

Preaching the Easter Texts: Resurrection and Vocation

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Though historians debate many aspects of the life of Jesus and that of the early church, one thing that they do not debate anymore is that a Christian is by definition someone who believed that the God of Israel raised Jesus from the dead.¹ Of course, the world, pagan and Jewish, thought this claim to be ridiculous. If the resurrection really happened, its occurrence would be so great a jolt to our assumptive world – in our world, what’s dead stays that way – that we would have great conceptual difficulty getting our minds around such an event. That difficulty is seen in the diverse accounts of the resurrection appearances in scripture. Yet be well assured that despite the difficulty of saying just what had happened, *something* had happened. That *something* all Christians, every last one of them, called, “God raised Jesus Christ from the dead.”²

Accuse these early Christian preachers of being ridiculous, but there are no historical grounds whatsoever to accuse them of having “faith” despite the fact that nothing had happened. As Paul puts it, without resurrection, we really have nothing interesting to say (1 Cor. 15:14).

Most historical-critical scholarship, which may have begun in an attempt to manage the embarrassment of the resurrection in modernity, was forced to acknowledge that without belief in the event of the resurrection of Jesus, there would be no reason for writing the gospels, no reason for the church, no celebration of Eucharist, no good news to tell.³

The disciples of Jesus do not seem to have had especially creative or imaginative minds, certainly not the sort of minds who would have any reason to concoct as inconvenient a thesis as the resurrection. Resurrection was not, at least not at first, sought for, or well-received good news.⁴ Furthermore, faith in the resurrection is never simply a claim about our future status after we die; that was an implication that had to be worked out later. Resurrection is first a demonstration about who God is and how God works. The resurrection is more than some enthusiastic projection from within the grief-stricken hearts of Jesus’ disciples. While the resurrection may be secondarily *pro nobis*, it is primarily an event *extra nobis*.⁵ And the thing that impresses me about this God, as reflected in the stories of the resurrection, is that this God is relentlessly *vocative*. Before our exploration of the theme of Easter and vocation, we list our assumptions.

“Go to my brothers and say...”

With the church through the ages, I assume that *the resurrection was a bodily resurrection*. To be sure, the resurrected body of Jesus was some sort of new, strange, reworked body, *soma pneumatikos* as Paul put it, but it was still, as the excruciating accounts in the Fourth Gospel assert, a believable body. Modern neo-platonic attempts to spiritualize the resurrection are to be avoided. When the disciples encountered the risen Christ, it was not their “faith” that astounded them; it was his body.

We have good reasons for believing in the resurrection. We believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus, but not without reason. We must not allow post-Kantians to put the resurrection into a privileged realm of “faith” where reasons are irrelevant. Our belief in the resurrection is not unfounded and unjustified. There is evidence of a sort, history, as we have noted. Only those who, like Robert Funk, begin with the dogmatic assertion that resurrection does not nor could not happen can be certain not to find any rationale for belief in the resurrection.

The resurrection is first of all about who God is and what God does before it is anything about us. God is not so much omnipotent, omnipresent or even good. God is mainly the One who “raised Christ Jesus from dead,” (Rom. 8:11) “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.” (Rom. 4:17). Easter is for us a glimpse into the heart of God, into the end toward which God is moving all things, this surprising, creative God who makes new “life from the dead” (Rom. 11:15). Once we are met by this outrageous God at Easter, all other godlets are so uninteresting.

The resurrection is also about who we are and our true destiny in Christ. When time and decay have done their worst to us, we will be, by God’s grace, not no-bodies. We shall be some-body. The present world, as good as it sometimes is, is not all there is. God’s resourcefulness is not limited or stumped by the current age. The world, by twists and turns of providential intrusion, is moving toward God. Herein is our hope. “By his (God’s) great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (I Pet. 1:3).

Yet this Eastertide, here is the word that gets me going: *Resurrection is the mission of the church; the resurrection is our vocation and summons as disciples.* Barth once noted that nearly every text of scripture is not only revelation but also *vocation*. Embedded in all scripture is an address to us, a summons, a task to be undertaken. It is as if Easter is an explosion, the first cause that propels the apostles into the whole world bursting with a word to the world. That revolutionary word is resurrection. Thus Easter is both the authorization and the content of apostolic preaching. The word of the angel at the tomb is not so much, “Now you will have a right understanding of the nature of God and your future destiny,” but rather, “Get out of here and tell somebody!”

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Easter, John 20:1-18: “While it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb...”

The gospel accounts of the resurrection and its aftermath can all be read as stories of vocation, call, address, and summons. And that is just the focal image I propose for us to read the Easter texts this Easter, year of our Lord, 2004. When we come to Easter, in all three years of the lectionary, we encounter Mary Magdalene at the tomb, John 20:1-18. The other gospels portray Mary Magdalene at events before and after Easter, but the Fourth Gospel moves her center stage at the tomb. She had been there, near the cross of Jesus (John 19:25). She is now the first to see the stone rolled away (v. 1). She runs to Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple, telling them that someone has stolen the body of Jesus (v. 2). Then, Mary Magdalene disappears and the narrative focuses upon the two men at the tomb.

Then Mary Magdalene returns to the story, weeping by the tomb, peering inside (v. 11). The two men had looked into the tomb and had seen only folded burial clothes.

Mary sees two angels. When the angels ask her why she is weeping, she tells them about the presumably stolen body (vv. 12-13).

Now Mary has yet a third conversation, this time with a “gardener.” When asked why she is weeping, she tells him what she has told the others—I’ve come for Jesus’ body, but someone (is it you?) has taken him away (vv. 14-15). Surely the narrative is meant to be repetitious, tiresome, perhaps even humorous. Mary Magdalene has come and witnessed a resurrection, but even though she has seen the evidence for such an event, nothing is self-evident. She has come up with an interpretation for the absence of the body—theft. Like Funk, she has come up with theories that are anthropologically based rather than theological. She is in grief. She repeats her interpretation of the events to anyone who will listen. The angels are, by definition, messengers of God, but she tells them what has happened rather than having them tell her. Clearly, she cannot know (though we readers know) what really is happening here without some conceptual help.

Only now does the risen Christ appear, taking the initiative in Mary’s attempt to make sense of what has happened. He calls her by name, “Mary.” At that moment there is recognition. He does not yet say, “I have risen from the dead.” He rather calls her by name, thus echoing so many other vocation stories in scripture. True, at this point, she does not recognize him as risen Lord. She meets him as teacher, “Rabbouni” (v. 16). Jesus resumes his teaching of her, this time simply through his unexpected presence and his address to her.

Mary clings to him (v. 17). Jesus asks her, “What are you looking for?” a question that he had asked twice before (1:38; 18:4), resulting in a group of John the Baptist’s disciples becoming Jesus’ disciples and the other group arresting him for crucifixion. The question could be a cue for us preachers. Our appropriation of Easter is based, to some extent, upon what we are looking for. Mary, looking for the body of dead Jesus, meets a teacher; we, who have difficulty conceiving of any power greater than our own efforts, meet some wish projection out of our own egos.

Yet it is of the nature of the risen Christ to transform our expectation, to widen our conceptual frame of reference. He tells Mary not to cling to him, “because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending ...’” (v. 17). Mary has her understanding of Jesus expanded considerably. Resurrection is linked to exaltation, glorification, relating Rabbouni to “my God and your God.” In just three verses, Mary is moved from addressing Jesus respectfully as “Sir” (v. 15), to “Teacher” (v. 16), to “Lord” (v. 18).

This revelation and mind-blowing recognition is quickly followed by vocation. Mary becomes the sole preacher to the apostles. “Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’; and she told them that the Lord had said these things to her” (v. 18). We note parallels here to the see-tell vocational dynamic of the synoptic accounts of resurrection appearances (Matt. 28:7-8; Luke 24:6-9; cf. Mark 16:8). In fact, in Paul, a precursor of this story, the very definition of an apostle is someone who has seen the risen Christ *and* who has been commissioned by the risen Christ to tell the good news (1 Cor. 15:3-11); vision is linked to vocation.

It is the practice in many communities to gather at the cemetery on Eastern morn for a sunrise service. In the light of this scripture that is a strange practice. We are not to be huddled at the tomb, but scattered into the world. The message of the risen Christ, to those who first misunderstood, is “Get out of here and tell somebody.”

A woman on the margins, a person filled with misunderstandings and grief, a person who really doesn't play a role in the Jesus story until late in the drama, is, by the risen Christ, moved center stage. She is shown the truth about the world that is being assaulted by a living God.

And then she is given a job to do. She now knows something about the fate of the world, who sits on the throne (and it's not George W.), who is in charge, who she is called to be; and she now runs to tell the slumbering men what's what, now that Jesus has been raised.

Second Sunday of Easter, John 20:19-31: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

John's gospel is so rich. Almost any passage there offers us preachers an embarrassment of homiletical riches. We must make choices. Because of the richly metaphorical, self-consciously symbolic way the Fourth Gospel presents the Good News of Jesus' resurrection, it is fine for us to make much of some detail within a larger, grander narrative. The doubts of Thomas are not as interesting as the actions of Jesus. I suggest that we do that on this, the Second Sunday of Easter. Using our interpretive lens, "Resurrection as Vocation," my eye falls first upon verse 20:21.⁶

The risen Christ first appears, not to anyone of much importance – if I had been resurrected, I would have gone first to, say, Pontius Pilate ("Pilate, you made a big mistake. Now, it's payback time!"), or to Caiaphas ("Check your Bible one more time, you idiot!"), or someone with some power to do something. The risen Christ does none of this. Instead, he shows up to his disciples, who have already proved beyond a shadow of doubt that they are inept, misunderstanding cowards. Christ appears to them when they are in the dark, literally, huddled like frightened rabbits behind locked doors (20:19).

And to these fools Christ says that just like God the Father sent him (a statement repeated forty-one times by Jesus in the Fourth Gospel), he sends them (20:21). Then he gives them the Holy Spirit, the same mysterious power that empowered his ministry (20:22). They are given the Holy Spirit, not to engender some warm glow in their hearts, but rather because they have work to do that can't be done without the Spirit: "*If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained*" (20:23). In other words, they (fools though they have been) are given exactly the same work to do that Jesus did.

It is an astounding commission. Jesus embodies that forgiveness by returning first to the very ones who had so disappointed and forsaken him—his own inner circle of disciples. His repeated "Peace be with you!" (vv. 19, 21) is another way of saying, "I forgive you." Jesus was always extending forgiveness before we knew even to ask for forgiveness. Then he tells them that their main work will be to lose and bind sin.

Jesus' critics were outraged that he presumed to act like God and forgive sins (Lk. 7:49). Now Jesus extends the outrage, giving to these sinners the power to forgive (compare with Matt. 16:19, 18:18). John's "Pentecost" ends, as Acts 2, in vocation.

Speaking on our campus recently, scholar of world religions, Huston Smith, was asked to characterize the major, most distinctive belief of each of the world's "great" religions. When he got to Christianity, Smith said, "Forgiveness," claiming that forgiveness, particularly enemy-love as presented in Jesus, is unknown in other faiths. Now Jesus tells his followers that they have the power—a power not of their own devising—to act toward the world in the way that he acted. There is the retention of

sin, in the truthful acknowledgement that sin enslaves, binds, and kills.⁷ There is also forgiveness, the gracious announcement that, in the resurrected Christ, new life, freedom, and change are truly possible. I have met some preachers, in the months after September 11, who could tell you about their rediscovery of the outrageous, risky nature of the forgiveness we have been commissioned to offer in Christ's name. As one preacher was rebuked, by a parishioner who made an appointment with him in order to discuss his Sunday sermon, "We've got to be careful, in a nation under attack, not to take this forgiveness thing too far."

I'm sure that the preacher, meditating on the strange way the risen Christ in John's gospel first gives his followers the power to lose and bind sin, will think of examples within the congregation of those frightened, disobedient contemporary sinner disciples who have been given the power to forgive sins. In my congregation and yours, God really "has chosen things low and contemptible, mere nothings, to overthrow the existing order" (1 Cor.1:28 NEB).

When told, by a woman in my congregation, that she had at last received the power to forgive the person who had so horribly wronged her (it only took her twenty years!), I said to her, "Really? I guess then that Robert Funk got it wrong. Jesus really did rise from the dead and come back to harass the very people who betrayed him."

I'm now saying that the fact of vocation can lead us back to the reality of resurrection. That in our pastoral work, we are privileged to witness so many who are undeniably gifted by the Holy Spirit to subvert the principalities and powers and to wrench the world from the grip of sin and death, is for us our witness to the resurrection. To put it more plainly: The only "evidence" that I have for the truth of the resurrection, at least the only evidence I have today, is that woman.

The Third Sunday of Easter: John 21:1-19, "Follow me."

The post-resurrection world is a world full of coincidences, surprises, and unexpected encounters. Most commentators appear to regard John 21 as a later appendage from another hand. The style, subject matter, and vocabulary do seem different from the rest of the Fourth Gospel. The Gospel of John has ended at the wonderful conclusion of Chapter 20. These observations would be somewhat disarming for the contemporary interpreter were it not for the fact that, after Easter, nearly all of our stories seem different. Insertions, intrusions, and strange endings seem to be the order of the day, and the story is never over until the risen Christ says it's over. Since being released from the tomb, the risen Christ has a way of showing up anywhere, anytime. Even at work.

Simon and the disciples have had a frustrating night of fishing. At dawn a stranger appears and gives them fishing lessons. A huge catch of fish results. The beloved disciple blurts out, "It is the Lord!" (21:7). How he has moved from a net full of fish to, "I believe in Jesus Christ as Lord, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting," I can't figure. Yet in my experience, faith in the resurrected Christ does not always arise in a logically ordered way.

Simon Peter bolts into the sea and heads toward Christ on the beach. They have breakfast, during which no one dares ask, "Who are you?" (v.12). John says they did not ask because they all knew who he was. I think they didn't ask because, knowing that the risen Christ was none other than the same Jesus who had been so demanding and difficult during their three years with him, they feared learning anymore about his

demands upon their lives!

Demands keep coming. Jesus wants to know how much Peter loves him (21:5 f.). Three times Jesus asks Peter if he loves him; three times Jesus follows Peter's declaration with the call to feed, to tend, and to feed (vv. 15-18). Having fed his disciples, now Christ demands that they feed one another. As with the commissioning to forgive, the gospel for last Sunday, now the risen Christ calls them to do what he has done throughout his ministry—feed the hungry. Whenever the risen Christ appears, it invariably is with the assignment of a task. Yet we cannot help but be surprised that this task is given to Peter—who has shown himself on so many occasions to be unreliable, misunderstanding, and cowardly. That we should be surprised by Christ's commissioning of Peter is a sign that we have yet fully to learn the scandal of the odd sort of people God seems to call to do God's work.

That task will not be easy, as Jesus notes in his prediction of Peter's peculiar death. Disciples are to live the life that Jesus lived, and die the death that Jesus died. This is the peculiar way they "glorify God" (v. 19). In case you thought the resurrection and its subsequent vocation somehow nullified suffering, erased the cross, think again. Even here, in glow of Easter, the cross casts a shadow, but it is a shadow that is now faced by disciples who are fed, sustained, and encouraged by the risen Christ.

In proclaiming this text, the preacher would do well to look for examples, within the congregation and elsewhere, of those who have loved Jesus by suffering service to "his lambs," those who have transformed their affection for Jesus into vocation. Receiving sustenance from the risen Christ in the Eucharist, gathered with disciples on the beach or in church, we are to be about feeding others in his name.

When I was a sometime student radical in the sixties, in New Haven, Connecticut, during the raucous, sometimes violent protests and riots that accompanied the Black Panther trials there, I worked for a rather pitiful church on the New Haven green. When Yale students boycotted classes, and thousands thronged in angry protest on the New Haven green, the National Guard moved in one day with tear gas and gassed the crowds. They fled, many of them fleeing into our church. There they were greeted by members of the Thelma Winstead Lewis Circle with sandwiches and punch. The women had gathered early that morning to pray for the safety of the protesters and to do what they could. What they could do was to make sandwiches. Those older women, serving those sandwiches and punch to those students was my first real, undeniable experience of the Eucharist. Cheese sandwiches and punch as the Body and the Blood.

Later the next day (most of the women spent the night at the church to provide a haven for the students), when they were cleaning up the mess in the sanctuary and preparing for the service that Sunday, I said to one of the women that I thought what they did was quite wonderful.

"What's wonderful," I think, "is that Jesus has given us something good to do for him. I know churches that are struggling to find a mission. These students gave us a reason for being here. I can't believe that something so ordinary as a cheese sandwich can be an act of Christian charity."

Look Lady, after Easter, get ready for all sorts of surprising transformations: Bread and Wine into Body and Blood, ordinary, half-hearted, misunderstanding folk like us into disciples of a Living Lord.

Follow me.

Notes

¹“The Christian message is founded on the Easter faith. Primitive Christianity is obviously of the opinion that the earthly Jesus cannot be understood otherwise than from the far side of Easter.” Ernst Kasemann, “The Problem of the Historical Jesus,” *Essays on New Testament Themes*, tr. by W. J. Montague (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1954), 25.

²Carl E. Braaten, “The Resurrection Debate Revisited,” *Pro Ecclesia* Vol. VIII, No. 2 has been helpful to me in putting the matter this way.

³Contemporary searchers for the historical Jesus have generally been unable to shake off the intellectual limitations imposed upon their search by proto searchers like H. S. Reimarus and Albert Schweitzer. In *Honest to Jesus*, Robert W. Funk describes his attempt to float before his friends in the Jesus Seminar the notion, “The resurrection was an event in the life of Jesus”:

My proposition was received with hilarity by several Fellows. One suggested that it was an oxymoron. Others alleged that the formulation was meaningless, since we all assume, they said, that Jesus’ life ended with his crucifixion and death. I was surprised by this response. I shouldn’t have been. After all, John Dominic Crossan has confessed, “I do not think that anyone, anywhere, at any time brings dead people back to life.” That’s fairly blunt. But it squares with what we really know, as distinguished from what many want to believe. Sheehan is even blunter: “Jesus, regardless of where his corpse ended up, is dead and remains dead.” (Robert Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, 313)

⁴“They went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (Mark 16:8).

⁵Carl E. Braaten, in “The Resurrection Debate Revisited,” gives a quick summary of some contemporary attempts to explain the resurrection belief as something that arose from within the disciples:

Norman Perrin writes about the resurrection, and this is what he says it means: “What actually happened on that first Easter morning is that it became possible to know Jesus as ultimately in the historicity of the everyday.” Gerd Ludermann says Peter’s belief in the resurrection of Jesus can be explained psychologically as “the overcoming of a severe guilt complex. He had sinned against Jesus by denying him.” Robert Funk says that “to claim that Jesus rose from the dead is a way of confessing that Jesus...caught a glimpse of eternity. Affirmations of Jesus’ resurrection should send his devotees searching through his parables and aphorisms for traces of that glimpse.” For Bishop Spong the essence of the resurrection was Peter’s experience of seeing Jesus as the inbreaking reality of God. (122)

⁶A cursory glance through more than a dozen commentaries for preaching revealed that there was little interest, among these commentators, in the verse on the vocation to bind and lose sins. Rather, the doubts of Thomas were interpreted as the focus of this passage.

⁷To a group of “blind” critics, Jesus says, “Your sin is retained” (John 9:41, my translation). The willful determination not to “see” must be truthfully named.