

Easter Preaching and the Lost Language of Salvation

Barbara Brown Taylor
Piedmont College, Demorest, Georgia*

Easter comes early this year, before April Fools' Day, which may make it a little easier to keep people's attention in church. When Easter comes late, worship services focusing on God's gift of new life in Christ can face stiff competition from the natural world, where pagan trees sprout green leaves and pantheist bulbs burst into red flower with no apparent knowledge of what happened on Calvary. This abundant new life is not faith-based. It is as reliable as the earth's progress around the sun, and unless you can get people more interested in life after death than life before death, you may have to snap your fingers a couple of times to keep them focused on your preaching during Easter season.

By most Christian reckoning, the story of what happened on Calvary is the story of salvation. On that desolate hill, God's exceeding love for humankind was made palpable in a way that defies even the most earnest explanations. This has never stopped us from trying to explain it, however. Like others before us, we are compelled to make sense of a Savior who is not saved, but who dies the most wretched of deaths. Like others before us, many of us have settled on the idea of atonement—Jesus' willing acceptance of the death penalty for our sins—while others recoil from such transactional theology.

Whatever we believe about what happened on Friday afternoon, the story of salvation is not complete until Sunday morning. The memory of the cross is transformed by the discovery of the empty tomb. The stink of death is contradicted by the fresh smell of a new morning, as Jesus' friends stumble upon a kind of life they have not known before—so boundless, so wholly unexpected—that it permanently rearranges their previous understanding of reality. In the presence of the risen Christ, they understand that there is no wreckage so total that God cannot redeem it. There is no cause so lost that God cannot breathe new life into it.

Deciding to trust the contours of this new reality more than they trust their accustomed sense of things, the friends themselves are changed. They stop hiding and start seeking. They stop making excuses and start moving mountains. They sell all of their stuff and put the proceeds in a common pot so that no one is in need. They lay their hands on the sick. They defy the authorities. They never tire of telling people who gave them the courage to do such things, and they become known for their glad and generous hearts. In this way, their way of life becomes contagious. If anyone wants to know what "salvation" means, then the friends will be happy to sit down and try to explain it, but explanations hardly seem necessary. All anyone has to do is to look. See? This is how saved people live.

During the eight weeks of Easter season, preachers will have ample opportunity to tell the story of salvation. Ironically, many of them will try to do it without

*Barbara Brown Taylor teaches religion at Piedmont College and serves in an adjunct capacity on the Columbia Theological Seminary faculty as Distinguished Professor of Christian Spirituality.

using the word, since “salvation” has become one of the more problematic words in the Christian vocabulary. Where it is still used with relish, it is often pronounced with more threat than promise, to define the kind of ticket one needs to get into heaven. In some places, this eternity with God can be so narrowly conceived that listeners may be excused for deciding that they do not want to go there.

If those listeners happen to decamp to mainline churches, then they may flinch at hearing the old language used even in a new context. Perceptive preachers note the flinching and reach for new metaphors. Salvation becomes “health.” Salvation becomes “liberation.” There is nothing essentially wrong with either of those alternatives, except that they make the Bible harder than ever to read. The Bible does not say “health” or “liberation.” The Bible says “salvation” and will go on saying it whether people flinch or not.

In other ears, the word elicits no more than a shrug. Who cares about something that only matters after you die, when what most people could really use is some help living right now? Traditionally defined, salvation may not have enough present purpose in it to woo those who still dream of changing the world—or who dream of realizing God now instead of later. When they hear Christians speaking of earth as no more than a waiting room for heaven, then plenty of them start shopping around for a new religion that has more to say about the real possibility of transformed life on earth now.

Meanwhile, a whole new generation of Christians is having a great deal of trouble believing that salvation is reserved for them alone. They know all about Mahatma Gandhi. They have read every book the Dalai Lama ever wrote. They have gone to school with Muslims, Jews, and Sikhs, as well as with Asians who defy religious categorization. Unlike their parents, they formed relationships with these people before they encountered the stereotypes about them. Given a choice between believing in their friends or believing in a religion that excludes their friends, most of them will choose the friends every time.

I am not sure that all of this can be addressed during one Easter season, but it does seem possible for preachers—and all who care about the mystery of the word made flesh—to spend some time contemplating both the rich scriptural heritage and the fullness of reality contained in the word “salvation.” What did it mean before Jesus was ever born? What did he think it meant, and what did it come to mean after he died? What kinds of experience does the word name? Beyond what salvation *means*, how does it *feel*? How would you explain it to a seven-year-old child?

The History of Salvation

Once upon a time, the salvation of human beings was the chief concern of God and God’s people. For the God who spoke to Abraham, salvation looked like a vast extended family whose fruitful lives would become a blessing on all the families of the earth. For the God of Moses, the vision grew to include a people whose love of God and neighbor would become incarnate in hundreds of daily good deeds. For the prophet Isaiah, salvation looked like new heavens and a new earth, where wolves and lambs would live peaceably with one another on God’s holy mountain and human meanness would become a thing of the past.

None of these was a vision of heaven. They were all visions of a redeemed earth, made possible by the just and loving kindness of God. Torah was the blue-

print for such an earth, and human beings comprised the crew-not because they were all that talented, but because God was determined not to work alone. When the crew bent nails, God either straightened them out or found some way to make them work. When the crew sat down and refused to lift one more finger until they were fed, God ordered take-out.

From time to time, God also threatened to abandon the whole project if the crew did not shape up. There are stories we never tell in church about how God ordered a couple of thousand defiant people killed here or there, but in the end the contract with their survivors was always renewed. The community endured, and so did their relationship with God.

Throughout this long history, salvation did not mean one thing but many things. In Hebrew the stem word translates “safety” or “ease,” with virtually endless applications. People knew that God had saved them when they were delivered from physical enemies, bodily illness, earthly injustice, and natural disaster. People knew that God had saved them when they were healed of their own faithlessness or delivered from the judgment they themselves had brought down upon their heads.

But however salvation was made manifest, it came from one source and led back to that same source, so that first Isaiah could speak of the two as one. “Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation” (12:2 NRSV).

This same Isaiah (whether in his first, second, or third incarnations) became the great visionary of what it might look like for God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. Later Christians came to love him for the portrait he offered of the one they would call Messiah, but even without this positive identification, Isaiah’s pictures of paradise are permanently mounted in most believers’ minds. Bears grazing. Lions eating grass. People living to ripe old ages in houses they have built for themselves, eating the fruit of their own vines, while little children play over snake’s holes with no objection from their mothers.

This was Isaiah’s vision of salvation, which all kinds of people have turned into a vision of heaven. While Isaiah might have agreed that salvation comes from heaven, I doubt that he would ever have agreed to leave it there. As far as the Hebrew Bible is concerned, heaven is only interesting insofar as it comes to earth. Salvation is not about earthlings going up but about heaven coming down, and any notion of salvation that does not include just rulers, honest judges, an equitable economy, and peace among the nations, would have made Isaiah scratch his head. Heaven may be God’s test kitchen, but the pudding is intended for earth.

By the time Jesus came along, there must have been some in Palestine who wondered if Isaiah had not gotten some of his coordinates wrong. That holy mountain he wrote about had been passed from Babylon to Persia to Greece to Egypt to Asia. Rome was the latest in this long line of foreign lions, who were eating Jews and not grass. A new kind of writing had appeared, in which the old prophetic vision of God acting in history had evolved into an apocalyptic vision of God ending history.

It seemed time to give up on the idea that armies or rulers would ever bring peace to the earth. God alone could do that, and people began looking for God’s appointed savior. While they did not all agree on what kind of savior this might be, the general idea was that through this messiah God would clean house on a cosmic

scale. God would turn the known world upside down, shake it hard, and set down a new creation in which things worked the way they were always meant to work. God's chosen one would rule this new world with perfect justice and compassion, so that there would be peace on the earth at last. Those who wished to survive this difficult birth were advised to get in shape.

This is the vision of salvation that John the Baptist proclaimed in the wilderness. He believed that God's intervention was right around the corner, and so did the most famous person he ever baptized. According to Mark, the first sermon Jesus preached concerned the beginning of the end. "The time is fulfilled," he said, "and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Careful readers may note a difference between the kingdom-centered vision of salvation presented in the three synoptic gospels and the Jesus-centered vision of salvation presented in John's gospel. Among many other things, this difference reflects the distance between Hebrew and Greek understandings of salvation. By the end of the first century, when the Jerusalem Temple (and the Jerusalem Church along with it) had lain in ruins for more than thirty years, and crowds of Gentiles were flocking to hear a gospel that most Jews found less than compelling, the writer of John's gospel had no problem identifying Jesus with God. He could in good faith have edited the earlier quote from Isaiah to read, "Surely Jesus is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord Christ is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation."

But it is difficult for some Christians to believe that Jesus himself would have approved this substitution. In the first place, his mother probably did not call him "Jesus." Since Aramaic was likely her first language, she probably called him Yeshua—the same Hebrew word that you will find in your concordance under the listing for "salvation." Chances are that Yeshua first learned what his name meant when he heard the story of the Exodus, which is one of the all time great Bible stories of salvation. As you will recall, it is not a story about believing certain things or even about doing certain things in order to gain God's favor. Instead, it is a story about God's gracious rescue of those who had run out of every other kind of hope.

This very Hebrew understanding of salvation as something physical that happens to human beings on earth was gradually replaced by a much more Greek understanding of salvation as something spiritual that happens to human souls in heaven, but the old usage is still evident in the synoptic stories and sayings of Jesus. If you do the math, then you discover that fully one-third of the references to salvation in the New Testament have to do with deliverance from present troubles. The only clear gospel reference to salvation from sin, interestingly enough, is in the first chapter of Matthew's gospel: "She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (v. 21). How does Jesus fulfill that prophecy? He saves people from blindness, from drowning, from demons, from hunger, from the judgment of the pious, and from death. Some of those he saves are followers of his and others are not, but that does not seem to be the basis on which he decides whom to help. He helps those who know that they need help, and those who *are* helped seem to believe that they can be.

On the occasions when he praises their faith, most Christians automatically assume that he means their *faith in his divinity*, which he then rewards by helping them out—but that is just another sorry example of transactional theology.

According to this theology, if you believe the right things about Jesus, then he will help you. If you don't, then he won't. I am not sure where this idea comes from, but in the first three gospels Jesus seems much more concerned with making people well than with making sure that they believe in him.

He does not proclaim himself, but the coming of God's kingdom. The only thing people have to believe is that God can help them. In Luke's gospel, when Jesus heals the ten lepers and the lone Samaritan among them comes back to say thanks, Jesus does not say, "Rise up and follow me." He says, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well." The faith that helps Jesus do his saving work—the faith that makes people well—is their full-bodied trust that God can act in their lives, both to forgive and to heal.

By the time John wrote his gospel, church and synagogue were in the midst of a messy divorce. Early hopes that Jesus might be recognized as the long-awaited Messiah were long since dashed, and Jesus was well on his way to becoming God. Greeks familiar with Gnostic thought and the various mystery religions had no problem understanding John's language. They knew what it meant to seek union with a deity who promised eternal benefits.

In the fourth gospel, Jesus is no longer the messenger of God's coming kingdom. He himself has become the message, giving Christians a new picture of paradise to place over Isaiah's peaceable kingdom. In the new picture, a Lamb sits on a throne in the middle of a golden city, and the only people who are allowed to enter it are those who are written in the Lamb's book of life (Revelation 21: 22-27).

No biblical survey of salvation is complete without Paul, but it is difficult to figure out where he fits in. Historically, he fits in before Mark's gospel (and some of us wish the New Testament were arranged that way). Theologically, it is harder to say where he belongs. Clearly, Paul was not interested in much that Jesus said or did while he was alive. For someone who wrote so extensively about the importance of the Christ event, it is truly remarkable that Paul did not include one direct quote from Jesus in his writings.

The obvious reason is that Paul was far more interested in Jesus' resurrection than in anything he said or did on earth. Paul's direct experience was with the risen Christ and not with the Jesus who fed thousands or upset tables in the Temple. Paul also thought and wrote in Greek, which may be why he sometimes made it sound as if salvation were something that happened to spirits instead of bodies, in the air instead of on earth.

While Pauline soteriology is too large a subject to go into here, one interesting exercise for anyone who is sure that Paul means only one thing by "salvation" is to track the verb tenses he uses to describe it. For instance, compare Romans 8:24a ("For in hope we were saved") with Romans 13:11b ("For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers"). If you look up every occurrence of *soteria* in Paul's undebated letters, then it is difficult to avoid the impression that he is looking forward to salvation as something that will happen when Jesus comes again, and not a moment sooner. This stands in stark contrast to the popular religious idea that salvation is something one may claim for oneself right now.

When I turned a bunch of undergraduates loose on this problem, the solution they came up with was based on one of Paul's own favorite images, that of pregnancy. When you come to faith in Jesus, they said, then you become pregnant with

salvation. Even if it has just begun, it is still a fact. It is a growing part of you, and if you mean to keep the child then there is no going back. The presence of this new reality inside of you changes the way you think. It changes the way you live. You cannot know everything about it until it comes to full term, but meanwhile you are part of a process that is underway.

We decided that if Paul came out of the Winn-Dixie grocery store and was accosted by an evangelist in the parking lot who asked him if he were saved, Paul would say, "I am *being* saved; is that good enough for you?" We came up with plenty of other questions that none of us could answer satisfactorily. Once you are saved can you ever do something bad enough to get your salvation cancelled? Now that two thousand years have passed and Jesus has not come back, does everyone get his or her own mini-judgment at the moment of death, or are we all put into hibernation until the Last Judgment comes at the end of time? Is there any hope of being saved *after* you die, or does your decision have to be final before then? Whatever seminary-educated preachers may think of such questions, they are questions that college students ask.

There is of course a theological history of salvation to be told alongside any biblical one, but in either case I do believe that two thousand years of waiting have taken their toll. The new age did not come, at least not as expected, and all of these years later the accumulated disappointment shows. Stop an average Christian on the street to ask what "salvation" means and you are very likely to hear an answer that involves an individual getting into heaven through profession of faith in Jesus Christ. The rich and complex reality of being saved by God has become individualized, spiritualized, institutionalized, and monopolized. In most places it is difficult to find any remnant of the Hebrew hope for transformed human life on earth, or any sense that salvation might be experienced daily by those who are not on a first-name basis with Jesus.

Meanwhile, the Easter lections are rich with possibilities for getting salvation's feet back on the ground. Whether preachers decide to focus on gospel accounts about how God's salvation came to earth in Jesus, or on stories about how it was embodied by early Christians in the book of Acts, or even on Peter's extended description of how saved people are called to live, the challenge will be to speak of salvation in ways that break open the otherworldly box in which it has long been confined.

The Experience of Salvation

Judging from the way that many people talk about it (at least those who speak of it at all), salvation connotes a kind of spiritual status conferred by confession of faith in Jesus Christ. Once the heat of conversion has subsided, salvation is more or less a done deal and nothing that people expect to run into on a daily basis. They may be able to describe all kinds of times when they have been rescued from danger, saved from harm, or even put back together again on the other side of harm, but no one ever taught them that such experiences have anything to do with salvation. Instead, salvation has been defined for them as something that is essentially spiritual and confined to their eternal relationship with God in Christ.

I would really like to change that. I would like to speak of salvation in so many recognizable life events that somebody started accusing me of confusing sacred

realities with secular ones. I would like to describe salvation happening to so many people in so many different ways that somebody decided to charge me with universalism. Because if I could do that, then I think that a whole lot more people might become interested in salvation—not as the exclusive property of one group of Trinitarian believers but as the ancient and ongoing practice of a gracious and maverick God.

Meanwhile, “salvation” is what any creative writer would call an abstract word. All by itself it has no scent, no shape, no sound. While most people will conjure up some kind of image to go with it, those random images may not help make salvation anything that those people want to know more about. It is up to those of us who use the language to offer true and life-giving images to go with it, or—to put it another way—it is up to us to describe certain experiences that almost anyone can recognize and then to give them their proper names. Remember Helen Keller up to her elbows in the flowing current of the yard pump while Annie Sullivan spelled W-A-T-E-R over and over into her hands? That is the idea.

It is almost impossible for us to share religious language until we have shared religious experience, but sharing our fundamental experiences of life and death is not something that ordinary people line up to do. Every year around April, one of my students invites me to his birthday party. The first time he did it, I thought he was inviting me to be one of the people singing to him while he blew out candles on a cake. “We meet at the Presbyterian church on Thursday nights,” he said, which was my first clue that we were talking about a different kind of birthday.

This year I went to celebrate his third year of sobriety, and I was once again dumbfounded by the kind of language I heard within the community of Alcoholics Anonymous. People who attend meetings regularly tell me that I romanticize the program, that there is as much hogwash and pretense in it as there is anywhere else that broken human beings get together, but that is not what I as a visitor hear. Perhaps that is because I travel in circles where people work pretty hard to hide their brokenness instead of to confess it, and who say, “Fine, thanks, how about you?” even when their hearts are in pieces.

Since anonymity is one of the sacred pillars of AA, I will not tell you what I heard this year. I will just tell you that I heard people talking in vivid detail about what it was like to walk in the ways of death-losing relationships, losing jobs, losing grades, losing health—all the while denying how deadly it all was—and about that startling moment when they “came to,” just for a second, just long enough to know that they were dying and that they did not want to anymore. I heard them talking with terrific gratitude and no apparent triumph about their fragile hold on new life, and about how much they depended on their sponsors and on the covenant of the AA community to support them in the daily decision of choosing life over death.

Very few of them used religious language, but the realities were there. The one that intrigued me most was that moment of awakening they had all experienced, that moment of clarity when they saw how things really were and were mysteriously given the will to change. Most of them would agree with my word choice, I think. They *were given* the will to change. It was not anything they could have worked up on their own, but once the real possibility of new life became apparent to them they could no longer deny that it existed. They could forget it, ignore it, or decide not to reach for it, but they could no longer pretend that there was no alter-

native to death. They knew for certain that there was.

Furthermore, no one else could give them that knowledge. Plenty of people had told them that they were addicts long before they told themselves that they were, but as far as I could tell, no one was in that room because someone else thought they should be there. They were all there by their own volition. They were there because they wanted to live. However many times other people had told them they were dying, none of those times mattered. The only time that mattered was the moment that each of them, for whatever mysterious reason, was given the ability to say, “You know what? I think I’m dying here.”

This year’s visit gave me a working paradigm for opening up the language of sin and salvation. Even people who will not go near those words with a long pole can tell you what is killing them, or killing people whom they know. If you make a list of what they tell you, then you will have a pretty good lexicon of sin, including such deadly realities as addiction, fear, greed, competition, isolation, unforgiveness, poverty, and war. You may need to make some distinctions between the states of sin that people deepen through their own choices versus those that they are plunged into by other people’s choices. You may also learn something about sin that you never knew before, such as its physical effects, but in any case you will not be charged with dealing in abstractions.

The next question, of course, is what gives people life. Some things are bound to turn up on this list that do not meet high spiritual standards, such as “spending time with the grandkids” or “finally ending the marriage,” but the important thing is to listen to what people identify as sources of life and to start there. It may take a while to get to God, and even longer to get to Jesus, but if you truly believe that abundant life is what the gospel is all about, then you can afford to be patient.

Every now and then you may have to repeat the question—“Okay, now what *really* gives you life?”—and eventually you will want to see if you can relate all of these little “s” salvations to the big “S” mother lode—but if you are willing to set aside the language of systematic theology for even a while then you may find yourself speaking the language of people’s lives—not the ones they may look forward to in heaven one day but the ones they are living right now, in the land of wretched deaths and bright red flowers. Furthermore, they may be so grateful to you for doing this that they allow you to speak some of your own lost language until, between the two of you, you nurse it back to life.