

Preaching Easter in Alabama

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So here I am stuck in Alabama, and Alabama is stuck with me. More importantly, both I and Alabama are stuck with the Risen Christ.¹ There is something about God in Jesus Christ that led us to look at Jesus and (democracy in action!) with one voice cry, “Torture him!” And there is something about us that thought that the purpose of government is to provide us peace, justice, and security (We’re at nearly \$500 billion and counting in Iraq.) — even if we must torture a rabbi and two thieves to do it. The only way to deal with death is more death. We tend to murder our saviors, seeing in them a threat to the government hegemony.

Nothing in this is new. Most of this story is covered on Good Friday. What’s new is that there is something about Jesus — victim of government torture — that made him look upon those who tortured him and say, “Father forgive, they don’t know what they are doing.” While it is unremarkable that we fled into the darkness once the military took an interest in Jesus, it is remarkable that Jesus, once resurrected, came back to the same gang of losers who betrayed and forsook him in the first place.

The narratives of Jesus’ resurrection teach us what we might reasonably expect from a living God. God is whoever raised Jesus Christ from the dead.² God is thus revealed by Easter to be relentlessly *pro nobis*, despite the failures and disappointments to be found among the *nobis*. The challenge of Easter in Alabama is to believe that a young adult Jew — who was tortured to death by a coalition of governmental and religious leaders who wanted peace with justice — is not only God, but God *pro nobis*. God is the one who keeps coming back for the slaves, keeps raising the dead, keeps showing up even for murderers like us, keeps appearing in out of the way places like Alabama.³

Listen to most Easter hymns and many Easter sermons, and you might think that the whole point of Easter is, “Jesus is raised...and now we too shall get to go to heaven,” with the emphasis decidedly on the second half of that affirmation. This is a strange take on Easter when one considers that the gospel resurrection narratives seem unconcerned about our future hope. Paul drew out a future hope for us as an implication of Jesus’ resurrection, but that does not appear to be a first order interest in Paul and certainly is not an explicit concern of the synoptic gospels. In a sense, the Risen Christ is not so much the one who rescues us from having one day forever to die, but rather he rescues us today from having to live with no hope beyond George W. Bush’s America.

I’ve just finished teaching a course on Jesus at Birmingham Southern College. As part of the course, we viewed a number of films on Jesus (including “Jesus of Montreal” and “The Last Temptation of Christ”). The students noted that most of these films have a gritty, First Century, Near Eastern verisimilitude about them — until they get to the resurrection. At the resurrection the camera becomes unfocused, everything gets fuzzy, blurred and pastel.

How different from the gospel narratives of Easter. The gospels give the story of Easter an utterly this-world, present-age significance. Jesus Christ—whom we

crucified—is revealed in his resurrection to be the true Lord of the world, this world, not some future world. Jesus is raised to reign now, not later. Thus the Easter narratives are accounts of vocation. Witnesses of the resurrection have a job to do, to tell the whole world the truth that Jesus Christ is Lord and all other presumed lordlets are not. “Go...tell!”

It is as if the gospel accounts of Easter try not to give any encouragement to those who attempt to make Jesus’ resurrection an otherworldly, spiritual experience.⁴ The gospels present the resurrection of Jesus as a political event, that which happens here, now in the gospel mix of fear, misapprehension, evening meals, locked doors, breakfast on the beach, and the disciples’ sexist unwillingness to believe the testimony of women. God’s new age has broken into the present time, our time. And the first to get the news were not good, spiritually perceptive people; they were people like us. We do not live in a perpetual state of pious Eucharistic adoration; our world is the dreary world of breakfast, soggy cornflakes, doubt and fear. We gather, in your church and mine, not with spiritually perceptive, fully believing, undoubting Christians; we gather with those who, when it comes to Jesus’ resurrection, like most of us are convinced that Caesar calls the shots, most of us are as clueless as Simon Peter, shocked and utterly unprepared that the Risen Christ appeared to a loser like him.

This was made manifest for me two Easters ago. The son of one of our pastors hanged himself at the parsonage just before Holy Week. Trying to offer comfort to the pastor and his family during their horrible grief, I asked, “Is there anything I can do for you to help?” The pastor replied, “Would you please come to my church and preach the Easter sermon?”

My first reaction to his request was to feel a huge sense of ineptitude—is it possible to speak a good word in the face of such horror and tragedy? Perhaps death really does reign. Upon further reflection, it occurred to me that this is always the way it is with Easter preaching. Every Easter we must preach to a world that is always in danger of thinking that death has the last word. Every Easter sermon is preached to people in grief. On Easter we preach, throwing our voices up against the tragic, raging against the Final Enemy one more time. And it is the world’s fate to not know the truth about Easter unless some inept preacher like me tells the story. (The women at the tomb, first witnesses to the resurrection, were commanded to “Go...tell!” though none of them had sufficient homiletical training for the task.) It has forever been so. The Easter narratives stand up to death’s dominion, defeat, disbelief, the Devil, and preach, “He is risen!”

A failure to believe the women’s testimony to the resurrection has dire consequences for the contemporary church. Why did my Annual Conference, two years in a row, pass resolutions supporting the troops, supporting President Bush, supporting the Bush-Cheney War, supporting everyone everywhere who was out to make Iraq like we wanted it to be? Perhaps we feel such a kinship with the President because we, being in Alabama, have been wrong so often about matters of such grave import, that we have a soft spot for George Bush as he sinks more deeply into the grave consequences of his mistakes and errors of judgment. We in Alabama, having been on the losing side so frequently, tend to identify with political losers. Yet here’s the wonder: *so does the Risen Christ.*

We in Alabama are last in education and toward the top in infant mortality and child poverty. The great economic ride of the past decade mostly passed us by. When

asked why we need to reform the most regressive tax code in the country, our Governor replied in all candor, “I’m sick and tired of Alabama being last in everything.” We’ve got a church on every corner, none of which stopped one of our legislators from socking a fellow statesman in the nose on the floor of the state senate last year.

Thus we do not have one of the nation’s more positive self-images. Recently, in a story about the movement of young adults back into lofts and condos in downtown Birmingham, a real estate person declared that most of his sales for these new downtown digs were to people who have moved here from elsewhere. If you are from Birmingham, the real estate salesman reasoned, you can’t imagine why anyone would choose to live in downtown Birmingham.

We’ve got the nation’s most disordered constitution, and one of our legislators recently described the Ku Klux Klan as a “kind of prank.” United Methodism joins United Presbyterianism in precipitous decline, despite our efforts. This past year over half the congregations under my care failed to make even one new Christian. All of this suggests that we are uncertain that Jesus is raised from the dead. In short, according to the gospels, *we in Alabama are well positioned for a visit by the resurrected Christ.*

Thus my Easter sermon: *To Galilee*

“And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb.... As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe,... he said to them, ‘Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised;... he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.’”

Mark 16:2-7

“For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins...that he was raised on the third day...that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time,.... Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all,....he appeared also to me....”

I Corinthians 15:3-8

Mark says that on that first Easter, women went to the tomb to pay their last respects to poor, dead Jesus. To their alarm, the body of Jesus was not there. A “young man, dressed in a white robe” told them, “You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified? Well, he isn’t here. He is raised. He is going ahead of you to Galilee.”

Here’s my Easter question for you: *Why Galilee?*

Galilee? Galilee is a forlorn, out of the way sort of place. It’s where Jesus came from (which in itself was a shock—“Can anything good come out of Galilee?”). Jesus is Galilee’s only claim to fame. Jesus spent most of his ministry out in Galilee, the bucolic outback of Judea. He expended most of his teaching trying to prepare his forlorn disciples for their trip up to Jerusalem where the real action was. All of Jesus’ disciples seem to have hailed from out in Galilee. Jesus’ ultimate goal seems not to focus on Galilee, but rather on the Capital City, Jerusalem. In Jerusalem he was crucified, and in Jerusalem he rose. Pious believers in Jesus’ day expected a restoration of

Jerusalem in which Messiah would again make the Holy City the power-center that it deserved to be, the capital city of the world. Which makes it all the more odd that the moment he rose from the dead, says today's gospel, Jesus left the big city and headed back to Galilee. Why?

One might have thought that the first day of his resurrected life, the risen Christ might have made straight for the palace, the seat of Roman power, appear there and say, "Pilate, you made a big mistake. Now, it's payback time!"

One might have thought that Jesus would do something effective. If you want to have maximum results, don't waste your time talking to the first person you meet on the street. Figure out a way to get to the movers and the shakers, the influential and the newsmakers, those who have some power and prestige. If you really want to promote change, go to the top.

I recall an official of the National Council of Churches who, when asked why the Council had fallen on hard times and appeared to have so little influence, replied, "The Bush Administration has refused to welcome us to the White House." How on earth can we get anything done if the most powerful person on earth won't receive us at the White House?

But Jesus? He didn't go up to the palace, the White House, the Kremlin, or Downing Street. He went to the outback, back to Galilee. Why Galilee? Nobody special lived in Galilee, nobody except the *followers of Jesus*. *Us*. The resurrected Christ comes back to, appears before, the very same rag tag group of failures who so disappointed him, misunderstood him, forsook him and fled into the darkness. He returns to his betrayers. He returns to us.

It would have been news enough that Christ had died, but the good news was that he died *for us*. As Paul said elsewhere, one of us might be willing to die for a really good person, but Christ shows that he is not one of us by his willingness to die for sinners like us. His response to our sinful antics was not to punish or judge us. Rather, he came back to us, flooding our flat world not with the wrath that we deserved, but with his vivid presence that we did not deserve. It would have been news enough that Christ rose from the dead, but the good news was that he rose *for us*.

That first Easter, nobody actually saw Jesus rise from the dead. They saw him afterwards. They didn't appear to him; he appeared to them. *Us*. In the Bible, the "proof" of the resurrection is not the absence of Jesus' body from the tomb; it's the presence of Jesus to his followers. The gospel message of the resurrection is not first, "Though we die, we shall one day return to life;" it is, "Though we were dead, Jesus returned to us." If it was difficult to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead, it must have been almost impossible to believe that he was raised and returned *to us*. The result of Easter, the product of the Resurrection of Christ is the church — a community of people with nothing more to convene us than that the risen Christ came back to us. That's our only claim, our only hope. He came back to Galilee. He came back to us.

I visit churches where they have a "Seeker Service" on Sunday mornings. Sometimes they have a "Seeker Service" on Saturday night. What's a "Seeker Service"? It's worship trimmed to the limitations of those who don't know much about church, where the music is all singable, where all the ideas are understandable, and where the preachers are adorable. It's designed for people who are "seeking" something better in their lives.

Well, the church should reach out to people, including those who seek something

better in their lives. Trouble is, that's not the way the Bible depicts us. Scripture is not a story about how we kept seeking God. As we demonstrated on Good Friday and Holy Saturday, we can adjust to death. We can get along just fine without Jesus. So back to work, back to what we were doing before Jesus called us, back to Galilee. Nobody expected, even less wanted, a resurrection.

But on Easter we were encountered by a Christ who was unwilling to let the story of us and God end in death. Easter is the story about how God keeps—despite us—seeking us.

On Easter, and in the days afterward, the risen Christ showed up among us while we were back at work out in Galilee—when he “appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, then to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all,....he appeared also” to the great persecutor and murderer of the church named Paul. The risen Christ was only doing what the crucified Jesus always did: *he came back to us*.

“Show us God!” we demanded of Jesus. God? God is the shepherd who doesn't just sit back and wait for the lost sheep to wander back home; God goes out, seeks, risks everything, beats the bushes night and day, and finds that lost sheep! God is the father who does not simply fold his hands and sit back and wait for the wayward son to come home; God is the heavenly Father who leaves heaven and reaches down in the mire and pulls out the prodigal son, that he may be at home with the Father forever.

We thought, what with the blood and the betrayal of Friday, this was the end. We thought it was over between us and God. At last, we had gone too far away, had stooped to torturing to death God's own Son. Then on Easter, he came back. He came back to the very ones who had forsaken, betrayed, and crucified him. He came back to *us*.

Christians are the people who don't simply know something the world does not yet know or believe something that nonchristians don't yet believe. We are the people who have had something happen to us that the world appears not yet to have experienced. The risen Christ has come back to us. In one way or another, you are here because the risen Christ sought you, met you, caught you, and commandeered you for God's purposes. We live not alone.

Implications? When we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, time and again we look up and realize that we're not walking by ourselves. When we come to some dead end in life, we look over the brink, into the dark abyss, and to our surprise and delight, there He is, awaiting us, a light in the darkness. We pick up the morning newspaper and delude ourselves that if we can just get some really good political leadership, some really effective defensive weapons, all our problems will be solved. Then comes the risen Christ who confronts and overpowers those politicians who thought they were in charge. We give up, give in, despair only to be surprised to find Him near to us.

A student, asked to summarize the gospel in a few words, responded: “In the Bible, it gets dark, then it gets very, very dark, then Jesus' shows up.” I'd add to this affirmation, “Jesus doesn't just show up; he shows up *for us*.”

As the Psalmist declared:

Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. (Ps.139:7-8)

I was visiting a man as he lay dying, his death only a couple of days away. I asked him there at the end what he was feeling. Was he fearful?

"Fear? No," he responded, "I'm not fearful because of my faith in Jesus."

"We all have hope that our future is in God's hands," I said, somewhat piously.

"Well, I'm not hopeful because of what I believe about the future," he corrected me, "I'm hopeful because of what I've experienced in the past."

I asked him to say more.

"I look back over my life, all the mistakes I've made, all the times I've turned away from Jesus, gone my own way, strayed, and got lost. And time and again, he found a way to get to me, showed up and got me, looked for me when I wasn't looking for him. I don't think he'll let something like my dying defeat his love for me."

There's a man who understands Easter. To the poor, struggling Corinthians, failing at being the church, backsliding, wandering, split apart, faithless, scandalously immoral, Paul preaches Easter. He reminds them that they are here, *ekklesia*, gathered and summoned by the return of the risen Christ. Earlier God declared, "I will be their God and they will be my people." That's the story that, by the sheer grace of God, continues. That's what this risen Savior does. He comes back – again and again – to the very ones (I'm talking about us!) who so betray and disappoint him. He appears to us, seeks us, finds, grabs us, embraces, holds on to us, commissions us to do his work. In returning to his disciples, the risen Christ makes each of us agents of Easter. "As the father sent me," Jesus says, "so I send you" (John 20:21).

What the young man in white tells the women is in effect, "Jesus is raised! You had better get yourselves back to Galilee; there you will see him." This was a wonderful, frightening thing to hear: the risen Christ is at work, on the loose and will appear where you live. By the way, Christians, from the first, seem to have worshipped on Sunday. Sunday for Jews was not a holy day of rest; it was the first day of the Jewish work week. Isn't it curious that Jesus wasn't raised on a Saturday, a holy day, but was raised on the day when everybody went back to work? In so doing I think God demonstrated that faithfulness is the willingness to be confronted by Christ even at the office. Jesus is raised into our time and our place. Now every day is sanctified, and the whole creation, even Alabama, is the Holy Land. From this perspective, tomorrow, Easter Monday may be more to the point than today, Easter.

In life, in death, in any life beyond death, this is our great hope and our great commission. Hallelujah! Go! Tell! The risen Christ came back to Birmingham, uh, I mean *Galilee*.

Notes

1 Walter Brueggemann assigned this article to me and gave me the title, "Preaching Easter in Alabama." When I got Walt's invitation to write this article — telling me that there would be no honorarium other than his gratitude — I thought that Walt was being condescending. People who live in Georgia tend to look down on people in Alabama, as if preaching Easter presents a challenge in lowly Alabama that Walt doesn't have in exalted Atlanta.

Why not "Preaching Easter Anywhere and Everywhere"?

Then I remembered that Plato tried to get us to dehistoricize and universalize truth. That truth, taught

Plato, is most true that can be most generalized and abstracted. The Jewish and Christian counter way with truth is to believe that God is always specific, concrete, historical, and located, choosing a particular people at a particular time and place. We make a big mistake when we try to universalize and generalize the serene particularity of the Trinity. The Risen Christ did not appear to all people everywhere; he scandalously showed up to the same group of losers and rabble who disobeyed and forsook him in the first place.

So Walt's assigned title seemed to me to be just right.

2 Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology, The Triune God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 42 ff.

3 Having just plowed through Hans Küng's, *Islam: Past, Present and Future*, trans. John Bowden, (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007), I'm now sure that one of the greatest stumbling blocks for Christian-Muslim dialogue is the Christian conviction (grounded in our Christology) that our human failure and sin evokes God's mercy and love rather than God's judgment and wrath. That sort of God is incomprehensible to Islam.

4 I suspect that one reason we attempt to "spiritualize" Easter, making it into a religious phenomenon rather than to receive Easter as the political fact that the gospels claim it to be, is as an attempt not to change our intellectual paradigms. We attempt to think about the resurrection using modern ways of thinking. Yet modern ways of thinking were born, in great part, out of an attempt to exclude the resurrection from the realm of truth. Modern paradigms of knowledge tend to be subservient to the present political order. So we can't think about Easter without conversion of our politics and our ways of thinking. We Easter preachers really have our work cut out for us.