

# *Homiletical Notes for Eastertide*

Thomas G. Long

*Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey*

In her memoir, *One Writer's Beginnings*, Eudora Welty describes the way powerful human experiences often reveal more of their depth when they are viewed in retrospect:

Suddenly a light is thrown back, as when your train makes a curve, showing that there has been a mountain of meaning rising behind you on the way you've come, is rising there still, proven now through retrospect.

It seems to me, writing of my parents now in my seventies, that I see continuities in their lives that weren't visible to me when they were living. Even at the times that have left me my most vivid memories of them, there were connections between them that escaped me. . . . [I] see them, perhaps, as greater mysteries than I knew. Writing fiction has developed in me an abiding respect for the unknown in a human lifetime and a sense of where to look for the threads, how to follow, how to connect, find in the thick of the tangle what clear line persists. The strands are all there; to the memory nothing is ever really lost.<sup>1</sup>

So it is with the church during Eastertide. Poised between the pinnacle of Easter and the burst of Pentecostal energy which will impel it into the world with a message and a mission, the church pauses before it plunges. The stories of Jesus, now complete, lie behind, the way of Christ lies ahead, and the church, seeking "how to follow" on the way, remembers those stories once again. This time, though, they are remembered *whole*, as we search for "the connections between them that escaped" us. We are confident that "the strands are all there: to the memory nothing is ever really lost."

The New Testament itself was written from this retrospective vantage point, and Eastertide preaching climbs to the same summit, attempts to gain the same view.

## *The Season*

There are fifty days in Eastertide, a period which includes Easter itself as well as other Sundays. Easter is, of course, the oldest of the Christian festivals, its observance firmly established by the second century and perhaps dating from apostolic times.

Those preachers who follow a lectionary, either as a resource for preaching texts or as a guide in their selection, will notice that, during most of Eastertide, the lectionary abandons the Old Testament, selections from the Book of Acts replacing the typical Old Testament "first lesson." This is a controversial move since some would argue that here, as the church explores the heart of its faith, it needs the Old Testament more than ever, lest the Christian community slip

into a chipper “Jesus-triumphalism.” The editors of the *Common Lectionary* justify this decision, however, by arguing that it actually protects the Hebrew Scriptures against an unfortunate typological imposition of resurrection themes. Moreover, they claim that the inclusion of lessons from Acts augments the more personal forms of witness found in the synoptics, making it clear that the church itself, in its corporate life, is the preeminent witness to the resurrection.<sup>2</sup>

Because of the simple mathematics of the situation, Ascension Day, which appears in this season and comes forty days after Easter, always falls on a Thursday, not exactly a high holy day for most modern worshippers. The more recent church calendars boldly suggest that the preacher might want to preach on the Ascension on the Sunday before Pentecost (thus scrapping the suggested lessons for that day) in order to restore this event to greater visibility.

### *The Texts*

For the sake of having a common ground for discussion, the three texts from John’s Gospel presented below are among those suggested for Eastertide by the *Common Lectionary*, the most widely-used schedule of texts. Even for those who do not use the lectionary, these texts are appropriate Eastertide passages, since they attempt to gather up the meaning of the Christian faith seen in retrospect through the lens of Easter. The lectionary “slices” some of these texts into smaller portions, but we will examine them whole, simply noting the Sundays to which the texts are assigned by the lectionary.

1) *John 20:1-31* (Easter and Easter 2)—Though there are many ways to divide this intricate series of post-resurrection appearances, one good way to picture the whole is to think of this chapter as a literary circle embracing the theme of belief in the risen Christ. Presented in linear fashion, the chapter describes five persons or groups who have come to faith in different ways:

- a) The “Other” (Beloved) Disciple—vss. 1-10
- b) Mary Magdalene—vss. 11-18
- c) The Disciples, Minus Thomas—vss. 19-23
- d) Thomas—vss. 24-28
- e) The “Readers”—vs. 29

This is to see the chapter in linear fashion. Actually, as we shall see, the material curves back upon itself, forming an endless circle. The first episode (vss. 1-10) tells us that one person, the disciple “whom Jesus loved,” came to believe in the resurrection simply by entering the empty tomb. He saw no visions; he heard no voices; he didn’t even know the relevant biblical passages (vs. 9). He simply believed. Here at the beginning of the circle of faith, the ending of it is already anticipated.

For Mary, though, coming to faith required something else, something more. She doesn’t even recognize the risen Jesus when he appears to her, but must wait for the familiar voice speaking her name, “Mary.” Again, the closure of the circle is anticipated as Jesus warns her, “Do not hold me, for I have not

yet ascended to the Father.” This is the same Jesus she has known, the modulations of his voice engraved on her heart, and yet there is something new about his presence. There is continuity with the past, but a discontinuity which faith must face as well.

The disciples are eyewitnesses to the resurrection as well, but in an even more definite way since they receive his Word of peace, are shown his hands and his side, and are given the Holy Spirit and the ministry of forgiveness. Only Thomas was absent, and no testimonies will satisfy him. Thomas wants to see the Lord face to face, to “touch and handle things unseen.” Eight days later, Thomas is given his opportunity, and doubt dissolves into a creed: “My Lord and my God!”

So far we have four stories of people coming to faith in the resurrection in different ways. “What is clear,” comments Fred Craddock, “is that faith is not for all the same experience, neither is it generated for all with the same kind and degree of ‘evidence.’” Craddock goes on to say,

For some, faith is born and grows as quietly as a child sleeping on grandmother’s lap. For others, faith is a lifetime of wrestling with the angel. Some cannot remember when they did not believe, while others cannot remember anything else, their lives having been shattered and reshaped by decision of faith.<sup>3</sup>

But now comes the last, and perhaps climatic, scene. As Raymond Brown has described it:

But now, as the curtain is about to fall on the stage drama, the lights in the theater are suddenly turned on. Jesus shifts his attention from the disciples on the stage to the audience that has become visible and makes clear that his concern is for them.<sup>4</sup>

“Blessed are those,” says Jesus, “who have not seen and yet believe.” Here are gathered all the readers of John’s Gospel, past and present, who believe in the risen Christ. In one sense they stand at the end of the chain of belief depicted in this chapter. They know the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Like Mary, they have heard his voice in their hearts calling them by name. They have received his Word to them, as proclaimed by those eyewitnesses who first saw him, and have found their lives shaped by the Spirit. Like Thomas, they have suffered through seasons of doubt and been invited, in the words of the old hymn, to see Christ “face to face,” to “handle things unseen” and “grasp with firmer hand eternal grace.”

And yet, even though they—and we—appear at the *end* of the chapter, the situation connects clearly to the *beginning*. When all is said and done, all of us who read John’s Gospel must, like the Beloved Disciple, finally believe without seeing. Like Mary, we must deal with the radical discontinuity of the presence of the risen Christ, the one who has “ascended to the Father” and who leaves behind only two things: an empty tomb and a community of faith empowered by the Spirit. The circle of faith is now joined. We are called to trust that, amid the noise of our life, the voice we heard calling our name is his voice; the Word of peace, more compelling than all other words, is his Word; the Spirit

which activates our memory of all that he taught us, is his Spirit; and the words which flow from the center of our lives, "My Lord and My God!," are a sign of his presence with us. There are no unassailable pieces of evidence, no proof-texts from Scripture. There is only the community of faith, gathered in joy and trust around the one who said, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

2) *John 10:11-18* (Easter 4)—This passage is firmly connected to the material which comes before it in John's Gospel. In the previous chapter, a man has been healed of blindness amid much controversy with the religious authorities. Jesus confronts the authorities, explaining his relationship to his followers with an image: "The sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers" (John 10:4-5).

They know his voice. When they are disowned by their families for their faith, they hear him say, "In the world you have tribulation, but be of good cheer. I have overcome the world." They know his voice. When they are tossed unceremoniously out of their former places of worship, they hear him say, "The world has hated them because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world." They know his voice. When they fear for their lives, they hear him say, "Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me." They know his voice.

Although the headlines have long since forgotten Karen Ann Quinlan, she is not forgotten by her parents. She has been in a coma for ten years, curled in a fetal position, her slight body kept alive by intravenous feeding. The decision to remove her respirator resulted in a lengthy and celebrated court battle, but now a decade has gone by, years of events and changes, but Karen Ann is, of course, aware of none of them. Each day, however, one or both of her parents stops by the nursing facility in New Jersey where Karen Ann lies. "We sit with her for a few moments. We speak to her and touch her. Even though she cannot respond, we want her to feel a caring touch and hear a loving voice. We think it matters."

"The sheep follow him, for they know his voice." But there are many voices, demanding our attention, calling for our loyalty. How can the community of Christ discern the voice of the good shepherd from that of the impostor? It is here that our text speaks a word: "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. . . . A hireling sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep." The true voice of Christ always speaks of sacrifice, his and, then, ours. The possibility preachers sound good, until the wolves of real human pain arrive. The "Be Good to Yourself" sermons fill the spiritual belly, until the swollen bellies of Ethiopian children call to us with other, more urgent, voices.

In Tom Stoppard's play "The Real Thing," one of the characters has just discovered that his wife has been unfaithful to him. Seeing the pain on his face, she asks, "Feel betrayed?" "Surprised," he responds, "I thought we'd made a commitment." She answers, "There are no commitments, only bargains." Commitments and bargains. Therein lies the difference between a hireling and the "good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep."

3) *John 15:1-17* (Easter 5 and 6)—It was H.E. Luccock, I think, who used to chuckle at the denominational hymnal which had the hymn “#364—Jesus Demands My All\*.” Down at the bottom of the page, it read: “\*For an easier version, see #365.” This text from John is clearly a “Jesus Demands My All” passage, and it has no convenient asterisk for an escape. Indeed, speaking of hymns, this is the text which lets us know that singing “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” is a dangerous exercise, since in the passage Jesus claims, “You are my friends if you do what I command you.” Lest we miss the significance of *that*, Jesus makes it plain: “Love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”

The standard way we preachers approach such demands in the gospel is to turn them into metaphors. “Now Jesus didn’t mean,” we say, “that we would necessarily have to lay down our lives in a literal sense. We ‘lay down our lives for the other’ every time we sacrifice our own desires for the good of others,” and so on. At one level, of course, this is perfectly appropriate. There are countless examples of Christians who, as expressions of their faith, make deep sacrifices on behalf of other people. I think immediately of Christian parents who adopt physically or emotionally disabled children, who intentionally reject the “perfect family” image of the larger culture in favor of a way of life which participates lovingly in the suffering of others. These people can speak, at a depth not reached by most of us, of power of Jesus’ promise that our “joy may be full.” This kind of sacrifice needs to be respected, celebrated as the way of faith, and gathered up into the meaning of this text.

At another level, though, the preacher must be careful to recognize the radical nature of Jesus’ commandment and not to whittle it down to manageable size. There have been times, and there continue to be times; there have been places, and there continue to be places, when and where people lose their lives for the faith. From Stephen to Bonhoeffer, from Polycarp to Romero, there have been those who literally lay down their lives for others and for Christ. To compare these sacrifices to the sort of low-cost adjustments most of us make ends up trivializing them and the gospel. To see the passage this way means, of course, that there is something unreachable about it for most of us, but to do so preserves the scope of the gospel, throws us more fully upon the mercy of the Christ who “lay down his life for the sheep.”

When the magnitude of Christ’s sacrifice is maintained and the ultimate demand of the gospel is guarded, we gain perspective on even the tragic dimension of human life, and the power of the gospel to provide comfort is preserved. Since New Year’s Day, 1984, the family of Sam Todd has been searching for him in vain. A seminary student, Sam left a New Year’s party in New York city, wandered off onto the streets of New York and disappeared. For over a year the family has been following every lead, tracing every clue. Their sad and futile search has led to hospitals, shelters for the homeless, and morgues. “The irony is that you’re hoping to find something terrible that would at least give the comfort of an explanation,” said Sam’s brother John. Sam’s father, a minister and former official of the World Council of Churches, expressed both the comfort of the Christian faith *and* its size when he said:

We are a family of faith. We believe in a loving God who knows where

Sam is. Sam is in His care, and we are, too. We live in a world where much more awful things happen all the time; where people living under autocratic governments have “disappeared,” and we’ve known several of them personally. [Sam’s disappearance] is an awful thing for us, but it’s pretty mild compared to that, and this sometimes makes us feel humble.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps our Eastertide preaching can help develop such a sense of size in faith, an abiding respect for the mystery in the life of Jesus and, as Eudora Welty said, “a sense of where to look for the threads, how to follow, how to connect, find in the thick of the tangle what clear line persists.”

“Abide in me, and I in you.” The strands are all there: to the memory nothing is ever really lost.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Eudora Welty, *One Writer’s Beginnings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984) 90.

<sup>2</sup> *Common Lectionary The Lectionary Proposed by the Consultation on Common Texts* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1983) 14.

<sup>3</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *John* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982) 142.

<sup>4</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John XIII-XXI* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1970) 1049.

<sup>5</sup> *New York Times*, 5 January 1985.