

So *unnatural* was it, in fact, that according to Mark’s account it struck terror into the hearts of the women who were the first witnesses of the unheard-of turn of events. One could wish that something of their “astonishment” (Mark. 16:8) and modesty (even reticence!) were retained in more of our Easter preaching, which for the most part creates the impression that resurrection holds no surprise for us whatsoever.

To say that Jesus’ resurrection is a matter of sheer grace is to say that it belongs to the same theological genre as the biblical concepts of creation and justification. Creation “out of nothing” (*ex nihilo*), justification of the sinner, and resurrection of the dead; all three mean that what is central to this whole tradition is belief in a God who makes possible what is not possible (Matt. 19:25-26!), and not for the sake of *impressing* us with the divine capacity for working miracles; rather, for the sake of *saving* us!

Faith, Not Sight

Sola gratia, sola fide - by grace alone, through faith alone. This “material principle” of the Reformers applies conspicuously to the resurrection. To the sheer giftedness of “eternal life” as God’s possibility for us (my first point), there corresponds our reception of it - *through faith*.

Faith is not “sight” (II Cor. 5:7; Heb. 11:1). When people turn the resurrection into what they imagine is some sort of “proof” that the gospel is true, they are substituting “sight” for faith - that is, trust in God. We cannot experience Jesus’ resurrection in the way that we experience daily occurrences which we “see”; and

even if we could it would not likely make much difference to us. The original disciple community did, according to its own testimony, actually *see* the risen Christ; but it was not until the advent of the Holy Spirit (the disciples' own *internal* "change of heart," their *metanoia*) that the *meaning* of Christ's resurrection grasped them existentially. Apparently apart from their new, Spirit-induced sense of its meaningfulness, the mere "fact" of the risen Christ only added to the confusion they already felt on account of Jesus' execution.

It is not the resurrection that produces faith but rather faith that receives and rejoices in the resurrection. While it is certainly legitimate for historical research to ask about the basis of Christ's resurrection in "fact," "faith in the Resurrection of the Christ is neither positively nor negatively dependent on it."¹ Only as one is oneself caught up and changed by the encounter with the risen Christ; only as one finds oneself "dead and buried" with Christ and "raised to newness of life" with and in him (Romans Ch. 6), only then can one comprehend something of the deep significance of Easter.

The Reign of the Crucified One

A culture that is based on the "Religion of Progress" (George P. Grant) and enthralled by the idea of "winning" demands symbols of triumph. That is why Easter, reinterpreted on the basis of the credo of Modernity, has been the primary cultic celebration of North American "Christendom." Apart from a few older European forms of the church, notably Lutheranism, Protestants in North America traditionally have downplayed "Good Friday" in their haste to get on with Easter! The Day of Resurrection, not only isolated from the larger story of the Christ's Passion but understood as *surpassing* the Cross, has been our favoured religious feastday, for the very good reason that it could seem to undergird our whole continental experiment in victorious living. when the court religion announces that we are now living on this side of Good Friday, that message easily translates into - or already, symbolically, represents - the sociohistorical belief that America, unlike those complicated, vengeance-ridden, class-bound societies of the old worlds from which "we" came, has put all that evil, death, and sin behind it and is marching into the future with banners unfurled. Thus Easter becomes little more than a religious rendition of the American Dream, a pageant generically not unlike the one that was rehearsed most recently with the victory celebrations of the Persian Gulf War in Washington and New York.

The trouble with this kind of religious and political triumphalism is that it ends by having to lie about reality. Theoretical victories and rhetorical triumphs are achieved easily enough. But to make them seem true to life you have to sweep all the nastiness of existence under the proverbial rug. It isn't surprising that there has been so much lying in public life on this continent recently. When you're bound to our kind of national mythology, the poverty, failure, immorality, and sheer finitude that has to be shoved under that well-used carpet soon accumulates. The discrepancy between the theory and reality becomes so conspicuous after a while that the usual rhetoric fails to conceal it. We are living with a very lumpy carpet these days!

The "logic of the cross" (Reinhold Niebuhr) challenges all forms of human bravado and triumphalism. The object of the gospel, which Paul (remember!) summarizes in the phrase, "Jesus Christ *and him crucified*" (I Cor. 2:2), is not to make of us people who overlook everything that is wrong with the world so that we can

seem cheerful and positive as we go about the world unchanged and undisturbed; it is to make us more truthful about what is actually there, which is, usually, profoundly disturbing! The intention of Easter, accordingly, is not to help us repress and suppress all the “bad things” that cause us anxiety, but to give us the courage to face them.

We *may* face them - we *may* enter, consciously, that darkness - because we do not have to face them alone; the darkness is inhabited. All appearances to the contrary, the One who is really “in charge” of the drama of history is that same One who assumed solidarity with the victims of history, the despised and rejected, the marginalized, the losers, which, in the final analysis, includes all of us, one way or another.

In other words, far from *surpassing* Good Friday, Easter Sunday is about the reign of the Crucified One. The cross of Christ is still at the centre of this gospel; and it must continue to be at the centre until “the cross of *human experience*” (Möltmann) has been wholly overcome. For when, religiously, we relegate *Jesus’* cross to the past, we also shut our eyes to the suffering that is still very much part of human experience. And unless we are given the boldness to enter imaginatively and concretely *into* that suffering, we shall never discover - what is the final, ethical meaning of Easter! - the courage to transform it.

The Resurrection - A Political Statement

The cross of Jesus Christ is about God’s abiding commitment to this world;² the resurrection, as “a chapter within the theology of the cross” (Käsemann), is about God’s determination to change the world.

There is a resounding political presupposition behind the proclamation, “Jesus Christ is risen!” It is that the work of that One who announced his “agenda” with words from the prophets about healing and liberation (Luke 4:18f.) *is continuing*. It has not been silenced by the powers of death; it is “going on.” And implicit in that declaration is the belief that we, who announce it, have somehow been given what we do not by nature possess - the determination, imagination and daring to participate in that work: to become stewards of life in the kingdom of death.

In North America, and perhaps especially amongst the middle-class people who still show up in churches on Easter Sunday mornings, it is terribly easy to ignore the presence of Death in our world, and therefore to miss the point of the victory of Life that is proclaimed at Easter. I suspect that half the unreality of most Easter services is the consequence of our failure to remember, *particularly* on that occasion, the deadly and demonic realities against which the risen Christ directs - and would have *us* direct! - his life-giving energies. It would help to put some honesty into Easter if preachers took the occasion, not only to reaffirm the livingness of the Christ and his judging, freeing work but also to remind their listeners of what the life of resurrection pits itself against.

The following “table” would be useful in that connection:

If the entire world consisted of 100 people:

67 would be poor;

55 would have an annual income of less than \$600;

50 would be homeless or live in substandard housing;

50 would be without adequate, safe drinking

water;
47 would be illiterate;
35 would be hungry and malnourished;
6 would be Americans and would hold 33 percent
of the world's income;
1 would have a college education³

Whether we like it or not, whether the congregations we serve like it or not, the gospel of the crucified and risen Christ is a *political* statement; that is, against the sort of world mirrored in the above model it posits a world of "justice, peace, and the integrity of creation."⁴ At no time in the Christian year is the political dimension of the gospel more unavoidable than at Easter.

Of course, this "unavoidable" dimension has been and is regularly avoided. Likely it will continue to be avoided in countless churches in North America once again this Eastertide. It will be set aside in favour of sentimental liberal testimonies to the power of life and love against death and hate, or pulpit-thumping fundamentalist declarations that the tomb was really empty, or pietistic assurances that believers are certainly going to be raised again at the last. But thinking Christian preachers should ponder carefully whether the aura of make-believe that hovers over every Christian congregation at Easter - especially Easter! - isn't closely connected with the failure of rich Christians to contemplate what it might mean if we took very seriously the risen life and reign of *that* One in a world like ours.

NOTES

¹ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. II (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), 155.

² I have developed this thought in *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1989), 22ff.

³ Michael True, *Ordinary People: Family Life and Global Values* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), 123.

⁴ The theme of the World Council of Churches, adopted at its Sixth General Assembly in Vancouver, 1983.