

Easter Preaching to Young Adults

Thomas Daniel

North Avenue Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, Georgia

For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I might share in its blessings.

(I Cor 9:17-23)

With God there is a spiritual intimacy...(but) I would rarely be asking these questions inside the church. I see lovely nice people hanging out in a church...but, basically, religion left me cold.¹ (Bono, lead singer of U2)

We are in need of “winning” young people to the gospel. As our society continues to drift away from Christendom, young people are looking at the church with increasing cynicism and skepticism. Many have come to see the church as the enforcer of the status quo, full of rule makers who teach what not to do, and ultimately an irrelevant voice in the conversations happening within culture. They talk openly and abstractly about life giving spirituality, but they easily ignore the church and religion. Accordingly, the number of young adults attending mainline congregations is at an alarmingly low level, and we as the church must be ready to listen to the example of the Apostle Paul. We need to win our young adults back. Actually, we need to prepare ourselves to be instruments in the hand of God, who will ultimately win them back, but this is a resolve and prayer that I see far too infrequently in the mainline church.

God as truth is unchanging, but the context in which we proclaim that truth is constantly shifting. The church must find creative and deliberate ways to keep the truth in front of people. Paul understood this idea, and it allowed him to become one of the greatest evangelists our faith has ever known. The question of relevancy has faced the body of Christ with each new generation, and over time we have transformed ourselves so that the gospel comes into contact with people of every age and life situation. In contemporary America, the quest to relate to young adults is certainly not lost, but it is imperative that we act immediately or risk losing the vast majority of a generation. While this article is intended to aid pastors who seek to relate to the young people in their midst during this glorious Easter season, these principles are relevant throughout the year.

Today there is a general consensus that an enormous shift is happening in the ways that younger generations think, feel, act, and process information; at the same time, church and society are struggling to grasp some kind of understanding of the term “postmodernism,” especially as it relates to the lives of these younger generations. For

the sake of winning young adults through preaching and pastoring, one of the most helpful summaries of postmodernism can be found in the book *Missional Church*, edited by Darrell Guder. In a wonderful analysis of postmodernism and its implications for the church we see that young people are on a “quest for meaning and connection.”² In other words, if we are to speak in ways that are relevant, the church must be prepared to first address whether there is a reason that we inhabit this planet. Is there a transcendent point to our lives that is beyond our own personal desires and ambition? Second, in a culture that is increasingly individualistic, what does it mean to feel connected to God and one another in authentic and meaningful community? The resurrection certainly speaks to both of these needs, and as preachers it is our job to present the truth in the specific contexts in which our young adults find themselves.

Meaning

According to *Missional Church*, young adults need to explore whether their lives have any kind of transcendent meaning and purpose. Meaning can only be discovered when we respond with our lives to some kind of reality. Meaning never exists on its own, but is a response to something greater. In this way it is like laughter. Laughter does not exist on its own, but is a response to seeing or hearing something funny. In the same way, we find meaning when we experience an entity or cause that changes us and we become so enamored that we declare this reality gives meaning to our lives. For Christians, this reality is the resurrected Jesus; what better time to boldly proclaim this author of true meaning than on Easter?

For the sake of preaching, the need for meaning requires us to remain focused on the person of Jesus Christ in our Easter messages. While this may seem obvious, it is amazing how quickly our sermons can move beyond the person of Jesus to the implications of the resurrection. We move into “church speak” and talk about the ministries of our congregation or the witness of our congregants. We talk about the social and political connotations for our world, and while we certainly need to extrapolate the implications of the resurrection, it all begins with one man who walked out of a stone cold tomb 2,000 years ago. Don’t forget to make him the focus of your sermon! He is the creator of purpose, he is the master, he is the way, the truth, and the life; and for young people to find meaning in their existence pastors must be willing to allow them to recognize the splendor of the sacrifice and victory won for us all. If we fail to preach the person of Jesus, then we can not offer meaning to young adults because they are missing the greater reality that is worth responding to with a commitment of faith. The church, its ministries, its witness, its working for justice, are not what give meaning, but rather are the results of people who have found meaning. Easter is the perfect time to talk about the One who gives meaning to all creation. Always remember that young people are looking for meaning and we have to win them back. This may mean our Easter sermons delve into the realm of evangelism, and for a post-Christendom age, such an Easter proclamation is entirely appropriate.

The cross is a revolution of the cosmos, a perfect victory of light overcoming darkness. It is a message of transformation. God transforms death into life, doubters into believers. God transforms mourning into tears of joy, loss into gain. God transforms defeat into an eternal victory. The message of a triumphant Messiah who brings transformation into the world is a message that will win people for the gospel. We only find meaning in a God who is worthy of worship. Our God is such a being. God can

transform the world, and following God will transform any person's life as well as our world. Living in the light of his resurrection means that God can change the darkness of our lives into light. God can take the broken places and bring wholeness. God can take our cold hearts and turn them into a fiery passion that propels us into the world. God deserves and demands awe and wonder on Easter and throughout the year. In the Gospel of John, Mary Magdalene arrives at the tomb in mourning, but is transformed by an encounter with the risen Christ into one who returns to the disciples with that first majestic Easter proclamation jumping from her lips, "I have seen the Lord!" It is Christ's presence that changes her, so consider spending enough time on him that your congregation can arrive at the tomb and be so taken with his majesty that they have no choice but to echo Mary Magdalene's passionate cry.

Discovering such meaning is not just an experience for individuals, but for all creation. While Jesus must be the focus, a sermon must certainly be balanced with the implications of the resurrection for this world. Young adults live in a society where the need for transformation and meaning is all around them. They have witnessed planes flying into the Twin Towers, AIDS epidemics, racism, and injustice in age of mass media that allows them unlimited access to stories of tragedy and pain. Many will not be able to hear about a God who does not bring about both individual as well as corporate transformation of the entire world. Easter is certainly the time to talk about how this God has conquered brokenness, but only after spending time on the person of God in Christ.

In a postmodern culture, young people are discouraged from believing in or proclaiming a viewpoint of truth and meaning. While the church must never claim to have complete understanding of the truth, Easter must be a time when we move beyond the realm of relativism and boldly proclaim salvation in Jesus Christ. He is alive, active in the world, transforming creation, and calling us to submit our lives to him as disciples. This act of following the resurrected Christ, of "presenting ourselves as living sacrifices," offers meaning to a generation that is searching desperately for it. We will not engage young people by offering yet another message of relativism and weakness. Jesus is alive! He has conquered sin and death, and his victory is experienced by all who believe in him as Lord and Savior. There is no greater meaning in this world than that found in the gospel.

Connection

Based on the definition of postmodernism in *Missional Church*, meaning is only one of two needs that young adults are searching for. The other is related and is defined by Craig Van Gelder, author of chapter two, as "connection." He describes how our culture has become increasingly individualistic over the generations. "The structures that previously shaped such community have eroded. With this erosion, persons find themselves very alone. In this context, individualism is not so much a choice people make as a condition forced upon them."³ There is a loss of connectedness both with God and one another. An Easter proclamation that hopes to be relevant to young adults must engage this loss against the backdrop of the resurrection.

If nothing else, Easter illustrates the power of God over the forces of sin and death. The Bible clearly states that we live in a broken creation, that nothing in creation could restore our relationship with the Creator, and for this reason Jesus Christ came into the world to bridge the gap that had been created by sin. On the cross, Christ, who was

blameless and sinless, took the sin of the world upon himself so that those who believe in him would not have to face the final judgment based on their own merit. While the church proclaims Easter to be about more than atonement, Romans 8 and other passages of Scripture make it clear that atonement is certainly a central theme of Easter. This theological point can speak volumes to young adults as Easter represents a connection to God that exists beyond the merits of their own action. What an incredible message it is for a lonely generation to hear that God loves and values each person enough to give up his only begotten son in order to be in an intimate relationship for all of eternity! For many who have grown up in the church, these words might seem basic (although to recognize them as such would be a mistake) but to a post-Christendom generation this news is both welcome and revolutionary. Even though we might feel alone, Christ, through his resurrection, has paved the way so that through faith, “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Easter offers us a permanent and everlasting connection with our Creator, news that all of us, but young adults particularly, need to hear again and again. Because of Easter, we are intimately and permanently connected with God and therefore can never be alone.

In addition to connecting us with our Creator, Easter also allows for deeper relationships with other people through the journey of faith. For many young adults, church is often stereotyped as a weekly gathering of like-minded people who have relatively shallow relationships. It has become a place to dress up, smile, and by no means reveal the struggles and temptations one may be wrestling with. In other words, church appears to be a charade, and who wants to wake up early on a Sunday for that? Our individualistic culture means that we struggle to know how to move into deep relationships where persons expose themselves to the point of vulnerability. Therefore, many young adults are caught in the trap of desiring deep relationships and yet being too scared to really pursue them. However, by believing in the resurrection and its promises for our lives, we admit to God and one another that we are sinful and yet saved by God’s grace. There is a liberation for young adults to admit their true struggles, temptations, hopes, and dreams because God’s grace has freed them from the yoke of having to measure up to everyone else. This kind of connectedness is another facet of the resurrection that young adults need to hear about!

As Christians, we are also called as a community to go into the world and witness to those with whom we come into contact. We do this through both word and deed. It is important that we tell others about Jesus and the transformation we have experienced, but it is also important that we take this resurrection into the streets and work to embody the Kingdom to come. This means striving for the day when “justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.” In other words, we must work together not just to proclaim the resurrection, but to embody it. There are countless examples of contemporary Christians who proclaim *and* embody lives as people of the resurrection. For example, immediately following their Easter service, one pastor led his congregation to a neighborhood park that was a known hangout for drug dealers and prostitutes. Together they spent the afternoon cleaning the park as a service to their community. Not only did they want to reclaim the park for the neighborhood, but as resurrection people they wanted to take the light of Christ into the darkness and believe in God’s transforming power to work miracles in their

midst. At another church a group of young Christians spent an Easter afternoon making dinners for AIDS patients. After taking the meals to the sick, they offered to pick them up in a van to attend a vespers service back at the church. Many infirm people who had retreated to their own private worlds of sickness and scorn were able to experience the power of the resurrection because young Christians wanted to do more with the good news than simply leave church and retreat to private lunches in restaurants. In these, and so many other cases, young Christians did not want simply to *talk* about Easter, they wanted to *act* on it as well. These might seem to be ministries that many congregations engage in year round, but when they are explicitly tied to the resurrection, they become something wholly different.

In addition to connecting with God and neighbor, there is a special connection that can happen between the pastor and young adults during the actual delivery of an Easter sermon. In a recent conversation, a prominent senior pastor of a thriving mainline congregation and the spiritual home of many young adults, mentioned that he believed the postmodern generation connects with authenticity in a sermon as much as anything else.

It is not enough simply to read Scripture and talk about it, but the question many young people are asking is, "Do you really mean this? Does it make a difference in your life?" A stereotype young people often have of preaching is summed up by C.S. Lewis, who wrote that many preachers are "mild-mannered people, exhorting mild-mannered people, to be more mild-mannered." The resurrection is hardly mild-mannered. It is radical. How can we honestly present it as anything else? This is one of the reasons that many pastors who effectively communicate with young adults work incredibly hard to be free of a manuscript. While they might take one into the pulpit, they do not 'read' it. They know communicating with a congregation involves much more than words: it includes body language, gestures, and making eye contact with those who have gathered to hear God's Word proclaimed. Let them see your passion and what Easter really means to you.

Another way to connect is to use occasional and relevant personal examples. Such stories not only help humanize the pastor (thus making him or her more relational) but can also exhibit the difference the resurrection has made in the pastor's life. While pastors must always fight making themselves the centerpiece of any sermon, opening up in the pulpit can have a profound impact on winning young people.

True connection gives the pastor a chance to engage and challenge young adults. We need to win them over and that will not usually happen by a solid theological reflection on the resurrection that fails to challenge the lives of contemporary listeners. Young adults who are in church on Easter are doing something that is incredibly countercultural for people of their generation. If we don't challenge them with the Word then they will probably figure that gathering in coffee shops and discussing the deeper meaning of their favorite movies, books, and music is much more relevant to everyday life. Being authentic ought to include challenging aspects of life and culture that young adults assume or take for granted.

Paul knew God was the author of truth. However, he also understood himself to be an instrument in winning people to Christ based on the context of his listeners. In order to reach the context of young adults in America during Easter, pastors must relate their messages to the longings postmodernists experience concerning the loss of meaning and connection. We need to understand our context as well as Paul did "for

the sake of the gospel so that [we] might share in its blessings.”

Notes

1. *Rolling Stone Magazine*, November 3, 2005, Issue 986. Interview by Jann S. Wenner.
2. Craig Van Gelder in Darrell L. Guder, et al, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 18-45.
3. Ibid.