

Preaching Options For Easter

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In one sense, you have only one option. You must preach on the resurrection. Long ago in seminary some professor remembered to tell you that every Sunday is a celebration of the resurrection. That is why we worship on the first day instead of the seventh. You may neglect the resurrection on fifty-one of those resurrection-days. But on this one, the big one, preaching on the resurrection is inescapable, the only option.

In another sense, however, your options are immense. The entire New Testament, in old Bengel's phrase, "breathes resurrection." It is a post-resurrection book, and the light of the empty tomb falls across even its pre-resurrection accounts of the ministry of Jesus. The resurrection is implicit in almost every verse of it. And the quite explicit references to the resurrection are more than enough for a lifetime of preaching.

Some of your options will come quickly to view in a glance at the three-year cycle of the Lectionary. The Gospel lessons are Mark 16, Luke 24, and John 20. And when those are exhausted, you can go on to Matthew 28 and John 21, which the Lectionary lists for the following Sunday. The Epistle lessons are 1 Peter 1, 1 Corinthians 15, and Colossians 3. The first lessons, after lame attempts at Old Testament passages, fall back on the apostolic preaching in Acts 2, 4, 5, and 10.

When after twelve years or so you have dealt with all those passages, you should have grown enough to start through again with new insights and fresh excitement. If not, get out your concordance and you will find an inexhaustible abundance of additional material, notably in the Epistles.

Some Preliminary Exegeses

I would suggest to you that, before plunging into the exegesis of one of these passages, even before selecting which one to exegete, you exegete two other things of great importance.

Preaching is the practice of hermeneutics. It is where the rubber of hermeneutics hits the road. And hermeneutics is the interpretation of an ancient document, addressed to a particular group of ancient people in a particular set of ancient circumstances, in such a way that it addresses directly a particular group of contemporary people in a particular set of contemporary circumstances. So you need to make an exegesis of your congregation, the particular group to whom you are preaching; and you need to make an exegesis of 1983, the particular time in which you are preaching.

The exegesis of the congregation—an expression for which I am indebted to Fred Craddock—is specially important on Easter, for your congregation will be different. Many people will be present in church for the only time in 1983.

Why do they come on Easter? Some come, perhaps, to show off their finery. Others come simply out of custom: if it's July 4 you shoot off firecrackers; if it's Christmas you give presents; if it's Easter, you go to church. Some come, I am convinced, out of a profound hunger to hear some good news in a bad-news world. They can't count on what they may hear on the other fifty-one Sundays. The preacher may simply be up there venting his hostility on the congregation; and of hostility they get quite enough the other six days. The design of the sermon and whole liturgy may be to induce guilt; and they are already virtually paralyzed by it. They may have to sit through an arid skull session or a vapid pep talk. But on Easter they expect to hear strange tidings, too good to be true, or even too good not to be true. They may not be prepared to believe any of it; but at least it will not be dull.

What would it be like to be such a tangential person: essentially a non-church-goer, but vaguely Christian enough to obey the mandate of a residually Christian culture that one should really go to church on Easter after all? What would have been your encounters with death in the preceding year? What would be your unvoiced anxieties, your inarticulate hopes? Surely you know such people. They live next door; they work across the street. Set one of them concretely before you. You have one chance to tell them the good news of the resurrection. What Scripture passage will you choose? What will you say about it?

If the exegesis of the congregation has a special importance on Easter, *the exegesis of the times* has a special importance in 1983. The unspeakable, unthinkable peril that has hung over our planet like a mushroom-shaped cloud ever since 1945 has finally emerged from our collective subconscious, where we repressed it, into the public arena. Articles, books pour from the press. Church courts issue pronouncements. Physicians are aroused. The proposal for a nuclear freeze becomes highly politicized. While some people are activated by all this, many are paralyzed. As the dire consequences of a nuclear war sink into their consciousness, they see nothing that can be done about it. They see no single ray of hope. The paralysis of despair sets in. They try to put the whole matter out of mind. We may be sure that many of our Easter-only church-goers are in that group.

In my own despair and hopelessness, I find myself driven to Easter all through the year. God's purposes and promises were not thwarted by the death of Jesus! Contrary to all human expectation, God brought victory out of defeat, life out of death. Can I then believe that God's purposes and promises will not be thwarted even by the extinction of the human race and the death of our planet, if it comes to that? Can God bring victory out of that incomprehensible defeat? Only if I believe in God who raises the dead can I be freed from paralysis and energized to work, against seemingly impossible odds, for the preservation of the human race and of its one home in space and time, the earth.

Strangely enough, when I get the nerve to enter deeply into the fearsome reality of my own times, the ancient words addressed to other times begin to flash and glow with power and light. "I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously. . . . I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord. . . . Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God

the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. . . . O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!" (Ex. 15:1, Ps. 118-17; I Cor. 15:24; Lk. 24:25)

Selecting Your Text

Now then, how will you address your particular congregation in this particular time? What ancient text will you choose for the hermeneutic task?

There are two main kinds of Easter texts available: those that tell the story of Easter morning and of subsequent encounters with the risen Lord; and those that explicate the meaning of the resurrection, as understood by the early church. Your exegesis of the congregation and of the times may lead you strongly in one direction or the other.

Much has been published lately regarding the importance of story-telling, the sermon as story, and so on. There is no place where that applies more powerfully than to the Easter stories. Retold with involvement and reverence, those stories stir even the most jaundiced imagination and touch within us depths of hope and joy we did not know we possessed. If ever just the retelling is enough, it is here at Easter.

There are, of course obvious differences in the various Gospel accounts. I have heard many an Easter sermon attempt to reconcile or explain those differences. What does your exegesis of your congregation tell you about that? Is that what they are hungry for? My choice would be to select one of the stories and tell it in all its simplicity, beauty, and power. A discussion of the discrepancies between the stories could be useful in a class some time, when we are holding the Scriptures at a distance and speculating about them. But on Easter morning we are holding the Scripture close. It is a matter of hope or hopelessness, sanity or insanity, life or death.

Within each story there may be difficulties you will need to clear up and lessons you cannot refrain from pointing out. Let me urge you to do that with restraint. Trust the story to do its work in the hearts and minds of people. Let your work be the removal of false obstructions, not the erection of a proud superstructure of your own.

The Lectionary throws up for us this year the most beautiful and artistic of all the Easter stories, the story of the road to Emmaus in Luke 24. Before you do anything to it, sit in front of it, as you would sit in front of a great painting, and see what it does to you. If you have time, run through Luke with an eye for all the occasions on which Jesus is at table. Then you will see how this story is the climax to which all the others point. You may use none of that in your sermon, but you will preach differently from having done it.

There are times for stories and there are times for expositions. Your exegesis of your congregation and of the present situation may well drive you toward a passage in which the effect and meaning of the Easter event are expounded. A run at "raise, raise up" in any good concordance will indicate scores of available texts. One may seem to speak so directly to your congregation in this time that you cannot resist it.

The Lectionary throws up for us this year the heaviest concentration of

“raise,” the fullest discussion of the resurrection, anywhere in Scripture: I Corinthians 15. It bristles with difficulties. Before plunging into the commentaries, read it through more than once, underlining the statements you would like to shout from the housetop. What truly moves you is what will move your people. Make one of those statements the center of your study, moving out from it like the ripples from a stone thrown in a pond. When you’ve got it set in its nest of concentric circles, then you can figure out how to let your hearers share in your struggle and in your joy.

A Check List

Before your sermon is set in concrete, while it’s still pliable and open to change, you may want to ask yourself some questions like the following.

1. Have you come clean on your theology? What do you really believe about the resurrection of Jesus? Rudolph Bultmann, in his eagerness to demythologize the Gospels, declares that the resurrection is not a second event at all, but an interpretation of the meaning of the event of the cross. “Faith in the resurrection is really the same thing as faith in the saving efficacy of the cross.”¹ Karl Barth, on the other hand, refers to the resurrection over and over again as an event, and specifically as a “second event.”² He says: “We have to do with the concrete, visible, audible, tangible new presence of the man Jesus who was crucified, dead and buried . . . not just a mental appearance in the experience or intellect of the disciples as illumined by a vision or such like. It was His new appearance in the psycho-physical totality of His temporal existence from His first coming.”³

There are, of course, many possible shades of theological opinion regarding the resurrection. These two set opposite poles, as it were, and underline the necessity for a clear decision. Much Easter preaching is turgid, unclear, and weak because the preacher has not come clean with himself or herself on the basic theological issue of it all.

2. Have you made it clear that Jesus was really dead? The resurrection of someone who had not really died is a strange and pointless piece of news. The wisdom of Lent in the church year is to give us time to absorb the reality of the suffering and death of Jesus before we hear the good news of the resurrection. Remember that your once-a-year church-goers have not been through Lent, were not there on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. For this reason you may need, even on Easter, to tell the bad news before you tell the good news, to deal with the tragedy of the gospel before you unveil its breathtaking comedy.

3. Have you dealt plainly and unsentimentally with your own death and theirs? Your hearers do not have to read the existentialist philosophers to know that human being is being-unto-death, that we alone of the creatures can contemplate our own end. However they would articulate that, they know it, and they avoid facing it with a passion. But sitting in church on Easter, they know they cannot always avoid it. The reality and finality of human death need to be there in most Easter sermons.

4. Have you declared God’s victory over death? This is where it’s all been

heading, whether you are retelling the story or expounding the exposition. God has won! That's the point, and if you haven't made that point, you haven't preached an Easter sermon.

Here it comes: your once-a-year chance to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, to proclaim the gospel where Christ has not already been named. God forbid that they should hear an ancient wonder-story without present value and effects, or a cosmetic masking of death, or cheap grace, or the glorification of some kind of "immortality" which we automatically possess as human beings. May they hear great tidings, so strange they may well reject them—but tidings which, if they choose to believe rather than to be offended, will radically alter their lives, filling them with energy and hope, even in a world where doom hangs over us all by the slenderest of threads.

NOTES

1. Hans Werner Bartsch, ed., *Kerygma and Myth*. (London: S.P.C.K., 1960). 41.
2. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV, 1. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956). 304.
3. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV, 3. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961). 311-312.