

Protagonist Corner

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One of the burdens, along with the many blessings, for the preacher on Easter is the challenge of proclaiming the message of Jesus' resurrection to folks who only show up in the pews once a year. In many pastors' circles, they are unflatteringly referred to as "Easter People." You know them. Their faces come to mind immediately. You know where they sit in the sanctuary. They may even arrive early to get the best seats. In your pastoral radar, you read why they come, what they seek, and the excuses for their absence the rest of the year. What is less clear is the unique gift that lies hidden in their hands. They bring something special, even essential, for those of us privileged to preach the good news of the grace of God.

"Easter People" can also have a positive meaning, of course; it's a title I love to give the congregations I am privileged to serve. For Easter defines us at our best. It's a rare funeral when I don't remind the listeners that this is what shapes us as church, what gives us hope in the presence of death, courage in the struggle for justice and peace. Our spirits are marinated in Easter theology. I've served three UCC congregations in thirty-seven years, and those folks will tell you this term is one of my stock phrases. I'm sure I borrowed it from someone way back. St. Paul writes to the Corinthian church that it is the reason we can be "afflicted in every way but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed" (2 Corinthians 4: 8-9). This stubborn notion of being the "but not" people is the new Easter clothing we wear. Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are facts of our life, but not the final word. Easter is.

But now come these other Easter People who pack the place on the biggest day of the year. What do we do with them? We may be tempted to greet them with sour sarcasm. It is a temptation we should resist with all our strength, though there is biblical precedent for doing otherwise. The reproach of John the Baptist to those who came to hear him in the wilderness comes to mind. "Who warned you brood of vipers?" You can feel the contempt of his hot breath. Not a lot of warm welcome in those words. The complaint of the elder brother of the prodigal son sounds familiar, too. And how about the indignation of the workers who labored all day in the vineyard, but whose pay was exactly the same as those who showed up barely an hour before quitting time? We feel what they feel. It's not pastoral fun we're having here.

We don't generally like folks who cut in line. Those who show up only for dessert are spiritual rule breakers. Those who prefer the *Cliff's Notes* version of Christianity are a challenge to the preacher intent on shaping vital congregations where the gospel comes to life. A theological diet of chocolate bunnies and marshmallow chicks cannot possibly translate into anything spiritually substantial. How can these shortcut-takers experience the transforming joy of discipleship if they don't embrace its cost? How can the answer of the empty tomb matter if you have not first wrestled with the questions of Holy Week, the heartbreak of betrayal, the evil of Good Friday? Real Christians are made of sterner stuff. A yearly serving of wonderful resurrection hymns, our best sermons, amazing Scriptures, and an hour's worth of inhaling the

pollen of freshly bloomed spring flowers on top of a big breakfast served in the fellowship hall simply cannot produce transformed lives on fire with resurrection faith. “No Lent, no Easter” one of my colleagues bluntly declares! One parishioner of such churchgoing habit was bold to offer feedback to the preacher, saying, “You know for years I have only come to church on Easter. But I must tell you that you’re in a rut!” I suppose a gentle Rogerian nod would do here.

So where’s the gift I spoke of earlier? What is the special gift these folks bring us who labor so long and hard all year long, in and out of season? Look for it hidden in their hands. Look hard into their faces. See there reflected your own image. These folks look strangely like the Marys who irritate the Marthas of the world, always going for the good stuff in the dining room with the holy guest of honor, and never once lifting a hand in the kitchen, clueless that the host could use a little help. They look much like the latecoming laborers to the vineyard who press all the justice buttons of those who rise before dawn, work all day, and at the end hold weary upturned hands, only to receive the same paltry wage. They even resemble Job when God asks, “where were you when I laid the foundations of the world?” Or, as our youth pastor puts it: “When you create a whale, then we can talk!”

I suppose in the really big picture, we are more like these annual worshipers than we care to admit. When we remember our place, relatively speaking, we know that we are all “Jane-and-Johnny-come-latelies.” There is a little bit of the annual Easter visitor in all of us. We did not create the table to which Christ invites us. No matter how long we have been at this church vocation task, no matter how many times we have preached the good news of God’s life giving grace, and no matter how many times we have told the old, old story, or sung the familiar song, we still blurt out that old confession: “nothing in my hands I bring, simply to thy cross I cling.” Thankfully, for *all* of us Easter People, there is room at the table by the grace of God.

Picture this: A van load of tourists exploring the tri-state region between New Harmony, Indiana and Shawneetown, Illinois and Morganfield, Kentucky where the Wabash and Ohio Rivers merge, are lost. It’s a dismal day for travel-heavy fog, hidden sun, and a steady rain. They become disoriented in this river bottom wilderness. Uncertain where they are, they pull the van to the side of the road to assess their location. No GPS in this vehicle. They are not panicked. In fact, they seem to welcome the challenge. In front of them is a body of moving water. They debate whether it is the Wabash or the Ohio River. Like the magi charting their course to Bethlehem, the travelers study the road map, rotating it this way and that. Soon an old red pickup approaches. The driver stops beside their van, cranks down the window, and with a faint smile on his whiskered face nods to the stranded travelers. One speaks: “Sir, could you tell us if that’s the Ohio River?” He looks over his shoulder, then back at them. “Well, that’s part of it.”

Folks who show up only once, maybe twice a year, are not the church. But they imagine they are a part of it. They bear a unique witness to what God can do with a little, a testimony that humbles all of us Easter People. Don’t miss the gift they bring. And while you may be tempted to scowl like John the Baptist, instead love them the way Jesus did the rich young ruler.