

Radical Resurrection: Easter Preaching in a Time of Cultural Crisis

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Resurrection! The Easter announcement continues to be startling, astonishing! Try as we may to contain it or even to constrict it, we never quite succeed. A tenacious piece of the glad word, even in the annual routine, simply refuses to remain tamed or impotent. Liturgical familiarity never quite exhausts the phrases: "Christ is risen! ...He is risen indeed!" "Stunning," to use a word often employed in these pages to unleash, if not create, gracious, long dormant and life-giving realities.

Resurrection! The announcement tantalizingly calls us to new life.

But that is just the problem. Despite our protestations, we have grown comfortable in and accustomed to "old life." Not quite "death" but shuffling footsteps and muffled voices and well-shouldered duty and despair. Such conditions are our friends. Just now, some very near to me are caught up in an orgy of agony and enjoying every minute of it. "Being supportive," as we say, is all well and good, but it is seldom marked by new life.

We diminish resurrection best, or neutralize it, simply by not allowing it the legitimacy of being resurrection, the intrusion of the end-time in power and in awe. We do not take it seriously, as resurrection! Such treatment fits in a world where "nothing is serious anymore," as Susan Sontag said recently. Resurrection becomes an aesthetic event, perhaps. Not in the grand sense of aesthetics as the glorious and faithful servant of a mystic or even transcendent reality. Resurrection becomes aesthetic as a pleasant moment, like an evening at the symphony or the forty-five-minute walking tour that exhausts the British National Gallery. Nothing is newly defined, or redefined, or recast. No new reality orders life. The idea of resurrection becomes momentarily enjoyed, even nodded over reassuringly. Which cannot be called a bad thing; merely a pleasant thing, distracting. And once the moment is passed - maybe its aura lasts even a week! - then it is the shuffle and the muffled and the well-shouldered again. Our idols go unchallenged, our power undisturbed, our despair unredeemed.

Or, did something momentous truly happen on the little hill that looked like a skull outside the city wall? Something bloody real? The end foretasted in power? Where nails-into-flesh and spear-into-side, tools of an unwitting assault by the responsible powers, political and religious--calculated, of course; after all, they were charged with maintaining order and orthodoxy which had been endlessly tested and provoked by this unreasonable rabbi until they had no other choice - where nails-into-flesh and spear-into-side unleashed the wonderful and awful sovereignty of a redeeming God, tenaciously in love with all of us, especially the little ones, the ones who ache. What can you say? At best they were blind, or chose to be. "They know not what they do."

Something real happened there that breathes with life. It must thereby forever expose and defeat this world's pretense to power, though this world continues with a bold and seductive front. God, in a frail and vulnerable human form, chose--astonishing!--in the cross to engage death at the heart of all that destroys us.

God prevailed.

It was “finished” in a moment, when the Temple veil was parted, and the earth shook, and the caves gave up their dead. It is voiced in a word, not unlike the word spoken in creation, “and it was so.” Not unlike “a loud voice...from the throne, saying, ‘It is done!’” (Revelation 16:17). Thereafter it has been merely skirmish and dirty little consequence. The witness to the God who prevails is there in a word: resurrection!

So, what can we say?

“Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God....

“Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns....”

Revelation 19:1.6

Suppose--to take another view of it--suppose we take resurrection seriously. That is, suppose we see. Suppose we know that God prevails, that there is new life, that the masked and distorted truth about ourselves and one another and our world is finally, fully exposed. Suppose our sins, so carefully counted, now total up to...so much rubbish in the eyes of the Judge! Suppose the hold of the Prince of Darkness is truly broken, though he is still pretender to the throne.

And suppose we know this, not simply as knowledge to hold our minds with description or explanation--“objectively true”--or as merely an emotional high that credentials us as true believers. Suppose we know resurrection in the Hebrew sense of “to know”--that is, immediately and passionately and intimately, in ways that recast our lives and redefine what is true and real. What then?

Then, resurrection becomes for us authentically radical. There is a certain redundancy in the phrase: radical resurrection. It is God’s action in Jesus Christ that defies every rationality. It is clearly from beyond--not “of this world.” Like all miracles, yet it is the great miracle. Resurrection in its essence, by definition, is radical.

But I can find no other way to shake our view of resurrection free from its entombment in accommodation. It has been privatized in the service of individual survival. It has been “naturalized” through identification with all the budding out of spring, especially tulips and daffodils. If there is anything not natural, it is resurrection! Even the beauty and aroma of lilies have been duplicitously employed. They serve as something of an Easter narcotic, an opiate we might have said in another time. But then, when resurrection bursts upon us and yet it is largely trivialized, when the announcement is only accommodated, then it becomes in fact a numbing narcotic. Once tasted, we believe we need it. We come to crave it. We are habitually sedated.

In a word, resurrection has been domesticated. Incredibly this astonishing event, so revealing of the “other,” becomes massaged into our life-schemes as reenforcement for the “same.” Things not as they are in the employ of things as they are! So, for resurrection to burst upon us as radical can never be painless or free of threat to our contrived security, and especially to the systems of this world’s power.

Let me simply point toward resurrection’s taming. It is the savvy self-defense of identities and values resident in our culture. Here, there is no need for an exhaustive analysis. Pursue it in such recent works as *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (James Davison Hunter, Basicbooks, New York, 1991). But let me merely point that way, with the help of the work of my colleague, Jan G. Linn (*Christians Must Choose: The Lure of Culture and the Command of Christ*, CBP Press, St. Louis, 1985).

Dr. Linn used the image of a wedge. Enculturation, wherein the values of culture dominate or flatten our beliefs and practices, acts as an effective wedge between the risen Lord and the Church. When a felled tree was being prepared as firewood by my father, with the swing of a great sledge he would drive a large steel wedge--an ugly thing!-- into a log too thick for burning. It needed splitting. Even hard wood could not resist. The struck log fell apart. The wedge intruded at the core. That is the picture called to my mind. The values and practices of culture come as a wedge between Christ and his Church, which does not need splitting!

The jargon of analysis protects us from the immediate ways in which the power of culturally formed values capture life. Listen instead to the popular phrases. Dr. Linn identifies several of them. They alert us.

"Bigger is better." Size becomes the crucial component of power. It struts in the garb of "how much" and "how many." It knows what "counts." Born and nourished in the commercial world where it has both a necessary and legitimate function, its transfer into the arena of value and meaning reduces both our human grasp of reality and our freedom. Its instrumental use then pretends to power, and becomes embraced as value. Line quantitative boasts up against resurrection and what do we hear? The voice from the "other" answers the inquiry of the rich man, "Go...sell...give...come...follow..." (Matthew 19:21). We long have prayed, "Thine in the kingdom and the power...." The power of God in resurrection is not quantitative, and it reduces all such claims to power to pretence and impotence.

"Secure the future." It is the lifeblood of insurance schemes, and it walks in step with savings accounts. It parades "perpetual care" for cemetery lots. It becomes the preoccupation of those who pursue security in all its forms. They become the servants of institutional preservation. Put such a cultural mandate beside an Abraham who went out "not knowing" (Hebrew 11:8) or a Jesus who "has no where to lay his head" (Matthew 8:21), and one begins to suspect that the homeless among us may have a better grasp of resurrection than we who have known nothing more than shelter and warmth. Surely Jesus had no foreknowledge of his resurrection; otherwise the risk of the night and the prayer in the garden are robbed of integrity. Or, as Dr. William Baird once commented, "Anyone can get through a bad weekend!" Risk, not security, is the way of resurrection. It allows us to trust God! After all, God's future is the only future we have.

"I'm religious...I go to church every Sunday...." The veneer of religiousness is most apparent when the organized religious community becomes the central focus and expression of believing. It is then nonserious religion. It pumps denominational identity, organizational loyalty, the church "plant," operational efficiency, and institutional achievement goals not very different from any body of institutional life marked by a mild case of social responsibility. What of a body of believers born of the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ? What of an empty tomb that marks the beginning of a new age, with new values and a new clarity about God's redeeming authority in the midst of life? What of being "in" but not "of" the world? Resurrection is a witness to the way of the cross as this world's form of religious integrity. It is the risen Lord who validates the words Jesus spoke, "If any want to become my followers, let them...take up their cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34).

Next to "God and country" in popular cultural values--that is, the "Americanization" of the Christian gospel, wherein there is an unholy cohesion of the two, with neither conflict nor even dynamic engagement--"two sides of the same coin"--next to "God and country" is "My God and I," the privatization of faith. It is born of the

loneliness required of those who aspire to lead an acquisitive and highly competitive economic mechanism. "Get," not "give" and "against," not "with," become the watchwords. They insist on a God essentially private. Evangelism becomes defined by a private question ("Are you saved?") and a merely personal proclamation ("Jesus died for my sins."). The outcome consists of a religious system in which "my soul" is far more important than the soul of anyone else, and what happens to my soul eternally preoccupies my religiousness, inevitably at the expense of the lives of my brothers and sisters in this world. But resurrection is cosmic! When Jesus wept over the death of Lazarus, his tears are hardly exhausted by personal sorrow. Rather, they gather up the bystanders at the scene and generations after who are blind to resurrection. His weeping is for all! To "Americanize" or "privatize" is to become so captive to cultural perceptions of reality that resurrection has little chance to reorder our reality and free us from the weight of ourselves.

Turn now to the texts of this year's lections for the Easter season. To see them as astonishing, to engage them as reliable witnesses to the act of a daring God, not captive to either orderliness or consistency as we tend to measure them, is to allow resurrection to come as radical.

On Easter Sunday, the sermon of Peter in Caesarea flows with astonishing claims, irony, and power (Acts 10:34-43). Peter recounts a message to the people of Israel, but that message is about peace in Jesus Christ, which leaves no way for this Jesus to be less than "Lord of all," not of Israel alone. This Jesus did good and healed, yet "they" hanged him on a tree. But God raised him, and, says Peter, we ate and drank with him. This is no ordinary event!

Its setting--in the home of Cornelius--makes this message extraordinary squared! Peter and the believers from Joppa on the premises of a Roman centurion. Already this risen Lord has led them into quarters off limits and into the company of those normally avoided or scorned. The world is entirely new! Narrow limits define the precincts of death. But Jesus is Lord of all, and Peter and the others are there, and God's Spirit fell upon them in that place "just as (God gave the Spirit) to us," according to the later retelling (Acts 15:81). The risk of inclusion marks the world of resurrection.

The gospel lesson for this Easter has us listening again to the story of his appearance to Mary in the garden. The empty tomb, the missing body, serve only as negative witnesses. She spurns the angels and misses what they might have said. The drama heightens as she on turning sees the risen Lord, yet only through veiled eyes. She mistakes him for the gardener. Even his words to her are not enough. Despite her protest he addresses her by name: "Mary!" She turns again, not a casual detail, and calls him by title "Rabbouni!" A familiar title, even an affectionate one marked by respect, we may suppose. But he replies, somewhat curiously, "Do not hold me...." There is no record of any movement that suggests a clutching or a clinging on her part. It is the word "Rabbouni," the title, that, I think, reaches to constrict him. It arises out of past ties and old journeys. It tries to define the new in terms of familiar comforts. It permits him to return to established relationships and camaraderies. He is the same Jesus! He is with us again! He didn't really die!

Continuity with the Jesus he had been is one thing, clearly affirmed in the account. But captivity to his history, the meaning of what has happened exhausted in reassurance to grieving hearts that nothing has really changed? Hardly! "Mary," he seems to say, "you see but not quite. I do not come back to you as I have been with you. Nothing will be the same. Tell them 'I am ascending to my Father....,' who is

your Father and their Father, my God and your God. And then you will begin to see the scope and depth and height of resurrection.” It may be captured in the words of her report, not “I have seen *Jesus*,” but she uses Peter’s word, “I have seen *the Lord*.” In Acts 2:22-32, the heart of the Pentecost sermon, the radical logic is laid out: God planned, you crucified, God raised. Explain that reasonably if you can! Ours is a salvation beyond our striving, in a culture where we are taught to live and succeed by our own wits and muscle. God is that sort of illogical God! This is now a different world.

Turn then to I Peter (1:3-9). There are stirring words that sound oratorical and overladen until they are put in their context. They are addressed to those second generation witnesses in Asia Minor who knew in their own lives the nomenclature of believing. The phrases are too familiar: “suffer various trials,” “tested by fire.” It justifies those large phrases: “a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead....” Persecution in their world was simply the way it was, but the God who raised Jesus is faithful still. This is an incredibly good word if we know the inroads of culture in our time and the costs of living in a radically different way.

The account of Thomas (John 20:19-31), the conclusion, no doubt, of the Gospel of John at one point, is astonishing. The risen Lord enters the company of the disciples through doors locked in fear, it says. “Peace!” he speaks. It is the word of the crucified one who has been raised; the stigmata confirm it. It is John’s Pentecost. But Thomas is not there. In the familiar account of testing and finally believing, we see the struggle of one confronted with a reality that makes no sense, yet cannot be denied. It yields at last the only appropriate affirmation: “My Lord and my God!” Then the book closes with Jesus’ timeless blessing for those who struggle to live in a world defined by a miracle and explained by resurrection: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (John 20:29).

To walk on briefly through the season, note in Acts a church that becomes a community not of itself but through a risen Lord. This is a church transcending boundaries not out of its own initiative but in response to a God who is loose in the world to save them from a corrupt generation and reconcile them to one another. Luke recounts the story of the risen Lord walking with two to Emmaus. He is revealed in the breaking of the bread, only to vanish in a moment. It suggests that there is a lot more going on at the Table of the Lord than is often recognized! It is a fearful and wonderful place--his Table where, the experience of the generations confirms, he is known in the breaking of the bread. See the church again as an astonishingly different body of people who are freed from acquisitiveness and care for one another in gladness (Acts 2:42-47). Slavery is transcended by the call to a new order, rooted in a radically different sense of reality, one that reorders all relationships. This is something other than social engineering, one may suppose, and far more pervasive. As John tells of Jesus as the Shepherd (John 10:1-10), the Pharisees (thieves and strangers to the flock) are not failures out of intellectual or religious problems but because of an unwillingness to respond to the reordering of life that comes with belonging to the Shepherd. In the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:55-60), it is the martyr’s vision of a risen Lord that the Council cannot stand. The accusers are accused! Power is engaged. For if the vision is true, then those who stone Stephen are the enemies of God. John’s great claim for Jesus, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life....,” cannot be claimed for the world until we are claimed by it for ourselves.

The season unfolds with witness after witness to the astonishing meaning of resurrection. For these passages there is no way to muffle the reordering of life itself.

We live in a whole new reality! What does it mean if tomorrow we *don't* die? What does it mean if bodies don't stay in tombs? What if we can't count on "death and taxes" as inevitable?

In tamed presentations of an empty tomb, so strange to Scripture, Easter becomes a puny or sentimental routine. We leave manipulated and still asking, drugged or simply bored.

But if God raised Jesus from the dead--and if God is that sort of God--then we are living a whole new setting. The future is open and finally unthreatening. The end is not a timid conclusion but a magnificent resolution before the throne of God. The powers of culture that reach to define and control are exposed as puny idols. Their frantic orgy is a death dance. They still have the power to damage and even to destroy. But God raised Jesus from the dead, and that Jesus sits at God's right hand. That Jesus, though they nailed him, did finally conquer in a moment. That Jesus who prays for his own "has been there." And when we are bold enough to take up our crosses in an alien time and culture, we can take courage from his words of great caring: "Holy Father, protect them....so that they may be one, as we are one." It is the prayer of the risen Lord.