

Imagination and Easter

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No preacher hastens down the Lenten path toward Easter without experiencing what must be an age-old incongruity, remarkable not least for the silence in which it is shrouded. Easter is the most important Sunday of the year; without the first Easter, we have nothing to preach on any Sunday. If there is no resurrection of Jesus Christ, “then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain (1 Cor. 15:14, NRSV).” And yet, most preachers arrive at the tomb breathless and weary, like Simon Peter and the beloved disciple, barely able to grasp in their own lives the enormity or significance of the vacant tomb. Or like Mary in her grief, we approach cloaked in the penitential mood of Lent, rightly burdened by the ongoing crucifixion of the world’s innocent and guilty. We try to keep our focus on the saving work of Jesus Christ yet are exhausted with the extra bulletins, arrangements, and services of Holy Week and Easter.

No wonder many of us stop to catch our breath before arriving at the tomb, and we end up composing our sermons and preaching from that location, with the tomb barely in sight. Thus on Easter Sunday when our message is to be most joyous of all, we end up preaching another Good Friday sermon. We depend instead on the trumpets, choirs, and other celebrative elements of this holy day to nudge the congregation to a more fullsome proclamation of what God has now accomplished in Jesus Christ.

In such distressing circumstances of overwork or exhaustion, perhaps no amount of imagination will help the besieged preacher, even as distressingly little may be found. Imagination is no substitute for faith, rest, or appropriate spiritual nurture and discipline. The irascible British novelist Sir Kingsley Amis, who died last October, knew the power and limitations of imagination. He regretted not having a religious faith—“but you cannot summon one up just because you need it” (*The Globe & Mail* 23 Oct. 1995).

Imagination on its own is never enough, yet it can always assist our faith. Tutored by scripture and theology, it can at least bring people like Amis in our pews — surely we are all like him at times — before the empty tomb to be asked the essential question: “Has this One, who was put to death and is now risen, as is testified in scripture, encountered you in your life?” When all is finally said, we cannot do much more than invite a response to that pointed query. Yet it is enough. If people are going to get stuck, it is the right place to get stuck, dealing with the heart of the faith. The rest is up to God.

How can we use our own imaginations better this Easter? For practical purposes we may define imagination as the ability to shape pictures through use of images, story, and doctrine. I teach my students that given the special nature of the Easter sermon, it is a good idea to write a first draft even before Lent. This is what I propose to do in the remaining space here, using one of the assigned lectionary texts for 1996, John 20:1-18. Perhaps by naming imaginative elements I am seeking, and venturing some possibilities, others will be enabled to employ their own imaginations, in five similar steps, in crafting their own sermons.

(1) Introduction. How can an Easter sermon begin on a fresh note? One way is to picture a particular Easter celebration or custom you heard about, or an Easter in your own experience. Think of the preaching task as making a movie, for it is movies that our young people watch and television has shaped the listening patterns of our hearers. We are after a light mood in the introduction, not some Easter railway disaster or an excerpt from a doctoral dissertation. Give something we can see and maybe even taste. It needs to lead into a discussion of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is the thrust of the Gospel reading for this day,

Example:

On almost every score, Christmas ranked higher than Easter in my childhood memories. Christmas had a golden turkey and Easter dinner had ham, with fat. We could trust when Christmas was going to come, and it had longer holidays, but Easter always moved. It is simple enough, I suppose: after the spring equinox, Easter is the first Sunday after the first full moon, as I am sure you do not need me to tell you. There were no real presents at Easter, except for the Easter eggs, hidden around the room and under the furniture, and a hollow chocolate bunny in a yellow box with purple lettering. One Easter my sisters did get new hats and dresses to wear to church. I got a new white shirt. While even now I do not wish to be ungrateful, there was limited play value in a white shirt. For many of us, Easter came off second. Yet for the Christian church, Easter has always been the higher time, the most significant day of the year. We are a people of hope. Every Sunday we celebrate what happened on this day: the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

2) The Biblical Text: Judgment. This John text is a hard one because of its length and obvious awkward features. Commentaries on John, such as that of Charles H. Talbert (*Reading John*, New York: Crossroad, 1994), stress that three narratives have been synthesized by an editor: separate stories of women, men, and Mary at the empty tomb. More than passing reference to the editorial history of the text, or speculation about how Jesus' body was unwrapped, may be best left for a study class (where the different nature of Christ's body before ascension may be explored). Because of time considerations, perhaps pick just one of the two main stories for visual and sensory sermonic presentation. Commentaries are not the best sources for the visual. Try sources like *The Harper Atlas of the Bible* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987) and dictionaries of the Bible. We will come back to the text later. Here just focus in the text on some aspect of human brokenness before God.

Example:

Today we find ourselves rushing before sunrise with Mary of Magdalene through the Jerusalem market, past sleeping dogs and horses, out one of the gates of the ancient walled city, the Ganneth Gate, deserted at this hour, but for the soldiers on top of the wall. Outside this gate is suddenly countryside, except for a large stone quarry, looking like a huge gravel pit, off to our left. From this quarry many slaves had provided stone blocks for building the city. To this quarry Mary goes with her grief. She had shared in Jesus' ministry. She is going to the place where her hopes had ceased, where her dreams had died, where her worst fears were realized. She passes beneath the cliff top where two men who had been crucified with Jesus still hang on wooden crosses. She

goes to a far corner of the quarry to a garden, where the cliffside has row upon row of hand-hewn caves, tombs for the dead.

3) Our Situation. (a) General Theological Reflection. The question of relevance of the resurrection (i.e., the biblical text) is one we should begin to anticipate and address early. Here imagination may be used to conceive of individuals who obviously need the resurrection. Once again, if we keep looking for the visual, we will avoid getting bogged down unnecessarily in theological abstractions. Since in the sermon we have been travelling with Mary to the tomb, there is no need to change our course; just keep reminding people of the approaching tomb to maintain momentum and unity. We might suggest dividing our fellow travellers into those for whom the journey is relevant, and those for whom it may not seem to be. Our theological focus is still on human brokenness (or on Christ's suffering today).

Example:

There should be a checkpoint for us along the way to the tomb. Each one of us should answer one very simple question before proceeding. That question is, "Do you have fear in your life? Are you afraid of something?" If you say, "no way," then turn back. We need not trouble ourselves with the tomb and all of this difficult Easter business if fear has not approached and asked us about our approaching death. Turn back if, in watching TV, you have not heard the voice of fear as you contemplated the future of this planet or the suffering of its people. What person in northern climes finds the pruning shears in January, or the garden sprinkler in February or the Christmas lights in April? We do not find what we have no use for, even if it is there in front of us.

On the other hand, this path to the tomb is just the path for anyone who has dreams that have ended, hopes that have died. Come with Mary if you know what it means to go unrecognized, or if you lost your job, or if you were not promoted as you should have been. The tomb is there for any of us if our relationship or marriage is not as it might have been, or if we are deeply disappointed by our children, or by our parents. The tomb should be our destination if we are concerned about the poor or what we are doing to the earth; Lloyd's of London has recently become environmentalist fearing what global warming, melting icecaps, and rising seas would mean in harbour cities and other lowlands. Whatever fears we may hold, come to the tomb.

(b) Specific Theological Reflection. Frequently in preaching, in addition to shaping our theological message in general ways that include world concerns, we need something more. Which is first, the specific or the general, may not matter. In this case, show the relevance of the tomb in terms of one person's life, in order that we may make connections with our lives. Include the worst case scenario (without details of violence, etc.) in reflections, so as to take seriously the struggles of human life; even as in sermons generally we avoid presenting the good news without ambiguity, as though it may be equated with happily ever after.

Example:

Kate Sawford is now fourteen years old and has a book of photographs in the bookstores entitled *Kate's Story* (Candlelighter's Childhood Cancer Foundation, 55

Eglinton E. #401, Toronto, Canada M4P 1G8, 1995). It is her story of having cancer three years ago, when she had to have part of a leg amputated, and the lower part of her leg rotated and reattached. She writes in her book: “Days of my life I’d like to forget: the day the doctors told me I was sick. The day I had to tell my friends I was ill. The day my hair fell out. The first day after my surgery. They’re also the days I’ll always remember.” She once had only a 50/50 chance of a cure for her cancer. Now she has only a ten percent chance of cancer returning. Young Kate has been to the tomb.

Kate Sawford has been fortunate in perhaps having been cured. Yet even more important than a cure, Kate has discovered what we all need. We need to be able to go to the place of our deepest fear, our greatest sadness, not to have our sorrows mocked, but to have them addressed. Our need is not for some idle hope, nor some casual word of optimism, “Cheer up, everything will turn out alright.” We need what God offers: some divine assurance, some blessed reassurance, that what in our fear we thought was the whole picture is not the whole picture. What Kate thought was the end was not the end. What you thought was the end is not the end. However large our vision of reality, it is not large enough to contain God’s truth and power. All our fears, about ourselves or this planet, are never the whole story. God is still in control.

4) The Biblical Text: Grace. Here we are roughly midway and arrive at the central message of our text and sermon. From now on, God’s enabling actions are the theological focus, not our shortcomings or limitations. Begin where we were when last we visited the text, in this case, journeying to the tomb. Of course now we arrive at the tomb and the resurrection is our message. If what you are saying is not convincing, that is, if your movie of the text is not believable or fresh, find a way to make it so, instead of just reciting the narrative and asserting that Jesus is risen. Have you ever seen a convincing movie depiction of the resurrection? If you were a sceptic, under what circumstances might you be willing to accept this fact that goes against reason?

Example:

Easter is a surprising event. I sometimes think that this Easter story is too big to be played in a stone quarry in Jerusalem. How can we catch the enormity of the event by looking in an empty tomb? It is even too big for the big screen and the cardboard characters that Cecil B. DeMille used to give us. It is really a drama of the universe. To see it properly we need to be out at night, away from city lights, scanning the immense heavens, amazed that God created all of this out of nothing, struck with awe that there is life. Once the backdrop is large enough, then, only then, come to the empty tomb, and ask the biggest question of our life. Ask, “Is this possible?” You may then be able to tell from the echo of the tomb what a comparatively small question it is.

Yet keep on listening. Listen. Listen to the voice of the gardener, approaching beside you. “Why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” he says to us as he said to Mary. We may start to explain in our own way, “I am looking for hope, for my dream, I am looking for my loved one,” the same way Mary Magdalene started to explain. But Jesus interrupts, names each of us, the same way he said, “Mary.” In that moment when God speaks to us, and we know that it is God, and we see Christ standing before us, we then say with all Christians through the ages and around the world, Jesus is risen. Hallelujah!

5) Our Situation. What does the resurrection look like today? Here we seek stories that

can stimulate the imagination of listeners, not in order to pretend, but rather to be able better to see and experience what we know to be true. Again, include tough situations, and find the good news in their midst, such that the gospel does not become distorted into a pat answer or a cure-all. We are seeking to engender faith. (I regret that having only heard the second story below. I do not know its source.)

Example:

There was a man in my first congregation. When his wife was dying, he would drive to the hospital. Each day he would go down to the chapel in the hospital to pray. He would pray, "Dear God, please cure my wife." Finally his wife died. Was his faith shaken by her death? He said, "When I prayed alone in that small chapel, I was seeking God. I knew I was not alone. It was Jesus who was with me, and I knew my wife was in better hands than mine."

Who can count the times Christ has appeared to each of us, and we have not known? Four travellers were recently at a conference. They stayed talking too long and were late in arriving at the local airport. Grabbing their bags from the taxi they ran into the terminal. One of them in his haste knocked over a table on which a local girl had some items for sale. Being late, and not wanting to miss their flight they ran on, cleared security, and arrived at the gate before it closed. As they hastened across the tarmac towards their waiting plane, one of them stopped, said farewell to his colleagues, and returned to the terminal. He was glad he did. When he got back to the table, he discovered that the girl was blind. Some of the jars she had been selling were broken. He helped her as best he could and then said to her, "Here's \$50 to cover the cost of whatever is broken." As he walked away, she called after him, "Are you Jesus?" May her question be ours of each person we meet, and may people ask it of us.