

# *Renounce, Resist, Rejoice: Easter Preaching in the Age of Trump*

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The task of preaching, at least in my lifetime, has never felt more challenging, profound, and necessary as it does now in the age of Trump. Easter of 2017 was perhaps too soon after the election and inauguration of Donald Trump as the forty-fifth president of the United States to fully prepare for what it means to preach resurrection in this time of empire gone awry and extreme disorientation. Now that many of us have moved from shock and anger into a more settled despair, and sit on the verge of hopelessness when it comes to the pressing issues of our failing democracy, could the task of preaching be more daunting and essential?

Yet, how easily preaching, especially during the seven weeks of the Easter season, could avoid the hard truth and sound hollow, with easy rejoicing and shallow praise. Like empty words spoken to one who is grieving, attempting to offer quick comfort, Easter preaching could offend more than transform. We are wise to be reminded of the prophet's warning about worship and celebration when living in a time of naked injustice and idolatry:

New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

(Isaiah 1:13b–17)

To explore the theme of *Easter Preaching in the Age of Trump*, I am using the theme of my recent book *Renounce, Resist, Rejoice: Being Church in the Age of Trump*. First, though, it is worth asking what we mean by “the Age of Trump” and “Easter” and “Preaching,” in that order.

## *In the Age of Trump*

If worship that whitewashes injustice is wearying to God, it is also wearying and dispiriting to those living under injustice (and dare I say, it is for those enacting and supporting injustice as well). Many of our people have no room or energy left in their lives for vapid smiles on preacher's faces that mask the deep displacement they are experiencing today. Whatever Easter preaching is in this time of Trumpism, deep division, and despair on all sides (even those who support President Trump, because their despair is surely what is driving them), it must risk going deep into the truth and the pain, deeper than perhaps we have dared go before, so that the profound good news of resurrection might once again have the power to shock us into new life.

We might begin, therefore, by backing up a bit before daring to speak resurrection. In any given year, the faithful who show up on Easter Sunday and throughout the fifty-day season have likely not heard the full account of Jesus' challenge to political and religious power, his rejection, suffering, and death. If there is any true transformational power in preaching Easter, it is in preaching resurrection that comes through the cross. Backing up in the story of Easter means making this cross-centric truth plain and speaking it unadorned. Its ugliness is its power. Its truth-telling is its redemption.

Backing up and telling the truth of Jesus, the truth of the cross that precedes resurrection, also means backing up and telling the truth about us, our naked ugliness, our personal and social rejection, our participation in the ways of the empire that resist the kingdom. This kind of truth-telling is not about placing the ballast of guilt on people until they sink. That only reinforces a self-centered Gospel that traps people in bad news and drives them to a politics of despair. This transformational truth-telling is for opening the way for something new to be envisioned, embraced, and trusted—the newness of the reign of God in our midst. Many may resist hearing and confessing the truth we are obliged to tell, but for those who welcome it like necessary chemotherapy, it becomes the rough medicine that leads to healing and new life.

Therefore, we must name and describe what it means to be living in this era, the age of Trump, even at Easter. The specifics of what kind of world is being forged by the current occupant of the White House, those who prop him up, and the social forces that empower him must be named and confronted. In some settings, spending too much time naming “Trump” will not preach well. Whether the preacher names him or not, artfully naming these growing forces is required of honest preaching:

Energized white supremacy and racism  
Immigrant shaming and refugee blaming  
Misogyny normalized  
Unapologetic moves to shift wealth further upward  
Actions to strip health care from those who need it most  
Blatant and constant lying without shame from those in power  
Growing acceptance of uncivil discourse  
Partisan divides growing further entrenched  
Malignant narcissism and its dangerous foreign policy implications  
Permanent structural economic changes that leave many behind  
Festering nationalism that overrides baptismal identity and care for the other

There are more disturbing trends to be named. Which to name and how is the challenge of this urgent preaching moment desperate for truth-telling that leads to Gospel?

### *Easter*

What do we mean by Easter at this point in Christian history? What does talk of resurrection stir up in people? The expectations on Easter Sunday are high for something powerful and joyful to be preached, but it is not always clear what we mean by resurrection. Is Easter day and season a time to tell the story of long-ago spectacular events that call us to flatly believe in them? Do we live in an age when

we must explain away the resurrection of Jesus so it does not offend our scientific, rational, and settled minds? Do we look for a metaphorical/poetic meaning of resurrection that offers hope but no expectation of any act of God to transform? Do we preach baptismal identity that says we are living a new life now because of Christ's death and resurrection?

Each of these questions leads to a path for preaching resurrection, and each has its appealing answers and multiplying questions. I propose that right now, Easter preaching, resurrection talk, needs to be a bold and daring claim. Easter preaching is claiming something that we might not believe if it were not preached with power and Spirited conviction, because otherwise it simply is unbelievable. I propose that in this age of Trump, Easter preaching means engendering a profound trust in God's capacity to bring new life out of death, especially new life out of the death we must face now under empires of death, as we renounce them, resist them, and rejoice in the Gospel despite them, accompanied by our resurrected brother and Lord Jesus, the crucified one.

### *Preaching*

All of this requires us to reassess what we mean by preaching. In my own Lutheran tradition, we often mean preaching Gospel that overrides the truth of sin exposed by the Law. In other traditions and practices, preaching might be for moral admonishing, social justice advocacy, or inspiring story-telling. Those all have their place. In its greatest power, preaching is about offering an alternative truth to the truth we already know and have invested much in preserving. I propose that preaching in the age of Trump is preaching the alternative truth of God's resurrection power precisely in the moments when it seems empty of power, in the moments when the empire's crosses appear to have won.

What epitomizes the left and right in this age of Trump is a shared sense of cynicism and hopelessness in the political process to accomplish its higher goals. That might in fact be correct and may not be something we need to correct or soften or buoy. We might be tempted to do that in Easter preaching, tempted to preach a comforting resurrection and a hope rooted in something other than the paschal mystery, but that is not what preaching is for. We may indeed have reached the end of our American political story as far as it is capable of creating a more just and life-giving world.

Perhaps in this shared despair of conservatives and liberals, only poets, musicians, image creators, and preachers can dare envision an alternative, life-giving world worth hoping in. And perhaps only preaching can make a profound claim that this alternative world has already begun to emerge from the dank tombs of this world, the tombs of war and greed and nationalism and hatred, the tombs of Jesus and his followers, the tombs that God empties with resurrection power.

### *Renounce, Resist, Rejoice*

I am framing the call to the church in the age of Trump as the call to renounce, resist, and rejoice. The call to renounce is rooted in the ancient baptismal ritual that includes renunciation of evil and all that opposes love of God and neighbor. Baptismal identity is rightly rooted in a grace-centered, humble claim that we have mysteriously been included in God's community through Christ. But in this time, it surely means returning to that ancient call to renounce. When it comes to forces that oppose God,

forces that kill and diminish life for many, there is no room for gentle negotiations. The only fitting response to white supremacy and racism is renunciation, bold, naked, and loud. The only appropriate rejoinder to blaming vulnerable people for our problems, such as immigrants and refugees, is to say, “No!” The only faithful response to fearful clinging to guns and nuclear weapons as our only security is, “I renounce them!” I imagine the baptismal ritual of renunciation being done not in hushed and reserved voices, but in shouts and exclamations and tears.

Much like the ancient ritual of facing west and renouncing, and then turning east and claiming Christ, it is time for such dramatic speech, ritual, and action, or else baptism may lose its power and no resurrection of any consequence will emerge. Perhaps this means the Easter liturgy or the sermon itself includes a ritual of renunciation as a preparation for reclaiming the new life we have in Christ’s resurrection. Imagine the assembly bodily facing west, or away from the cross or altar, and decidedly saying *no* to all these deathly forces that have been given prominence and approval by the president of the United States and those who empower him. Trump did not create or start them, but his rise has given them an equivalent rise to power. Someone has to say “No!” Let it be the church in its courageous Easter faith.

The church in the age of Trump must surely practice creative and costly resistance. Preaching at Easter cannot avoid talk of resistance to the empire if such preaching embraces the cross. Jesus’ ministry is a strong witness of resistance to empire and religion that want to pervert God’s reign into one of self-interest, disregard for the weak and rejected, and accumulation of wealth and power for their own sakes. One can re-imagine in a sermon what Jesus’ resistance looks like in our time. Is his confrontation with Temple merchants a confrontation with religion that degrades the poor today? Is his truth-revealing conversation with Pilate a resistance to the alternative facts of today’s political players? Is his table fellowship with sinners and tax collectors a community-building with immigrants on the verge of deportation or a picnic in the middle of a refugee camp? Funding the church’s imagination for resistance today through Jesus’ own resistance is encouraging to an assembly gathered before the cross of Christ and pondering a mysteriously emptied tomb.

There can be no true Easter without some soul-stirring rejoicing, a celebration that comes not from shallow places in our hardened hearts, but from the depths of our wearied and grieving souls. Preaching resurrection as God’s determination to bring new life by God’s infinite mercy and unending justice can only ring true with rejoicing that equals the truth-claim of the Gospel. Perhaps this means finding ways to transcend safer modes of rejoicing and predictable patterns of celebration. Much like a typically reserved white preacher invited to preach in an African-American congregation with a rich culture of exuberance (an experience I am grateful to have had), we might be called to transcend what we thought rejoicing was, because the grief is so overpowering and the resurrection message so needed, so ungraspable, and yet so excruciatingly wonderful. How can the preacher do that in her own context? This is the challenge for each preacher and liturgist to ask within the culture of their assembly.

### *Preaching the Text*

Easter preaching flows from the resurrection text that coaxes us to place our trust in a new reality ushered in by God in the body of Jesus. Which text we use strongly

shapes the sermon preached (or it should). Since there are four Gospel accounts, and each is wildly different, some thoughtful consideration should be given to which one is read in the assembly and shapes the sermon. For lectionary preachers, 2018 is Year B, the year of Mark. Lectionaries often have a choice between the synoptic Gospel's Easter story and John's. In many years, John is favored for its colorful story of Peter and the Beloved Disciple, and Mary's touching encounter with Jesus in the garden. However, I would argue that preaching in the age of Trump makes Mark's Gospel a strong choice.

I am assuming that Mark's ending at 16:8, with all its mystery and unresolved questions and lack of a resurrection appearance, is the original ending. There are many scholarly debates about this and several other textual endings that fill in the blanks. Regardless of the answer to the question of original ending, the ending at 16:8 is clearly the earliest attested, and if there is more to the original work, it is not one of the longer endings available to us from later manuscripts. Beyond all questions of textual criticism, I want to argue that Mark's Gospel and its enigmatic ending at 16:8 is the most significant text for preaching Easter in the age of Trump.

If I were to characterize Mark's Gospel in one short phrase, I would say it is the Gospel of faith overcoming fear. Fear is a major theme in Mark, with much of the motivation and challenge that characters in the story experience being rooted in their fear. What they fear throughout is trusting God as Jesus does, because it feels like losing: losing wealth, losing self, losing status, losing political and religious power, and above all, losing life in the call from Jesus to follow his way of the cross. One important verse that names this fear/faith tension comes after Jesus calms the wind and the waves. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" (Mark 4:40). Thinking about this existential struggle with fear throughout Mark and the faith one is called to have in God's kingdom as Jesus announces and inaugurates it, we might be tempted to think that Jesus' resurrection is the ultimate motivator for faith to overcome fear. But here, Mark's ending confounds and ratchets up the tension in the reader:

As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. (Mark 16:5-8)

The women come to the tomb grieving and afraid. The angels announce the resurrection and instruct the women to go and tell the other disciples. The women flee from the tomb afraid and speechless. The good news of resurrection does not break through for them. The power of God is too awesome to comprehend. Fear and empire power seem more believable and strangely more comforting compared to the incomprehensible God of resurrection who won't leave us alone. The story ends with silence, fear, and an open-ended question for the hearer: *How will you respond to this God of resurrection? Fear or faith? Perhaps both?*

The power of this ending is its ability to leave the reader in a state of wonderment, dissonance, and deep inner questioning. It raises a sense of obligation in the hearer to consider her own response to the announcement of a raised and living Jesus beyond the crucified Jesus of the empire's doing. Mark's Gospel does not expect that simply hearing about the resurrection will create faith that overcomes fear. The fear is too deep and dreadful. The messenger's sermon at the empty tomb falls flat. There is more wrestling to do. Yet the reader knows, because Mark's Gospel exists, that someone said something somewhere. Somehow, they overcame their fear, and the good news was shared. In some mysterious way, faith gave power to speak and act, but when? And how? The ending challenges the reader: Go and wrestle with this! Listen to your own inner struggle with fear and your own desire to trust God's resurrection good news.

This Easter Gospel from Mark is what we need for preaching Easter in the age of Trump because it speaks to our deep, cynical, pessimistic, despairing moment, and says to keep wrestling with it. Don't accept any easy religious answer to this age's challenges. Your fear of our empire's disassembling of ways that lead to life and neighborly care is profound because the challenge is grossly profound. Even Jesus' resurrection will not be your easy answer. Only a searching faith that dissects the fear we still cling to can move us from silent acquiescence to joyful speech and action. We are living in an age that feels like the period at the end of Mark 16:8, and the good news we expected feels cut off. We wonder where the rest of the current chapter is, let alone the next chapter. We don't know how to go on with the story.

So this is my proposition for Easter preaching in the age of Trump: preachers speak a bold, unapologetic word about God's power to bring life out of death, and preachers let the assembly recognize their own fear, ambivalence, and unsettled questions about whether we even want resurrection to be true. What did the resurrection of Jesus do but transform his followers from fear to faith, from despair to radical hope, from timid hiding to bold action in the public realm? Resurrection is the last thing we want to be true, because it validates the cross and everything Jesus said about it. If Jesus had merely died on the cross and stayed dead and quiet, his call to following his way could be nicely forgotten. Jesus' resurrection makes everything he calls his disciples to live true and unavoidable. Jesus' resurrection makes the church dangerous to those who prop up an empire of death.

In many ways, American Christianity in the twenty-first century has not been well-formed for a time such as this. We have been overly comforted, cheaply graced, syncretized with nationalism, and excused from taking up the cross and facing death. This has been true generally for middle-class and wealthy white churches and for evangelical churches and for preachers of growth and prosperity. Notable exceptions to this are African-American congregations deeply connected to their history and struggle with oppression, immigrant churches, poor churches, and churches strongly aligned with those on the margins.

The challenge of preaching Gospel at all today, let alone the Easter story, is greater and more necessary than many of us have known in our lifetimes. Preachers should know that their task is both frighteningly important and potentially transforming of the current gathering of the faithful and the fearful. All of us assembled to hear the Gospel word and share the meal of the crucified and risen Jesus on Easter day are surely both faithful and fearful. Let the preacher urge us toward deep trust in the God

of resurrection, though we are unsure if we want resurrection to be the truth.

The church is an Easter community created out of the crucified and risen body of Jesus, enveloped by empires, but not overwhelmed. The church is a graced gathering that has been transformed by the good news of God's life-giving reign. The church is the assembly in which the holy and mysterious presence of Christ Jesus is welcomed. The church on Easter Sunday, throughout the season culminating in Pentecost and at every gathering, is called to trust in this good news so deeply that it renounces all that opposes it, resists all that seeks to upend it, and rejoices in God's gracious resurrection power that changes everything, even this current age. Preach to the church, preacher. Preach Easter in the age of Trump. All are awaiting resurrection while we endure this tomb.