

The Stones Would Burst into Cheers: Easter Worship for All the Senses

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Introduction

It was Easter morning my first Easter as the Pastor of Oak Grove Presbyterian Church in Retreat, New Jersey. Being just a few years out of seminary in my first solo-pastorate, I was excited to proclaim, “Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!” When I arrived at the church, I greeted a young girl and her mother making coffee and setting up Easter treats. I knelt down next to the little girl and said, “It’s Easter, and I’m so excited. Today we celebrate that Jesus is no longer dead, but alive!” She asked, “Where is Jesus?” And I explained, “He is here in our hearts,” patting her little chest. She looked down at my hand on her heart, then looked up at me suspiciously and said, “But, I want to see Jesus. Where can I see Jesus today?”

People have been looking for Jesus since the very first Easter, when, according to the Gospel of Mark, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome went to the tomb, and upon entering saw a man dressed in a white robe, who 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.”¹ As with the first eye-witnesses on that first Resurrection Sunday, we are called to tell the story that Jesus has been raised from the dead, and we are promised that we will see him. But how?

Preaching is one way—but not the only way—to tell the resurrection story. Easter is not meant to be cognitively grasped, for who can understand the breadth of God’s mercy stretched out on a cross or the depth of God’s love buried in a grave or the strength of God’s promise that rose from the dead and lives forever? Easter is not to be analyzed—for the cross is foolishness. Homiletician William Willimon claims, “A resurrected Christ is pure movement, elusive, evasive.”² In the ending of Mark’s Gospel, the resurrected Christ is so elusive and evasive that the women are speechless: “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.”³

In his writings on the surprise ending of Mark’s Gospel, New Testament Scholar Donald Juel described the Easter story as a great mystery which cannot be fully and rationally understood—in fact, that is the point: “It is only fitting that just as the tomb will not contain Jesus, neither can Mark’s story. Jesus is not bound by its ending.” As God is at work finishing the story, Jesus lives on; but, Juel claimed, “In the meantime there is only the Word, the bread, the wine, and the promise that you will see him.”⁴

Easter is the promise that we will see the risen Christ—made possible through the words and symbols of worship. Words are powerful; they have the capacity to carry messages of hope in the midst of despair and life in the face of death. As theologian Leanne Van Dyk asserts, “The sermon is the word of God, in a sense, because it makes God ‘audible’ in much the same way that sacraments make God ‘visible.’”⁵

The liturgy conveys meaning through its words but just as powerfully through bodily actions,⁶ liturgical symbols,⁷ and worship places⁸—what liturgical scholar Gordon Lathrop calls “holy people,” “holy things,” and “holy ground.”⁹ Symbols are not simply visual aids; they evoke a greater meaning. And it is during a liturgical rite that the power of the symbol is released and recognized. In *The Use of Symbols in Worship*, Christopher Irvine describes this phenomenon: “When used in the context of worship, symbols mediate and bring to expression God’s redeeming engagement with the world and elicit our response. Liturgical symbols are not simply one element among many in the panoply of worship, but a key mode in which the interaction between the triune God and his people actually occurs.”¹⁰ Symbols have the power to allow people to get glimpses of God and to experience the elusive risen Christ in their midst.

On Easter Sunday, we pastors strive to craft worship that reflects the presence of the risen Christ—keeping alive the promise that “you will see him.” In the Word read and proclaimed, the pastor declares the truth of Easter that Christ is alive and among us today. But, the resurrection of Christ is not limited to the sermon; it also must be proclaimed in the bread, the wine, and throughout the liturgy.

When Jesus entered into Jerusalem, his disciples praised him with these words: “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” Some Pharisees ordered them to stop and be quiet. Jesus replied, “If they kept quiet, the stones along the road would burst into cheers!”¹¹ This is the promise of Easter—that the good news of the Christ’s resurrection is proclaimed in word, in symbols, and throughout worship. No matter what we do, the symbols will speak. As worship leaders, if we are creative and thoughtful, we can ensure that the symbols—like the stones—burst into cheers: Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Like that dramatic morning in the tomb with the angel, Easter is a story to be experienced with all of our senses.¹² One way to make sure that the stones and symbols “cheer out” is to engage all of our senses—sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste. To craft a multi-sensory liturgy is to make the resurrection worship a powerful experience. To encourage and inspire you in your Easter worship planning, here are some ideas from pastors who have creatively and boldly crafted worship to let the stones burst into cheers: Christ is risen! Christ is risen today! Alleluia!

Sight

Like the little girl I met looking for Jesus, people of all ages come to worship on Easter Sunday hoping to see Jesus, or at least to experience his presence. We need symbols that proclaim the power of the resurrection and the presence of the risen Christ in our midst, including Light, Liturgical Art, and the Cross.

Light

At the end of the Maundy Thursday or Tenebrae service, all candles would have been extinguished and removed from the worship space, creating a deep darkness. The Rev. Catherine Purves, pastor of Bellevue Presbyterian Church in Pennsylvania, uses the symbol of light in a candle to transition between Good Friday and Easter:

One thing that we do is not at all new, but it’s a powerful symbol. On Good Friday, after reading the passion as the sanctuary gradually darkens with

the extinguishing of candles, we extinguish the Christ Candle itself. I say, “It is finished,” and carry the extinguished candle out of the church. On Easter Sunday, worship begins at the back of the church with the lighting of the Christ Candle with certain spoken and sung responses; then it is carried back into the church during the processional hymn.

To make the contrast even sharper, Easter worship can begin in darkness—to represent the pre-dawn hours in the darkness of the tomb. The Easter Vigil is historically the first service of Easter, held any time after sunset on Saturday or before sunrise on Easter morning, when the light contrasts more sharply with the surrounding darkness. The Easter Vigil Service of Light begins as people gather around a contained bonfire (or if indoors, a large paschal candle can be used to represent the new fire).¹³ From this blazing new fire, the Paschal Candle is lit and held high, with the words: “The light of Christ rises in glory, overcoming the darkness of sin and death.” The ancient chant is sung: “The light of Christ. Thanks be to God.” Then, worshipers are invited to light their candles from the Paschal candle and follow into the dark church.¹⁴ The light brightens the darkness of the room (tomb), boldly proclaiming that the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. It is in the darkness that the Easter message shines most brightly. The light cheers out: Christ is risen! Alleluia!

Liturgical Art

It has been said, “A picture is worth a thousand words,” and for good reason. Pictures can communicate powerfully, sometimes more than words can say. Consider using images in worship to proclaim “Christ is risen!” Invite an artist in your congregation to participate in worship. The Rev. Susan Rothenberg, pastor of Emsworth Presbyterian Church in Pennsylvania, reflects: “One year, we had an artist in our congregation do a painting during Palm/Passion Sunday worship and used that painting as our bulletin cover for Easter Sunday.”

At Second Presbyterian Church in Nashville, Tennessee, I watched in amazement as an artist “painted” the sermon on “The Lord is my Shepherd.” It remained in the chancel throughout worship, continuing to proclaim the good news. Imagine how powerful it would be to have someone paint a picture during an Easter sermon that colorfully proclaims, “Christ is risen! Alleluia!”

Cross

The most powerful symbol of Easter Sunday is the empty cross. It speaks a powerful message, as described by Kae Evensen in “The Cross in Easter”:

The foolish, self-risking, love of the cross, this earthly mess into which God enters, tells us much about whom it is we worship. It tells us that God is madly in love with us. That though we are just clay and breath, though we live in darkness most of our days, we are beckoned into God’s future summoned toward resurrection hope.¹⁵

The empty cross boldly proclaims that death did not have the last word; God did—and that word is a word of amazing grace and eternal love. So, by all means,

sing “Lift High the Cross.” But don’t just sing it; do it. Lift high the cross during the processional and recessional. Let the resurrection cross burst into cheers: “Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!”

Sound

On Easter morning, the pastor repeatedly proclaims, “Christ is risen!” And the people respond, “Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!” As this acclamation of faith is repeated throughout the worship service, people not only say the words themselves, but they also hear the entire church together expressing unity and faith and joy.

The Rev. Nancy Reinert, pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Caledonia, New York, crafts liturgy creatively, focusing on how the Resurrection sounds to joyful worshippers:

My challenge is trying to help the congregation celebrate the true joy of Resurrection with as many senses as possible. One way we have done that well is by inviting everyone to bring (or pick up on the way into worship) bells—dinner bells, cow bells, sheep bells, jingle bells—that we ring every time we say or hear the word “Alleluia” during our Alleluia-filled liturgy. I am always surprised at how the congregation stays with it through the service. It’s not dancing in the aisles, but it’s a joyful response!

Music is an essential element in making a joyful response to the good news of the resurrection of Jesus. Consider starting with a hymn and then craft the liturgy around it. Hymns are the sung theology of the church; they tell the story of our faith in song. Be sure to involve the music staff early in the planning, so they have ample time to secure music and musicians and to practice and rehearse. Nothing says *Alleluia* like a trumpet: brass and bells make Easter more joyful! Also consider musical responses, so that on Easter morning, a chorus of voices can proclaim “Alleluia!” and sound through the rafters. Alleluias should be in our ears and in our mouths throughout the entire worship service, making it possible for people to hear the cheers of the powerful message: Jesus Christ is risen today! Alleluia!

Touch

The message of Easter is that God raised Jesus from the dead. The theology of Easter is reflected in the Sacrament of Baptism. Historically, Easter was the day that converts were baptized and joined the church. It makes good theological sense to baptize on Easter Sunday, for just as we are buried with Christ in death, so we are raised with Christ to newness of life. If not the baptism of one person, then the baptismal covenant can be renewed by everyone.¹⁶ The touch or feel of water is a tangible reminder of the grace of God that washes clean our sin-sick souls and reminds us of the promises of our faith, the faith in which we baptize. On Ash Wednesday, the ashes touched on our foreheads mark us as dust. Now, on Easter Sunday, we feel the water on our foreheads wash away the mark of sin and death with a mark of grace and life, the seal that reminds us that we belong to God.

As we were reconciled with God in baptism, we can be reconciled with our neighbors in the passing of the peace; as we touch the hands of those around us, we share the joy of Easter. As the Alleluias burst forth—in words, song, and in music

(bells!)—we should let people get their bodies into the act and feel the joy of Easter.

In order to allow people to touch and feel Easter, Pastors have to think outside the books of worship and let the joy of Easter fill the room in ways that are palpable and tangible and touchable. Pastor Susan Rothenberg ended a summer worship service by playing the popular song “Happy” by Pharrell Williams. Then she had children throw out beach balls which were tossed around the church. Imagine doing something similar with balloons or confetti during Easter worship. This could surely be used at Easter to help people touch and feel and pass onto to their neighbors—the joy of the Resurrection—on their skin and deep down into their soul. Through touch, people profoundly experience the feel of resurrection: Christ is risen! Indeed!

Smell

The sense of smell is more precise than seeing or hearing. Because the sense of smell is linked to memory, a particular smell can call up memories and powerful responses almost instantaneously. The smells of Easter include lilies and tulips and fresh flowers that smell like spring and represent new life. Consider the arrangement of the flowers—how many and where they will be placed to allow the smell to fill the Sanctuary. You might further evoke the power of liturgical symbols by arranging the flowers around the font or under the Lord’s Table or under and around the cross.

In two churches I have served, we had a lily parade. During the Processional, the children bring in the flowers, each child carrying one flower pot. It is a beautiful and precious sight to behold and a fragrant smell to enjoy. The flowers transform the Sanctuary from an empty chancel to an extraordinary aromatic garden! In sight and in smell, the flowers proclaim new life and cheer out great joy!

Invite people to bring flowers to church—fresh cut from their gardens. They can hold them in the pews or put them in containers at the doors. Either way, the fresh-cut spring flowers will fill the air with a bouquet of sweet fragrance. During the recessional, invite people to follow outside to the front lawn of the church to transform the cross. What was once a wooden cross used on Good Friday to receive sins now becomes a resurrection cross. Covered with flowers, it is a symbol of new life, faithfully and fragrantly bursting into cheers: Christ is risen! Alleluia!

Taste

Jesus said, “Do this in remembrance of me.” As we gather around the Lord’s Table to share communion, we enjoy a foretaste of the heavenly banquet we anticipate celebrating someday in glory with all the saints. On the road to Emmaus, when the resurrected Jesus broke bread, their eyes were opened and they recognized him. And so we come to the Table with eyes wide open, hoping to taste and see that the Lord is good. Consider having bread baking as people arrive, so they smell the aromas. On the Table, have the bread uncovered, so people can see and smell and anticipate the Sacrament of Communion. Before any words are spoken, the powerful smell and sight of the bread proclaim, “This is my body given for you.” They cheer out, “Taste and See that the Lord is good.” People will be ready and anxious to come to the Table even before they are called.

On Easter, the sacrament of Communion is not marked with a solemn tone; rather we come to the Lord’s Table singing “This is the feast of victory for our God! Al-

leluia!” And at this feast, loaves abound. Pastor Susan Rothenberg makes sure that people can really taste and see the goodness of God during Easter Communion: “At Easter, I provide large, delicious loaves of freshly baked challah bread to symbolize the “feasting” aspect of the day. And I encourage folks to take large pieces of bread during communion.”

Even a taste of the bread of heaven and a sip of the cup of salvation proclaim, “Christ is risen indeed!”

Multi-Sensory Easter Experience

Christ rose from the dead! This is good news of great joy for all the people! And yet, often our Easter worship is far too sedate. The joy of Easter is not just for the Pentecostals. Even more traditional main-line churches can experience Easter with all of the senses, so that Easter is embodied and celebrated. The Rev. Tiffany Nicely Holleck, who serves St. Peter’s Lutheran church on Cape Cod, attends to all of the senses in their Easter celebration.¹⁷ Pastor Holleck constructed an “Alleluia” trunk, in which the “Alleluias” were buried before Ash Wednesday. No “Alleluias” were spoken or sung throughout Lent. On Easter morning, the trunk was opened, and long streamers of gold, white and yellow ribbons were taken out to symbolize the release of the “Alleluias.” A powerful way to engage all of the senses in the Easter celebration is through a drama like this one performed at St. Peter’s Lutheran Church on Easter Sunday:

At opening of worship, bell is rung three times. Three girls carrying bowls of fragrant spices move from doors of sanctuary to altar rail, where the Alleluia trunk is open.

Mary M: Who will roll away the stone for us?

Mary J: That stone is covering the whole entrance to the tomb.

Salome: There is no way we can move it.

They arrive at the trunk. An angel dressed in white stands next to the trunk.

Angel 1: Do not be afraid. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth.

Angel 2: He was crucified and he died. But now he has been raised. He is not here!

Angel 3: Look, (*points at the open trunk*) there is the place they laid him. But go, tell the disciples and Peter that Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.

Three girls look into trunk and at each other. They grab streamers and run down the center aisle.

Angel 3: Christ is risen!

Congregation: He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Angel 1: Christ is risen!

Congregation: He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Angel 2: Christ is risen!

Congregation: He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

To engage the congregation in feeling the joy of Easter, the girls distribute the Alleluia ribbons to everyone. Throughout worship, the congregation waves the stream-

ers each time they say or hear “Alleluia.” Through multi-sensory dramas like this one, congregations can experience the resurrection bursting into cheers in powerful ways.

Easter worship that engages all of the senses is not to be done haphazardly, but faithfully. As the Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber, Lutheran Pastor of the House for All Sinners and Saints in Denver says, “I really feel strongly that you have to be deeply rooted in tradition in order to innovate with integrity.” And so from a solid foundation of the theology of Easter, we seek to create new ways for people to encounter the living Christ. For Pastor Bolz-Weber, innovating with integrity has changed her Easter worship service to be a multi-sensory experience:

So, for example, we celebrate the Easter vigil, where you start with a new fire and you light it and you have this paschal candle and you parade in chanting, and we have these baptisms and we have the Eucharist and it’s like amazing. And then we end it. When it’s done, we have a huge dance party, and we feel like nothing says he is risen like a chocolate fountain in the baptismal font, right? *(laughter)*¹⁸

Like the surprise ending of the Gospel of Mark, pastors who lead an Easter worship that engages all the senses may be joyfully surprised at the people’s responses in the end, which may include chanting, dancing, and laughing. Alleluia!

Conclusion

Every Sunday, as we gather for worship, Anne Lamott boldly and rightly proclaims, “We are, by the gracious love of God, tricked into coming back to life.”¹⁹ In an Easter service, the message of God’s victory over death is proclaimed and “bursts into cheers” in the sight of the empty cross, the sounds of the glorious music, the touch of the baptismal water, the smell of the lilies, and the taste of the communion bread. A worship service filled with the sights and sounds and smells and touches and tastes of resurrection will surely bring us back to life. And for that we joyfully respond: Alleluia!

Notes

1 Michael David Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version: With the Apocrypha: An Ecumenical Study Bible*, Fully rev. 4th ed. (Oxford, England; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), Mark 16:6-7.

2 William Willimon, “Preaching as Demonstration for Resurrection,” *Journal for Preachers*, Easter, 2014.

3 Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version: With the Apocrypha: An Ecumenical Study Bible*, Mark 16:8.

4 Donald H. Juel, *Mark*, Augsburg Commentary (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 235.

5 Leanne Van Dyk, *A More Profound Alleluia: Theology and Worship in Harmony*, Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies Series (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2005), 73.

6 Kimberly Bracken Long, *The Worshipping Body: The Art of Leading Worship*, 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 32.

7 Gordon Lathrop, *Holy People: A Liturgical Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999); — — —, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); — — —, *Holy Ground: A Liturgical Cosmology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press).

8 Jeanne Halgren Kilde, *Sacred Power, Sacred Space: An Introduction to Christian Architecture and*

- Worship* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 11.
- 9 Lathrop, *Holy People: A Liturgical Ecclesiology*; — — —, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology*; — — —, *Holy Ground: A Liturgical Cosmology*.
- 10 Christopher Irvine and Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (Great Britain), *The Use of Symbols in Worship*, Alcuin Liturgy Guides (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2007), 18.
- 11 New Living Translation, Luke 19:40.
- 12 Kathy Black, *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996). Note: for those who cannot see or hear, providing a multi-sensory experience of Easter is essential.
- 13 Think about a safe place for your bonfire to be. And be sure to ask authorities if clearances are necessary and to follow local ordinances. Nothing could be worse than to have your joyous service interrupted by the local police!
- 14 The basic structure of this service is described in *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, 369-376, and *The Book of Common Worship of the Presbyterian Church*, 297-314.
- 15 Kae Evensen in "The Cross in Easter." workingpreacher.org, May 7, 2008.
- 16 Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Ministry Unit on Theology and Worship, and Cumberland Presbyterian Church, *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant for a Congregation, 464.
- 17 Holleck recommends the Iona/Wild Goose Resource Group materials as a way to inspire creativity. Particularly helpful in Easter worship planning is the *Stages on the Way: Worship Resources for Lent, Holy Week, and Easter*.
- 18 Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Interview with Krista Tippett, On Being with Krista Tippett*. <http://www.onbeing.org/program/transcript/nadia-bolz-weber-seeing-the-underside-and-seeing-god-tattoos-tradition-and-grace>.
- 19 Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999).