

How Shall I Sing A New Song?

Choosing Music for Easter

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As a musician Easter has always troubled me. The expectations of worshipers and the swirl of emotions in the texts for the day grate against each other like fingernails on the proverbial blackboard. Every year I face planning for Easter with dread. I normally enjoy reading the lectionary and making theological connections with texts of anthems and with the poetry of hymnody, but not for Easter.

Many people who come to an Easter service are coming not so much to witness to the resurrection, but to celebrate the season of renewal. People get up on a sunny spring morning, maybe eat a special breakfast, watch the children laugh with delight at their Easter baskets, put on their new pastels and head for church, anticipating some loud, triumphal music and an Easter sermon full of certainty and hope.

But who else comes to church on Easter? Or, perhaps a better question, who stays away on Easter? The woman whose mother died around Easter a few years ago is one. She tells us, sadly, “I would just be a wet blanket and spoil the fun.”

It seems to me that she, too, should feel welcome at Easter. So should the person who feels uncomfortable about the resurrection because he has not yet fit together his budding faith with the incomprehensible mystery of such an improbable event. How can we make them welcome and connected on this day? And how can we prepare worship that might be truer to the texts upon which it is based?

Easter is in many ways “Super Sunday.” The event which we celebrate is foundational to the Christian faith, our liturgy is grounded in the events of Holy Week and Easter, but our preaching and music for Easter itself seem to have found a tradition of their own. This is because many people’s view of Easter practically oozes with expectations that are in some conflict with the texts of the day. The musical literature with which I have to work does not have the same depth and breadth as the powerfully passionate texts and settings of Holy Week. Indeed, for years I have thought about how fitting music is as a worship tool for the story of that hectic and dramatic week in Jerusalem — not only because it is narrative, but also because it is evocative of the emotional highs and lows which lace the story. When I look at Easter Sunday on the other hand, I am faced with an amazingly small choice of music — texts rarely poetic about the resurrection — and settings rarer yet that appeal to the ear and the soul as suggestive of the great mystery of the day. This dearth of music is made even more frustrating because settings of such texts would be almost totally at odds with the expectation of the musical “blow out” reserved for this occasion in many worshipers’ minds.

Music and preaching have a strong connection with each other, not just for Easter, but for all worship. Music in worship can be thought of as a reflection of the Word; a mirror image of a thought, a Truth; poetry that shimmers with its own shape and depth, shining back what it illuminates. In other words, it is not unlike preaching. The creative process involved in the musician’s preparations and the preacher’s are different, yet they share in the desire to delve into the essence of the scripture in order

to find the part of it that they can enhance.

Preaching and music have paralleled each other at varying times in the church's history. Both being grounded in scripture, they are the creative aspects of worship that give flavor and depth to it. Therefore these creative opportunities sometimes have been at odds with the changing world, a world with new vocabulary, new styles, new ways of thinking, different emphases, and the sheer power of secular culture pushing in on traditions of worship.

It is interesting to look back, read and listen to preaching and music of the church's past and hear how they have changed over the centuries to reflect the evolution of language. We often look back to study changes of doctrine and other historical movements, however just listening to the use of language is a study in itself. Oratory and musical language have evolved at varying rates of speed, to be sure, however both means of communication have struggled through many changes. But that fact notwithstanding, both preachers and musicians are proud to know that preaching and music-making have remained invested in the beauty and power of metaphor and allegory, symbol and image, because their ability to communicate with this richness of language is, after all, their art.

Applying our art to Easter, though, is a challenge.

Easter is our major feast. The resurrection is central to our faith. The concept of every Sunday as a "little Easter" has had validity because of its centrality to our beliefs. Within the week-long journey from Jesus' triumphal arrival in Jerusalem to his reappearance on Easter morning lies the drama of our faith. Yet the annual return of Holy Week, lived out in its unique time every spring, has a special power which weekly remembrances can never match. The power of the passion narrative is so great that the reading of it needs little ornamentation. Nevertheless, the mystery and miracle of the story begs for elaboration. The pathos of Jesus' betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion yearns for a time of grieving, of letting the details of the story pour into our souls, little by little, so that we have time to experience each emotion in its turn. The feelings of Good Friday are easily understood. We have all grieved, and the story of the death of Jesus is accepted as truth.

But Easter is different. We find ourselves wondering how we can make Easter "glorious." Will the musicians be successful in sending the people out the door with smiles on their faces and hope in their hearts?

It seems to me that this might be the wrong question. It might be better to ask ourselves how we can be true to the texts and yet not lose the total character of what Easter is for so many. We might be able to move along a notch or so in our approach to planning for Easter by beginning with those texts, for not only the preaching but also the music must be tied to them with integrity.

Good texts based on scripture can inspire wonderfully creative musical expressions that reach deep within the soul and connect the listener to an experience of the event. This is especially true of texts that have to do with death and dying. It is no accident that choral settings of the requiem service are especially moving; to the composer as he or she sets them, to the singers learning and presenting the work, and to the listeners. This is because of the need for comfort and a remembrance of the foundations of our faith that are manifested in those words.

Why is it that we connect more readily to the sorrow of the passion rather than to the joy of the resurrection? Because we as a culture have taken the time to dissect the

complexities of grief but not of joy, and we are skeptical of joy because we do not know how long it is going to last. Grief, on the other hand, has even been assigned a series of stages, and we know that in some way it stays with us always.

The texts that tell the Easter story, though, are not befitting of a requiem. Instead of being able to call upon rich poetic text or meaningful scripture to ground the listener in an event of death, we read a powerful, mysterious, and hopeful story wherein a perplexed group of people cannot find a body and are told that Jesus has risen from the dead. So we are not singing a requiem, we are cheering about Jesus' victory over the grave. This is the serious business of our faith, yet the event of Easter itself still has a flavor of perplexity to it. "... as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes" (John 20:9,10). "Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale and they did not believe them" (Luke 24:10,11).

It has become the norm for musicians to search for yet another noisy anthem, preferably with brass instrumentation, or at least a loud organ part, as the crown jewel for worship on this day. This is true even though we have had the privilege of working with texts and settings of great beauty and passion during Holy Week. Where are the powerfully poetic texts that communicate the mystery and awe of the resurrection? "Christ Our Passover Is Sacrificed for Us. Alleluia." "Jesus Christ Is Risen Today. Alleluia." These are faith statements, inherently mysterious, to be sure, yet can they reach out and move people in the pews who still have not felt the presence of the Risen Christ? It is frustrating to have to use a noisy setting of an unimaginative text after having brought worshipers to feel what is closer to them, the grief and pain of the Passion story, just a few days previously. To turn around and celebrate what many people still feel to be a great mystery as if it were the winning game of the World Series feels awkward.

Perhaps there is a way to be thankful, even jubilant, without losing sight of the mystery, the perplexity, the quietness of Jesus' community that first Easter morning. And it might not be a mistake to assume that many of our worshipers could connect more easily to that nonturbocharged atmosphere. Witnessing to the mystery of the resurrection becomes the worship leaders' challenge, both in sermon and in music, but an obligation taken on which might clash with expectations. So from the very beginning we have decisions to make.

Every year I search the catalogs of music publishers for new Easter music. I have thought of commissioning a writer and a composer, but I am unsure of what exactly to request. What I really want is a moving expression of our conflicting feelings of the day; a text which can communicate both our hesitancy to accept such a profoundly powerful event and our hope and jubilation at the very thought of it.

But what about the expectations of the congregation? Some worshipers will always come to church expecting a glorious, high gear experience, but others will always be reluctant to come to church on Easter at all. They are uncomfortable with the wide gap between the joy and the exuberance of the worship and their own torn souls, still searching for glimpses of a Risen Christ in their lives. And then there are those texts. A mystified group of people who can't find the body that morning and aren't at all sure what to do.

Suppose that it is in the very attempt to create a high performance engine to run

Easter worship that we have made a mistake. Especially on that first morning, could this be the time to *begin* Easter? And would it be more fitting to begin Easter by quietly approaching that empty tomb with wonder and perplexity, only to build into the high-powered realization of what the resurrection means for us later in Eastertide? Maybe the great feast is a gradual one, not one that can so quickly come from a week of torn emotions and passionate cries.

To lower the wattage on Easter Sunday does not mean that tradition must be lost. The favorite hymns can still be sung, maybe with a newer one thrown in which has a quieter feel. Maybe “Christ Jesus Lay in Death’s Strong Bands” (*Christ lag in Todesbanden*) could be used. Any of the familiar hymns can have a softer texture if they are presented simply, without a lot of fanfare and noise. The extra goodies of instrumentation, choral descant, and high intensity organ registration can still titillate, but be arranged to be more muted in tone. It is tone, indeed, which must be chosen carefully before the Easter service is planned. Tone of hymn, tone of choral music, tone of preaching all must have a hue that complements both each other and of course, those texts.

For the past several years I have enjoyed using a string quartet instead of brass with organ on Easter. The choral and instrumental music I chose stayed within a tight style description that included music of Mozart, Vivaldi, and Handel. Music of this particular time frame (1720 – 1800) can be passionate, uplifting and light, without being heavy, overly dramatic, or overstated. Using several movements of extended works (*Gloria*, by Vivaldi, *Messiah* by Handel) has worked well. Using several settings of the word “Alleluia” by Mozart has also added a lighter sense of celebration to an Easter service.

I also like the sounds of the upper woodwinds (flutes and oboes) with the organ, and I am intrigued with the idea of using the harp someday. The point for me is that I begin with a certain texture in my mind’s ear and then I look for music that is true to that sound. It is almost like choosing the colors for the palate before I begin to paint the actual picture.

These choices have been generated by conversations with the preachers and my own frustration with the lack of suitable materials for Easter Sunday. Anxious to serve the whole congregation, including those in need of a quieter recognition of that empty tomb, our preaching has had some “question mark quality” which is better matched by a lighter musical texture. The joy is still there; it just does not smack one in the face. So familiarity can be preserved in hymns and liturgy that we all want to save. The preaching, on the other hand, and the organ and choral music can delve a little deeper into the texts, coming away gently, as if to say: After all the pain of this past week, please sit down and let me whisper in your ear. Christ has risen. He is not in the tomb. Have we not experienced the Risen Christ in the world, working in us, and in other people? Do we not feel the power of this living Christ in our own lives?