

Following the Four Gospels into Eastertide

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Last year during the week after Easter, I met for Bible study with a group of ministers. Hoping our study might yield suggestions for preaching in the Sundays of Eastertide, we chose the endings of the four Gospels as our focus.

The Gospels have in common, of course, lengthy accounts of Jesus' Passion and Resurrection, each devoting the single largest block of material to that final week of Jesus' life. All four understand the Resurrection to be the triumph of God's redeeming purpose in Jesus Christ. However, it is instructive to notice how each of the evangelists, as he brings his Gospel to a close, draws the meaning of the Resurrection into focus and trains its light upon the life of faith and church and world. Preaching possibilities are legion.

Mark 16:1-8 "He Goes Before You"

The last sentence of Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* concludes with an ellipsis – three dots. The vast implications of that extraordinarily rich novel trail off into all the unfinished business of human life, the currents of time and human story running into the unknown future. Tolstoy saw no way to write “finis,” as if it had all come to an end.

So also might it be with the last verse of Mark's Gospel. In his commentary on Mark, Lamar Williamson begins the section on chapter 16 with this riddle: “When is an ending not the end? When a dead man rises from the tomb – and when a Gospel ends in the middle of a sentence.”¹ The reference is to the Greek text of Mark 16:8 where the last word is not the adjective “afraid,” as our English translations suggest, but the conjunction *for* or *because*. It is possible, therefore, to end the sentence not with a period but with an ellipsis: “So [the women] went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone; they were afraid because . . .”(Mark 16:8). No period. No “The End.” Mark brings his readers, with the women, to the open mouth of an empty tomb to stand trembling before the words of a white-robed messenger: “He has risen; he is not here . . . he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him . . .”(Mark 16:6-7).

In this moment and with this announcement a line is drawn that marks the end of human possibility in determining our relationship to Jesus Christ. The empty tomb is not a human discovery, but a divine announcement. It is a sign that Someone Else is in control of things. Its purpose, as Karl Barth observed, “is to show that the Jesus who was crucified, who died and was buried, has been delivered from death, and therefore from the grave by the power of God – that He, the Living, is not to be sought among the dead.”²

That “not here” prohibits once for all every assumption that Jesus can be located by human action such as crucifixion and burial. The empty tomb is God's prohibition against our putting Jesus anywhere: in a grave physically, a doctrine intellectually, an experience spiritually, and thus have him available. It stands as both symbol and fact that the initiative in dealing with Jesus belongs not to us, but to him.

And yet, for all the necessity of the empty tomb as a reminder that the Resurrec-

tion brings us to the limit of human possibility, the content of Easter is not that the women learned that the tomb was empty. The gospel of the Resurrection is that when they had lost Jesus through death, he sought and found them as the risen Lord.

And so, overcome with trembling and astonishment, they fled the tomb. Is this not, after all, the only way human beings can recognize and know the Resurrection – as a thing totally unexpected, utterly mysterious, beyond human capacity to grasp or understand, much less control? After all our possible explanations have been exhausted, and all the interpretations from our poor literalisms and pitiful rationalisms are in, is this not the only way we can take our place with those three women, namely, to know shuddering amazement?

As James L. Mays observed, “They would see him in Galilee! That was a possibility and a promise that changed the world . . . Now he filled all their tomorrows. He was no longer in the past confined to memory, but at the edge of every present.”³

The Resurrection of Jesus is God’s seizing, God’s claiming of each and every and all life, of the whole of human existence, of the whole of time and nature and history. For life itself, and each life in particular, is now a life of which God in Christ threatens, offers, promises, intends to become the subject.

“And they said nothing to anyone; they were afraid because . . .”

The meaning and promise of the Resurrection do, in fact, trail off into all the unfinished business of life where the problem is no longer that we cannot find Jesus Christ, but that we cannot escape him.

John 21: “Feed My Sheep”

John ends with a scene that Mark’s ending foreshadows – the risen Christ now awaiting the disciples in Galilee where they lived and worked. And so it happened. After a night of fishing that had not gone well, a figure on the shore called to them: “Any luck? No? Cast over there!” The result was a full net, and John’s excited shout, “It is the Lord!” It was just as they had been promised. What follows has captured the imagination of Christendom.

The disciples join Jesus on the beach where he had prepared a breakfast of charcoal-broiled fish and bread. He “took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish” (21:13). The echo of sacramental language is intentional, recalling both the Last Supper and the place and power of the Eucharist in the early church. Moreover, the scene depicts what is sometimes called the sacrament of reconciliation or the sacrament of the second chance.

Turning to Simon Peter, Jesus asks three times in succession, “Simon, do you love me?” Character is formed in accordance with whom and what we love; by that to which we commit life, energy, and loyalty; by what we do when we must make choices, arrive at decisions, and act. Painfully aware of his failures as disciple and friend, Peter can only call Christ to confirm what his own denials and abandonment gainsay. “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you!” And Christ answers not by repeated assurances, but by commands that promise Peter a future in his Lord’s service: “Feed and tend my sheep; and follow me.”

Surely we have our own denials and betrayals that cause our prayers to echo that of Simon Peter: “You know and believe about me, O Lord, what I dare not claim for myself – that I do love you!” However imperfect our love of Christ, Christ’s knowledge and love of us offer us a future with him and encourage and sustain us in

the work that awaits.

Earlier John reported Jesus' figurative reference to himself as "the good shepherd" (John 10: 1-30, cf. Ps. 23). Here again this rich metaphor depicts the risen Christ as the model shepherd. Having laid down his life for the sheep (10:11), even sheep outside the fold (10:16), he has taken up his life again and his shepherd's identity. "My sheep," he says. These words ring with reassurance of our value to him. The good shepherd knows his sheep, calls them by name, and holds them secure in his hand (10:3, 28). Now Christ hands over the care of his own to Simon Peter and, by implication, to the disciples, and to pastors through whom he continues to shepherd his flock.

A ministry of feeding and tending is wide-ranging. Encompassing basic physical needs of food, clothing, and shelter, it has decided social, economic, and political dimensions as well.

In a journal for preachers, however, might we agree that nothing can take priority over the proclamation and teaching of the gospel as food for the soul – the actuality of God's grace, mercy, and steadfast love thrown around human life?

John begins his Gospel by declaring that the Word who was in the beginning with God and who was God has become flesh in Jesus Christ — that in Jesus we have to do with God's very self. "God does not, if Jesus is the Logos, first know himself as an essence," writes Robert Jenson. God is not first of all an impersonal, abstract, unknowable "something," but is with, for, and among us as a particular and specific "Someone" who knows us, and whom we can know.⁴ Electing to be God in this way, God draws us into the drama of the redemption of the world in Jesus Christ, underscoring the deepest truth about human existence and about every life.

People still need words that witness to God in our midst as the essential environment of the human heart, assuring us, as Albert Outler expresses it, of "our existence from God, our life lived before God, and life upheld by God's encompassing presence and omnipotent grace."⁵ In this light we learn how God deals with the sin the world cannot turn off or throw off or redefine or explain away or escape. Just so are we more likely to grow into that faithfulness, forgiveness, and compassion which the world has such a hard time getting right.

By contrast, a Christian witness, so-called, that is just one more bid by a person or group for power and the prerogative of telling everybody else what to think, how to behave, what to believe, how to talk, and how to vote is both overbearing and boring. My friend Tom Currie reminded me recently that the Christian faith is remarkably undictatorial; and when it becomes dictatorial, it is alarmingly un-Christian. In any case, better to wonder at the mystery of God's grace than about another's spiritual status or calling, as Peter discovered (21:21).

John concludes with a wonderful exaggeration in verse 25. Before we disdain such hyperbole, we might follow Raymond Brown's advice and consider Origen's interpretation of this verse: "It is impossible to commit to writing all those particulars that belong to the glory of the Savior." That, after all, is not far from Paul's claim that in Christ "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col.2:3).⁶

Matthew 28:16-20: "I Am With You Always"

At the end of the Gospel of Matthew, the eleven disciples are gathered with the risen Christ upon a mountain. Here we read, without any hint of disapproval, "When

they saw him they worshipped him; but some doubted” (Matt. 28:17). To these cherished friends, worshipping and doubting, Jesus issues a final claim, a final command, and a final promise.

The claim: “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me” (Matt. 28:18). “All authority” belongs to God who alone can confer it upon another without forfeiting it – the Lord to His Messiah, the Father to the Son. (See below Luke’s account of the Ascension to make the same point.)

From the outset Matthew identifies Jesus as the one in whom God’s promises and God’s purpose are fulfilled. He is Messiah, the Son of David who will bring in God’s reign of justice and rule of grace (Matt. 1:1). He is the son of Abraham in whom all the families of the earth will be blessed (cf. Gen. 12:3). He will be called Emmanuel – “God with us.” That is, he will bear the very name of God – “I am the one who will be with you” (Exod. 3:14) – the promise of God’s effective presence with and for God’s people and God’s world.

Matthew even reflects the Old Testament in his fascination with mountains as the setting for authoritative teaching and revelation. In reporting the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5-7, Matthew says, in effect, that in Jesus Christ the Torah of God given to Moses on Mt. Sinai is set firmly, visibly, personally in the midst of human existence. Here is the word of God with us in person. In reporting the Transfiguration, Matthew locates it upon “a high mountain,” in keeping with the tradition (Matt. 17:1-8, cf. Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36). And so again at the end, Matthew has us meet the risen Christ upon the mountain where he announces: “All authority . . . has been given to me.”

There follows Christ’s final command: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations . . . (Matt. 28:19a). “All nations” says this “son of Abraham” who bears and fulfills that ancient promise of universal blessing.

“Baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit . . .” (Matt. 28:19b). When a child is baptized “into the name of the Father,” she is given into God’s keeping. We might open a service of baptism with words from Isaiah of the Exile that are meant for each and every one of us: “Fear not for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine” (Isa. 43:1). When a person is baptized “in the name of the Son,” he is taken into Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, marked and claimed as Christ’s own, “hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3).

“Teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:20). The Christian life is marked by growth in grace. Devotion, gratitude, and obedience deepen as faith’s search for understanding is fed by able, willing teachers gifted in speaking carefully and faithfully about God and the gospel in ways that are reasoned and reasonable, true to scripture, and that convey an authentic sense of grace and mystery. All Christians are called to bear faithful witness to Jesus Christ as God with us. Pastors, however, are preeminently teachers ordained by a community of faith to speak with clarity and good sense about God and the importance of God’s reality and grace for an authentic human existence secured within God’s unfailing presence and reconciling love.

Just so might the people of God, in word and deed, come to be what Paul described as “[Letters] of Christ . . . written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of the human heart” (II Cor. 3:3). Paul is talking about the visible word of our lives, lived in and by the power of the Word incarnate

working among and in us, who is “able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine” (Eph. 3:20).

Christ’s final command is undergirded by his final promise: “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt.28:20). Matthew began his gospel with the story of the birth of Emmanuel – God with us (1:23). Later, he reported Jesus’ promise: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (18:20). Here at the end, the promise that is God’s own name and the name that is God’s promise are now on the lips of the risen Christ.

Matthew sets forth the powerful assurance that the church worships and carries on its Lord’s commission to the close of the age in the presence and on the authority of the Son of God. This one in whom God is present with us in person, and through whom God exercises God’s gracious and redeeming rule, is our faithful companion in every moment of life and death and destiny.

Luke 24:44-53; Acts 1:1-11: “And He Shall Reign Forever and Ever”

Christ’s claim to “all authority” at the end of Matthew is given full dramatic expression by Luke. Luke’s Gospel ends, and a second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, begins with Christ’s appointment of the disciples as witnesses, the promise of the Holy Spirit to empower their mission, and the Ascension of the risen Christ into heaven. In the final verses of the gospel, Luke simply reports, “Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven” (24:50). Then, as if to review, the Ascension is described dramatically in Acts 1: 6-11, the only place in the New Testament where the event itself is reported.

However, as with the Resurrection, the meaning and significance of the Ascension reverberate throughout the New Testament. Consider Phil. 2:9-11; Col. 1:15-18; Eph. 1:20-22; I Tim. 3:16. Revelation begins with John’s salutation: “Grace to you and peace from . . . Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth” (Rev.1:4-5); and John later heard a heavenly Chorus sing, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever” (Rev. 11:15). The Ascension represents the coronation of Christ as King of Kings.

In his Catechism for the Church of Geneva of 1545, John Calvin wrote that Christ’s Ascension to the right hand of God simply means the “regnum Christi” – that Jesus Christ reigns over heaven and earth. “The right hand of God,” Calvin said, “is a metaphor taken from princes, who are wont to place at their right hand those whom they make their viceregeants.”⁷

Commenting on Calvin’s catechetical instruction, Karl Barth wrote, “The expression ‘right hand of God’ does not designate a place, but a function, that of God’s lieutenant, the sovereign’s minister. Christ holds in his hands the power of God. He governs in God’s name . . . God’s power has become his. There is no divine almightiness without Jesus Christ. To declare that God governs the world amounts to saying that Jesus Christ governs the world.”⁸

The Ascension is God’s “Amen!” to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ – the Father’s “Well done!” to his only begotten Son. We are to understand God’s sovereign rule not in terms of ruthless, impersonal power, but in terms of invincible grace and redeeming love as we know it in Jesus Christ.

It is no surprise that Luke's gospel ends with this cosmic perspective. All along, he has emphasized the universal scope of Christ's significance. He traces the genealogy of Jesus not just to Abraham and the beginning of salvation history (Matt.1:2-17), but to Adam and the beginning of human existence (Luke 3:23-38). His gospel has often been called the gospel for the Gentiles because of the favorable references to Samaritans, the important place given women among the followers of Jesus, and the insistence that the good news is for Gentiles as well as Jews.

Furthermore, in Acts Luke makes the Ascension the link to Pentecost and the gift of the Holy Spirit to people "from every nation under heaven" (Acts2:5). In Acts 2:9-11 Luke pictures humanity, scattered and estranged, brought together by the power of this mighty word of God in Christ who overcomes the curse of Babel; who, in fulfillment of the promise to Abraham, blesses "all the families of the earth"; who reconciles the world to God; and who demonstrates that the One by whom all things were created is the One in whom all things hold together. In his Ascension Christ belongs to the world, to the ages, to the cosmos as the risen and reigning Lord, and all belong to him!

In this assurance and confidence, those early witnesses answered Christ's command to take the gospel to all nations (Luke 24:17). This same conviction undergirds the church's witness today: that, as Barth declared, "The power revealed in the reconciliation of the cross, in the forgiveness of sins, in the act of divine justice and mercy is identical with the power of Almighty God over the whole world"⁹ Jesus Christ is God's sovereign decision not merely to offer us a deal or to increase our options, but to claim us as God's own possession and to give us life. The deepest truth about each of us is that our lives are under the gracious sovereignty of Christ, whether or not we know or acknowledge it. "The difference between the church and the world is that in the church the Lord of the world is acknowledged and confessed, whereas in the world he is still ignored. But the same Lord rules over both."¹⁰

No wonder the history of the Christian church, for all its blemishes and blights, for all the cowardice and failure of many of its number, is nonetheless a stirring drama of ignorance overcome by Christ who alone is the truth; of death undone by him who alone is the life; of evil defeated by him who alone is the righteousness of God; of tyranny overcome by him who alone is "the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death" (The Barmen Declaration 8:11).

Thanks be to God that G. F. Handel set the meaning of the Ascension to earthly music for all time. Luke surely would have been among the first to stand for the Hallelujah Chorus. "The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign forever and ever. King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Hallelujah!"

Notes

1 Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), 283.

2 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960), Vol. 3 Part 2 *The Doctrine of Creation*, 453.

3 James L. Mays, "He Goes Before You," *As I See It Today*, Union Theological Seminary, 1978.

4 Robert W. Jenson, "What If It Were True?" *Reflections* 4 (Princeton, Center of Theological Inquiry, Spring 2001), 14.

5 Albert C. Outler, "The Pastor as Theologian," in *The Pastor As Theologian*, eds. Shelp and Sunderland (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1988), 20.

6 Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John 13-21, The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 1130.

7 Karl Barth, *The Faith of the Church: A Commentary on the Apostles' Creed According to Calvin's Catechism* (New York: LivingAge Books, 1958), 109.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Barth, 111.