

The Easter Texts: Getting Hold (or not) of Easter

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Somewhere in the second half of Lent, the phone calls between pastors begin. We are, at first, casual in our conversations with colleagues and friends. But soon we move the conversation to the subject of our increasing preoccupation: the Easter sermon. While parishoners out there suspect Easter Sunday is our favorite day of the church year, bolstered as we are by the crowds and the lilies and the trumpets, we know it is our most fearsome Sunday. What we say to one another in the safety of “professional circles” is something like this: “I know that I’m going to preach about resurrection...but have you found any good *illustrations*?” We are looking for that story or image that will help us speak clearly and convincingly of the resurrection to disciples today from biblical texts that feel as elusive as the actual event must have felt to those first witnesses.

Christmas is much easier. For one thing, the season is shorter. For another, Christmas is a lot more, well, tangible. It is about a birth, the birth of the Messiah, yes, but a birth nonetheless. Most of us have held a baby—our own or someone else’s. And the story is so “touchable” beyond that in all of its details, real or imagined. Here are a manger and hay, woolly sheep, a sturdy cow and perhaps a donkey. There is a baby wrapped comfortingly, securely in swaddling cloths; shepherds with staffs; bejeweled kings or exotically dressed magi carrying their fragrant gifts. We manipulate the Christmas story with our own hands as we arrange brightly-colored Nativity sets. We put up lights and decorate trees and wrap gifts of our own. There is so much to get hold of at Christmas.

Not so with Easter. Easter is hard to get hold of. There are those elusive angels that in each gospel either give instructions or ask questions that no one can understand or answer. This story has its own cloths—but the fabric no longer swaddles a human being securely even in death. At Easter, the cloths are cast aside or folded up, a detail no longer needed. Fragrant spices also make their entrance in the Easter story, but the bottles remain corked, quickly forgotten, set aside literally (and textually). There is the gaping emptiness of that tomb. And this season will go on for seven Sundays of texts from John and Acts that tell even more stories of strange encounters and outrageous happenings.

Some years ago now, I got one of those “Christian Supplies” catalogues. It advertised the “Calvary Hill Play Set” complete, the ad said, with “a stone that really rolls away and three removable crosses.” I ordered it. It is made of gray plastic. The stone really does roll (slide) and the crosses are easily removable. Figures, human or angelic, were not included, but you could order the “Jesus, Son of God, Action Figure” separately. I have that, too, if anyone ever needs it, but these items will not help you feel that you have come any closer to getting hold of Easter.

Still, we keep trying to get hold of Easter, to understand and claim resurrection faith for ourselves and to foster it in the church and in the world. One of the texts for Easter Sunday this year makes plain why it matters so much to us. First Corinthians 15:19-26 contains one of the most poignant lines in Scripture: “If for this life only we

have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.” Who has not felt this way at one time or another in one’s own life, or on many days when examining the state of things in the world? Death assaults us daily in high definition by way of another bombing on the streets of Baghdad or another murder in our own suburb. A serious illness in us or someone we love sharpens the recognition that one day death will make a very personal high definition appearance. So in this life, which is the only life we know, we lean from verse 19 toward verses 25 and 26 with deep Easter yearning: “For [Christ] must reign until he has put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” On Easter Sunday and every other day of the year we stand between these two truths: In Christ’s resurrection, death has been defeated. /The last enemy (still) to be destroyed is death. The texts in this Easter season put us in the company of those who first stood in this place of deep yearning and hope.

Easter Sunday, John 20:1-18

In this reading, the Gospel According to John offers, as will be the case on following Sundays, a story within a story, leaving preachers the choice of addressing one or both scenes in the Easter sermon. The story of Mary Magdalene is told on either side of an account of Peter and “the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved” going to the empty tomb. Much has been written about the two disciples racing (against?) each other to reach Jesus’ tomb. It is often noted that the other disciple lets Peter enter the tomb first, perhaps an acknowledgment with a significant portion of the early church of the primacy of Peter among all the disciples. However, the “disciple whom Jesus loved” may have been the important disciple among the community for whom this gospel was written, so he retains ‘first place’ in this part of the narrative by those who interpret him to be the first to come to full Easter faith. Jean Vanier, in an interesting book that he says is not so much a commentary on John’s Gospel as it is “meditative prose,” offers a different perspective on this footrace. Of John 20:4-9, Vanier offers a psychological interpretation: “Peter, heavy with sadness and guilt, is confused and runs slowly. The other disciple, ‘the beloved,’ seems less troubled. He had followed Jesus to the cross and so is more sprightly. But he is respectful and lets Peter go into the tomb first.”¹

Mary Magdalene is the first follower of Jesus who tries to get hold of Easter as she grabs hold of Jesus with either her hands or her cry, “Rabbouni!” But just as quickly, Mary is the first to understand that she cannot hold onto the Resurrected One in the new day that is dawning. He is ascending and she is being sent, and soon other disciples will be sent on the way, too, into places and among people they could not have imagined any more than they could have imagined his resurrection.

It is worth noting that before Mary is “sent,” Mary stays. Hers is the one sustained witness in this passage because she is the one who stays. In the dark, Mary stays. In sadness and confusion and fear, she stays. Angels speak to her, she stays. A stranger approaches, perhaps the gardener, still she stays. When this stranger speaks her name, and his voice is the voice of her beloved friend who was dead and is now...what? What in the world has happened? Mary stays. Perhaps there is lesson enough in that small detail. She stayed long enough, waited long enough, to glimpse resurrection. People who have gone through the long, dark experience of grief say this is what it takes. Call it by whatever name you like: stamina, courage, stubbornness, dogged determination, anger, faith...but staying there—through the dark, the confusion, the questions—this

is the way we come to glimpse, eventually, resurrection life. All of the gospels tell us that, this side of heaven, there are glimpses of resurrection, but it will always be beyond our grasp. The Risen Christ is on the move in new ways in the world and he calls on Mary to get moving, too. So, after she stayed there that Easter morning, Mary went. And it was her joy, and her responsibility, to announce that a startling new morning of the world had begun.

2nd Sunday of Easter: John 20:19-31

This story of a small group of disciples huddled together, low in spirit, is perfect for the Sunday after Easter. The trumpets are silent, half the choir has gone on vacation, a few wilting lilies remain in the chancel, and the folding chairs have been returned to the closet until next Christmas. The “faithful remnant members” are here this week, huddling together for warmth instead of being squeezed in by crowds, joined (in many cases) by the associate pastor who will be the preacher this week. We join the disciples who are hiding in a house behind locked doors, afraid. There are, again, at least two stories within this one reading: Jesus’ appearance to the disciples without Thomas, and Jesus’ second visit that focuses on Thomas who this time is present and accounted for. The conversation between Jesus and Thomas is always worthy of a sermon, but this time around we’ll focus on verses 19-23.

If death was no barrier to the Risen Christ, then the locked doors of a house could never hold him back. Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace to you.” This is not just a wish or a hope from the Lord. It is a declaration that peace is already among them.² He is their peace. Jesus showed them his wounds and the disciples rejoiced in recognition of him. As with Mary, Jesus then sends the disciples. They will have to get out of the house! Jesus breathed on them, giving life to the new creation.³ Jesus tells them their mission has to do with forgiveness.

Think of those disciples hunkered down in fear in that house, perhaps turning accusing eyes on one another following Jesus’ arrest and death. Or perhaps each disciple in that room blamed himself for all that had gone wrong. The atmosphere may have been so dark that it is no wonder Thomas—who had missed the first visit of the Risen Lord—refused to believe a word they said! They needed forgiveness. They needed to forgive themselves and each other, for a start. This mission of forgiveness, of sharing God’s mercy generously, may be just the word in our own faith community, torn apart by suspicion and anger and accusation over doctrines and interpretations and practices. Offering forgiveness and mercy is certainly a needed mission in the world. Think of how stunned we all were in the wake of the Amish Schoolhouse shootings in October of 2006 when people of that close-knit community immediately responded with forgiveness toward the man who killed the young girls and toward his family.

Newspapers, television shows, and websites reported the words and deeds of forgiveness with incredulity and awe. Sometimes it is a moment of such ultimacy that gives us the eyes and ears of faith we need to receive and offer the peace and forgiveness Christ brings to us. In 2004, Laura Mendenhall, President of Columbia Theological Seminary, wrote of one of her last visits with Shirley Guthrie, beloved and long-time professor of theology at the seminary. She wrote: “We were talking about his approaching death, and I told him he seemed to be at peace. His eyes twinkled, and with amazement in his voice he said, ‘Yes, and the peace is bigger than I imagined.’ He went on to say that he had quit worrying about all the things he had to do...*ought*

to do. “It turns out,” Guthrie said, “these things are not as important to God as I thought. It’s all about forgiveness.”⁴ Unlocking the doors to Easter sends us out with just what the world (and we ourselves) need.

3rd Sunday of Easter: John 21:1-19

I have a special place in my heart for people who fish. Every summer of my childhood, I and my siblings would go to Florida and visit our grandparents. They lived on one end of a dirt road and at the other end was a marshy lagoon filled with egrets, bass and bream, and a twelve-foot alligator who liked to sun himself on the bank beside the three little boats the neighbors shared. We spent hours fishing with our grandfather. At least I called it fishing...never mind that he had to put the worm on the hook for me and take the fish off the hook if I happened to catch one! Fishing always felt like a great adventure in an exotic world beyond the bounds of my suburban upbringing.

In this passage from John, so soon after the resurrection of Jesus, the disciples are not in some exotic world. Instead, Simon Peter says to a few of the other disciples, “I am going fishing.” They said back, “We will go with you.” After the confusion, fear, and uncertainty of the past few days, it was no doubt a relief to think of leaving the “Easter world” going back to their usual routine of life. The disciples apparently decide to return, at least for this day, to the ordinary world they knew before Jesus interrupted more than their fishing with the invitation to “Come, follow me.”

There is so much to choose from in this passage for a sermon. The miraculous haul of fish, the communion-like tone of the breakfast of bread and fish, and the hint of on-going “rivalry” between Peter and “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” are only the beginning. The second half focuses on the conversation between Jesus and Peter, with its three-fold questioning, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Perhaps Jesus is giving Peter the opportunity to respond with a faithful “yes” at daybreak, once for every denial of Jesus made in the night of that garden. Though some might dismiss the connection, it seems that those two stories are connected by a literary device. Beside the Sea of Tiberius, Jesus cooks breakfast on a charcoal fire (21.9). It was by another charcoal fire that Peter denied he knew Jesus at all (18.18).⁵

In this exchange, Jesus calls Peter to become a shepherd of a new and vulnerable flock...the little community of the early followers of Jesus. Peter will find himself having to give more than ever before now that it is the crucified and risen Lord who says, “Follow me.” While most of us do not live as costly a discipleship as did Peter, it is important to remember that faithful discipleship often does cost us something: time, energy, money, comfort, safety or security perhaps. To put it too simply, we can’t forever let someone else put the worm on the hook and someone else take the fish off the hook and still call it fishing!

Four More Sundays to Go

The remaining texts from the Gospel of John go back to the time before Jesus’ death and resurrection. These passages have an overarching theme of Jesus’ identifying his followers, giving them a new commandment to love one another, sending the Advocate, the Holy Spirit to be with them, and praying for their unity. These words are all very relevant to the church today as we struggle more with the things that divide us than we seek the love and the Spirit that unites us.

The passages from Acts in the Easter season are astounding stories of what

happens in the lives of people now that Christ is risen and the Holy Spirit is at work in (and beyond) the church. If, after two Sundays of Easter, the preacher has said all she or he can say about the post-resurrection appearances, then Acts offers more than enough to deal with for the next month or so: There is the conversion of Saul/Paul. The raising of Dorcas. Peter having to explain himself back in Jerusalem for the controversial act of “letting Gentiles in.” Peter’s question, “Who am I to hinder God?” still rings in our ears. The conversion in Macedonia of Lydia and other women. Acts 16:16-34 introduces us to a slave girl and her owners and to a jailer keeping watch over Paul and Silas and other prisoners. But in this Easter upside-down world, who is enslaved or imprisoned and who is truly free has been completely redefined.

There is more than we can ever get hold of in these Easter texts and in the meaning of Easter for our own lives, for the church, for the world. We grasp what we can of this death and resurrection and pass it on from one to another to another, like bread and wine shared. We let go, too, and watch as the Risen Christ continues to surprise us in unexpected places and ways filled with yearning and hope.

Notes

1. Jean Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 335.
2. Francis J. Moloney, S.D.B., *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina Series (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 534, note 21.
3. *Ibid.*, 535, note 22.
4. Laura Mendenhall in *Vantage*, Autumn, 2004.
5. Moloney, 550.