



Journal for Preachers

Volume XLIX Number 3

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George Mason: Look! A New Creation: Easter Preaching as Glimpses of the World Set Right

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Keith Grogg: Sermon: “What Are We Supposed to Do with This?”

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Publisher's Foreword

Reflecting on a term teaching at Harvard Divinity School in the early 1980s, Frederick Buechner wrote:

I had never understood so clearly before what preaching is to me. Basically, it is to proclaim a Mystery before which, before whom, even our most exalted ideas turn to straw. It is also to proclaim this Mystery with a passion that ideas alone have little to do with. It is to try to put the Gospel into words not the way you would compose an essay but the way you would write a poem or a love letter—putting your heart into it, your own excitement, most of all your own life. It is to speak words that you hope may, by grace, be bearers not simply of new understanding but of new life both for the ones you are speaking to and also for you. Out of that life, who knows what new ideas about peace and honesty and social responsibility may come, but they are the fruits of the preaching, not the roots of it.

Each of the contributors to this Easter issue of *JP* displays the very best of what Buechner is trying to express. On these pages, you will find the heart, the excitement, and life of these preachers. Each, in their own way, takes seriously that Easter shapes us, not the other way around. The faithfulness of these words from our colleagues collected here bears witness to the truth that we do not craft Easter proclamation out of our own exalted (or clever) ideas.

In the opening sentence of the first piece, Lewis Galloway writes, “In spite of what we may think, Easter is not for those looking for easy answers to the big questions of life.” That opening is a guide to this issue. Easter proclamation is the word that comes in darkness, in hardship, amid scars, seeing the moral challenge to love our enemies, while painfully waiting, and while contemplating, as Rebecca Gurney writes, what it means to walk “the costly road of love.”

And, yes, Easter calls us to joyful proclamation. It is the joy of Easter sunrise expectation, the voice of love that makes you want to do a resurrection dance, it is the journey of Easter companions. All this and more is offered in these pages by our gifted colleagues.

As George Mason writes in his insightful survey of Easter texts: “In the work of preaching about things that cannot be proven but only believed, show surpasses tell. It opens our imagination to what we never thought possible. Like the Resurrection itself.”

— Mark Ramsey

On the First Day of the Week

Lewis F. Galloway
Black Mountain, North Carolina

In spite of what we may think, Easter is not for those looking for easy answers to the big questions of life. We tend to think of the Easter message of the resurrection as a bold truth that spoken loud enough silences all opposition. If we think that way about Easter, then we have not really heard the struggle of the early Christian witnesses to the resurrection. According to the gospel writers and Paul, the Easter proclamation, “Christ is risen,” met with confusion, astonishment, and disbelief before it became an affirmation of hope, joy, and truth. The Easter message is fraught with challenges and filled with promise. Is Christianity only a vain faith or an idle tale?

First-century questions are not as far as we might think from 21st-century questions. In his book, *Is Faith Obsolete?*, Robert McAfee Brown notes that modern people have trouble with the Christian faith because they say it doesn’t do justice to what we call the “hard facts” of human existence. Week after week we live those “hard facts.” They say the faith is simply “an impossible return to outworn convictions.”¹ Brown says that people either hold the faith to be important but not possible or possible but not important.

Let me explain. Some would agree with the initial reaction of the first disciples that the women’s story of the resurrection of Jesus simply cannot be. In the crucifixion of Jesus, they see the power of evil conspire to defeat the most loving person who ever lived. When you look evil in the face, it is hard not to be a bitter cynic, afraid to take the risk of living and loving again. Certainly, there is some evidence—a stone rolled back, an empty tomb, and jumbled up linen cloths. Yet, these can be explained in other ways. Twenty centuries have only increased our skepticism. We want proof, some kind of hard evidence that meets the test of our so-called scientific world view. Our own pain, our despair, and our brushes with death make it hard to believe. Yes, the faith may be important, but it just doesn’t seem possible.

On the other side, there are those who act as if faith may be possible, but it doesn’t seem important. Some continue to live as if the resurrection of Jesus doesn’t make any difference in their lives. Then Easter becomes little more than a holiday about bunnies, festive meals, butterflies, and the rebirth of spring. In the letters of Paul, we see that many people in the church keep on living the same carefree, riotous, bigoted, and immoral lives they lived before they knew Jesus. Today, we know people who claim to follow Jesus but who are unmoved by the plight of the poor, the immigrant, the hungry, and the elderly, and who accept anger, injustice, brutality, and violence as a way of life. To these it seems quite possible to believe, but faith does not make a difference in their lives.

Easter divides two worlds. In the old world, faith may be important but not possible, or possible but not important. The old world ends with a long journey to the

grave. Luke tells us that another world begins on the first day of the week. It is our world in which the impossible becomes the most important possibility of all.

On the first day of the week, the resurrection of Jesus vindicates the truth of everything he said and did. The poor, the grieving, the meek, the hungry, the merciful, the persecuted, and the peacemakers are blessed. The last are first and the first are last. The outcasts, the vulnerable, and the sinners find welcome. The good news is for all people; the captives find release; the blind see; the abundance of the earth is shared with everyone; and the dead are raised to new life. The resurrection of Jesus is the culmination of God's redemptive work throughout creation. The resurrection of Jesus affirms the goodness of creation and the value of every life created in the image of God.

Long before Jesus, there is a foretaste of the resurrection when God frees the slaves, provides manna in the wilderness, heals a foreign leper, feeds a hungry outsider, deposes an evil monarch, and returns a weary people from exile. The resurrection of Jesus confirms the truth of "the great reversal" in the Bible where God brings down the proud, lifts up the lowly, fills the hungry with good things, and sends the rich away empty. The songs of Hannah and Mary share a vision of the mighty, redemptive, and transformative work of God in the resurrection.

On the first day of the week, when resurrection faith takes hold of our lives, we are invited to explore an old world with new eyes. Jürgen Moltmann has written in his book *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, "With Easter, the laughter of the redeemed ... begins."³ Resurrection faith turns the world upside down. Those who live in the power of the resurrection offer their lives as testimony in a world that does not yet see the truth.

On the first day of the week, a thirty-one-year-old physician, Bill Thomas, became the medical director of a nursing home in upstate New York. When he toured the home, he found despair in every room. He decided to attack the "Three Plagues" of nursing home existence—helplessness, boredom, and loneliness—not with medication but with life. He convinced the state to allow him to make some rather unorthodox changes. It took all of his persuasive powers as a salesman to make it happen. He threw out the artificial plants and brought in live ones; he tore up the lawn and created a garden for the residents and a playground for neighborhood kids; and he brought in two dogs, four cats, and one hundred parakeets. It was bedlam at first, but soon the changes had a profound effect on the health and quality of the residents' life.³ On the first day of the week, he invaded the land of the dead with new life.

On the first day of the week, some years ago, I dragged my reluctant heart to Easter worship. I was weary because a young seminary friend with brain cancer had died that spring. When the cancer first appeared, he dropped out of school for a year and went through surgery and treatments. He began to heal, finished seminary, accepted a call, married, and had a son. Then the cancer returned. In spite of the prayers of the church and the skill of many physicians, the cancer spread, the suffer-

ing increased, and he died. At his funeral, as we sang, “I will cling to the old rugged cross.” I thought to myself, what good is that if all our love, efforts, and prayers only end in pain and death. While I was distracted by these thoughts in that Easter worship service, I woke from brain fog to hear the pastor, Dr. Albert Currie Winn, say, “The resurrection of Jesus means that you doubt everything you once believed to be true, and you believe to be true everything you once doubted.” The darkness, hopelessness, and doubt lifted; I began to see my friend’s life in light of the resurrection. His life had meaning and beauty like the life of Jesus. He was not gone. Like Jesus, he is with us in the communion of saints to inspire us to faith, courage, and goodness.

On the first day of the week, a woman rose in worship to give a Discipleship Moment to encourage folks struggling with life issues to use the resources of the church’s Counseling Center to find healing. In this very proper, buttoned up, “Sunday best” congregation, she began to tell of her life. She had grown up in privilege, was educated at the finest schools, and had been given the best of everything. She had married. From the outside, it looked like she lived a charmed life. Then she said that for years she was physically abused by her husband. When she told the pastor of the church she attended at that time of the abuse, the pastor implied that it must somehow be her fault. Her marriage ended; she found a new church; she became an outstanding educator. In that moment in worship, she was witnessing to her new life and offering others in abusive situations to find the help they needed. When she finished her testimony, there was a flash of utter silence as her powerful words shattered the Sunday morning facade of pretense and perfection. Then, thunderous applause rose from a congregation that never clapped in church. In that moment you could feel the luminous presence of the Lord rising among the people of God.

On the first day of the week, we leave the empty tomb and take to heart the words of the mysterious young man in the Gospel of Mark, “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.”²⁴ On the first day of the week, the women go back to the familiar places where they walked with him, listened to him, ate with him, felt his love, and witnessed his compassion. Only this time, they will see the Risen Jesus in all the ordinary moments and daily routines of life. This time, they will live the new life he has given them knowing who he is. They will see him in the faces of family, friends, strangers, and even enemies.

It has often been said that Galilee is every place and any place. Galilee is the breakfast table where a family is preparing for another day, the conference room where a shady deal is being cut, the filthy house where children are neglected, the graveside where the body of our loved one lies, the school where a teacher is ready to give up, and the deportation center where immigrants are treated with abuse. Galilee is also the place where people gather to work for an end to gun violence, where a community opens a food bank and pantry, where a congregation builds affordable

housing, where neighbors start a prison ministry, and a church welcomes all. In all these times and places, Jesus is present. There is no place where the Risen Lord is not present.

A retired Navy captain in Norfolk saw Jesus in everyone he met in the neighborhood where he lived. He was a person of deep faith who had known tragedy in his life. While his family was moving across the country to a new naval assignment, his young son was killed in a freak accident. His daughter developed schizophrenia and lived in a group home. His wife died from cancer. In his naval career, he had commanded a ship and known combat in war. He knew about the power of death in war and in his personal life. In the Risen Christ, he found a greater power. In a Navy town during the Cold War, he chaired the peacemaking committee of the church because he had seen the devastation of war. He was able to bring a wide range of people to the table to talk. In everything he did, he worked for reconciliation, because he knew the terrible cost of human brokenness, despair, and discord. Nothing was more important to him than sharing this resurrection faith with others. He spent Sunday afternoons driving around the city to make doorway visits with first-time worshippers in the church. He wanted to hand over to them the same power that he had received. In spite of all the things that he had experienced in his life, the terrifying beauty of Easter morning had taken hold of his heart. He lived a resurrected life.

Galilee is all around us. There is no place we can go where Jesus is not present. On the first day of the week, we leave Easter worship to go back to Galilee, that is, go back to the places where we live and love, labor and play, struggle and dream, fail and try again. We go back with a deeper sense of the presence of Jesus. We go back in the power of the resurrection to stand against political violence and to stand with the forgotten, poor, and oppressed. We go back with fresh eyes and a new faith to see the one who was always there, but we never could see clearly. He is always ahead of us—greeting us in every new experience and in every person we meet. We will meet him in the most unexpected and ordinary places. In his power, we will not flee from challenges that call for courage, situations that require sacrifice, and wrongs that demand forgiveness. We go back to meet the one who renders us speechless and then gives us a new voice to speak.

Notes

¹ Robert McAfee Brown, *Is Faith Obsolete?* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 16.

² Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 303.

³ Atul Gawande, *Being Mortal* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2014), pp. 111-125.

⁴ Mark 16:6-7.

Sermon: “Preaching, and Living, Resurrection”

Amy Starr Redwine
Richmond, Virginia

For the first time in the seventeen years since my ordination, I spent Easter 2025 not preaching in a sanctuary that smelled of lilies, but alone on my back porch waiting for my family to get home from church. Barely a month before, I had abruptly gone on medical leave when I received a diagnosis of a rare leukemia that required immediate and aggressive treatment. I had spent the last few weeks awake in the late-night and early-morning dark, often with tears leaking from my eyes as I tried to wrap my head around a prognosis which predicted I would have only a handful of years left to live.

On Easter morning I woke up far too early and, trying not to disturb my still-sleeping husband, crept out to our porch where I listened to the sound of the wind in the trees and, eventually, to the song of the birds as the dawn finally broke. I thought about what I might say to my congregation if I were to stand in the pulpit that morning, and I remembered two Bible verses. One was written in my grandmother’s beautiful penmanship on the flyleaf of the Bible she gave me in high school: “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:5). The other is from John’s version of the resurrection story: “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb” (John 20:1).

I have long been a believer that in order to talk about the resurrection promise of Easter, you have to acknowledge the dark, the truth that there can be no resurrection without death. Not simulated, apparent death—the “mostly dead” of *The Princess Bride*—but actual, life-ending, world-rending, grief-bearing death. The realities of actual congregational life make this challenging, though. Most gathered congregations at Easter are made up of two groups: those who came to every Lenten and Holy Week service and thus witnessed, from the Ash Wednesday cross on their forehead to the Good Friday rendition of “Were You There When They Crucified My Lord,” all the hard lessons the season had to offer; and those who hadn’t been to church since Christmas Eve but who get themselves to worship on Easter. Threading that homiletical needle is no small feat. How do we find ways, on this day of liturgical excess, to acknowledge the reality of death in order to fully celebrate the mystery and wonder of the resurrection?

On September 9, 2025, US Air Force veteran Jeffrey Nuccetelli and US Navy Senior Chief Petty Officer Alexandro Wiggins testified at a hearing on UFOs before the US House of Representatives. Both recounted their personal encounters with Unidentified Aerial Phenomenon as well as encounters shared with them by their colleagues. They pleaded with the representatives to take these experiences seriously. Nuccetelli began, “I’m here today because the American people have both the

right and the responsibility to know the truth about unidentified aerial phenomenon. That truth remains hidden, classified, and silenced by fear, retaliation, stigma, and confusion. Today we are here to help break that silence.” After recounting several UAP encounters, including his own, Nuccetelli observed, “The question is no longer whether these events are real, but whether we have the courage to face them. True leadership requires vision, a willingness to confront the unknown with transparency and resolve.”¹

The writer of the gospel of Mark would surely have agreed. His resurrection account has the women encountering an angel at the empty tomb, but seized with terror and amazement, they run away and keep silent. Scholars have interpreted this as Mark’s account of what not to do, in hopes of inspiring the reader to do the opposite and proclaim the mystery of the empty tomb with courage and resolve.

The strange and challenging task of preaching Easter is that it requires us to proclaim a truth that is often hidden and silenced. Yes, on Easter, many of us exchange the greeting “Christ is risen, He is risen indeed!”—but how do we genuinely and transparently bear witness to the resurrection promise, not just at Easter but in our day to day lives? It can too often live as a closely guarded secret, something we have glimpsed but that leaves us with a profound sense of uncertainty and unease about what we have seen—not unlike those encounters with UAPs, which are undeniable but also inexplicable. As preachers, in order to exercise homiletical leadership—what Nuccetelli calls the “vision [and] willingness to confront the unknown with transparency and resolve”—we offer up words and images that invite people to courageously name their resurrection encounters, counter-cultural as this may feel. We do this in spite of the fact that the people in the pews are often focused on the tangible stand-ins for true resurrection experience; the music, the lilies, the chocolates, the dresses, the family pictures, the celebratory lunch. Our task is to summon the courage to lead the congregation on a journey of facing the many questions raised by the day in order to move closer to resurrection truth. And the question is not whether the resurrection events described in the gospel are true—empty tomb, encounter with angels, encounter with risen Lord—but rather the questions that follow if we assume they are true: *In a world steeped in suffering, what does resurrection offer us? What new good news does Easter offer us today, in this unique moment? How do we summon the courage to share our resurrection experiences with one another, to “confront the unknown with transparency and resolve”?*

Such questions are increasingly salient in this moment when Artificial Intelligence has begun replacing many human to human interactions. As Tripp Fuller writes, we have landed squarely at a time when “humanity’s oldest spiritual questions are colliding with our newest technology in ways that would make Augustine dizzy.” People seek out an AI not just for help with work or school, but for companionship, therapy, and affirmation. They might even be more willing to admit to an AI the very things that feel daunting to share with another person, for fear of being ridiculed or disbelieved.

Fuller believes Christianity has something to say about all this, and specifically that this is fertile ground for the doctrine of the resurrection:

Unlike other major religions, [Christianity] claims a God who fully shared the human condition—who wept, suffered, felt pain, and died. A God who rose not as pure spirit but in bodily form, affirming the value of our embodied, finite, mortal existence.

This matters because Silicon Valley’s vision of digital immortality misses something essential: our bodies give us our uniqueness, our limitations force us to grow, and our mortality makes our choices meaningful.

The resurrection of the body isn’t ancient superstition—it’s a profound statement about the irreplaceable value of embodied, finite, mortal life in a world racing toward digital transcendence.²

There is nothing like a devastating diagnosis to remind us of the “irreplaceable value of mortal life”—and this may be an actual diagnosis but it could also be any of life’s unwelcome disruptions, including job loss, the implosion of a cherished relationship, or even a welcome event like marriage or childbirth which nonetheless scrambles our sense of our identity and reassembles our priorities and values. When my children were small, I struggled with insomnia and often lay awake terrified that I was so exhausted and overwhelmed by the tasks of work (in and out of the home) and child-rearing that I was missing this phase of my children’s lives. I would constantly see the image in my head of trying to hold dry sand in my hands and watching helplessly as the grains slipped through my fingers. Likewise, resurrection truth is slippery, unwieldy, difficult to measure and describe, and sometimes, like the wind, only verified by its effects, particularly when we find ourselves intimately confronted with the forces of death. And yet it is the resurrection that ultimately affirms the sacredness of our embodied existence, in which we attend to loved ones and strangers personally, in embodied ways, even as we face daily the vulnerability of being human.

When Jen Hatmaker learned that her husband of 26 years had been having an affair, nearly three decades of her life was upended all at once. It was, in her words, catastrophic. The day she found out, her husband moved out of the house and never came back. Three days later, they decided to sit down and have a conversation. She had told him she didn’t want to talk until he was ready and willing to tell her the whole truth, so they both knew the conversation was going to be difficult. About ten minutes before the meeting, she received a text from two of her best friends’ husbands, men who were like brothers to her. The text said, “Listen, you’ve got to do this part by yourself. We’re sorry. We know it’s going to be hard, but you’re the only one that can go out there and have this conversation. However, we are parked right outside your house and we’re just going to sit here in the car until it’s over and we just want you to know that you’re not alone ... our bodies are 30 feet away and so if you start feeling like you are all alone in there hearing the worst things you’ve ever

heard, we just want you to know we're on the street. You can look out your window and see us in the car." As Hatmaker put it, "we can survive anything when people love us like that."³ In the face of death, she experienced the resurrection promise of new life through real and tangible presence.

That Easter morning, waking up in the early morning dark, I thought of John's version of the resurrection, which begins in the pre-dawn hours, while it is still dark, when Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb and finds it empty. Mary and the other disciples fear the worst, the grave has been robbed, someone stole Jesus's body—it is the most logical explanation.

It's still the most logical explanation, even for those of us whose job it is to proclaim "Christ is risen!" It's the only explanation that makes sense for what we see around us: people look out for themselves; rulers do what maintains and increases their power; the world is a ruthless and cruel place, with cycles of violence and corruption repeating themselves over and over again. No one would blame us for coming to the conclusion that the resurrection is merely wishful thinking in the face of human depravity.

But on that morning, with my own death staring me in the face, I discovered that the birds don't wait for the dawn to break to begin their song; they sing in the dark, as if by doing so they can bring forth the new day. I remembered that while it is still dark, there is a seed of possibility that darkness is not just inscrutable and scary, but powerful, creative, nurturing what comes next. While it is still dark, there is a moment when something shifts and the shapes of the world become barely discernible (blink and you'll miss it). This interplay between the end of night and the beginning of day is the mystery of Easter, which doesn't announce itself loudly with trumpets and shouts of *Alleluia!*, but gently, incrementally, slowly. Easter is the mystery of embodied love, which grows even in places where cruelty and disease and fear and death would choke it out, love which moves through the world with exceptional subtlety, love which binds people together—family, friends, and strangers—with the smallest acts of kindness, love which so many mistake for weakness but which is actually humanity's greatest strength.

Resurrection, new life, embodied love, all of this shows up while it is still dark. It does not wait for the first light of dawn to make sure it can find a way. Resurrection *makes* a way, even in the worst circumstances life and the world bring. This is the good news we have the opportunity to proclaim at Easter, this is the promise we find the courage and vision to share with those who have gathered, those who know all too well the reality of death and who are dying to hear that life and love get the final word.

Notes

1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DagOq0MPig8>

2 <https://processthis.substack.com/p/four-questions-about-ai-that-will>

3 <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/divorce-deconstruction-and-rebuilding-from-scratch/>

Sermon: “Necessary Wounds: Reframing Moral Injury”

Ian Clark
Norfolk, Virginia

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

– Matthew 5:43-48

Author’s Note

The sermon below was delivered on November 29, 2025, aboard USS BAINBRIDGE (DDG 96), a US Navy warship that, at the time, was operating in the Caribbean Sea in support of Operation Southern Spear. Chaplain Clark serves as the command’s chaplain.

There is a famous moment in Homer’s *Odyssey* when Odysseus, the heroic voyager, must steer his ship through the Strait of Messina, a channel that, on our own deployment, we, too, have traversed. For us, the passage was beautiful; I hope you went topside to see it. For Odysseus, however, it was fraught with peril. On either side of the Strait lurked monsters bent on his destruction: Scylla, ravenous for human flesh, and Charybdis, whose endless thirst churned the sea into whirlpools capable of swallowing ships whole.

To pass through the Strait, Odysseus must choose which terror to face. Circe, his guide, counsels him to steer closer to Scylla: “*Better by far to lose six men and keep your ship than lose your entire crew.*”¹ It is pragmatic and calculated advice, but it serves as a reminder that mission accomplishment often demands sacrifice. Neither our journey nor Odysseus’s is a pleasure cruise.

Homer’s tale is not merely a dramatic myth, but a metaphor for the difficult choices we are often called to make in our lives and work. Time and again, we encounter choices where no easy options are given. In these moments, wisdom lies not in the fantasy of avoiding danger altogether but in discerning which danger we can bear and live with. Like Homer’s hero, we ourselves have grown accustomed to a stark calculus: weighing risk, even the risk of death, against the requirements of our nation’s strategic military goals. We pray that we do not lose anyone, yet we

acknowledge that injury or death remains a possibility in the pursuit of the missions entrusted to us. This reality is woven into military service.

And yet, we are not machines. We are human beings who possess a rich inner life. We feel deeply. We embrace moral and spiritual convictions that shape who we are. Even against the utilitarian backdrop of our work, we cannot perfectly divorce the strategic mind from the emotional and spiritual heart. The two live side by side, reminding us that the cost of duty is measured not simply in lives, but also in our spiritual relationship to our work.

This plays out in Homer. Odysseus takes Circe's advice and points his ship closer to Scylla, who devours six of his men. Their deaths are described in haunting detail. We, the readers, are presented with their screams. Odysseus recalls, "*I could see their hands and feet already hoisted, flailing, high, higher, over my head, look—wailing down at me, comrades riven in agony, shrieking my name for one last time!*"² We do not need to guess what effect this had on Odysseus, as he tells us himself: "*Of all the pitiful things I've had to witness, suffering, searching out pathways of the sea, this wrenched my heart the most.*"³

Today, we have a name for the lingering pain that follows morally fraught choices: *moral injury*.

Just as a physical wound scars the body, moral injury wounds the soul. It arises when we feel responsible, whether through what we have done or left undone, for an outcome that seems to stand against our sense of what is right or just. In some cases, moral injury occurs when we know we have done something patently wrong. In other cases, it may arise even when we know we made the right call: Odysseus carries the weight or moral responsibility for the deaths of his shipmates, even while recognizing the necessity of the choice that led to them.

Moral injury probably exists along a spectrum. For some, it takes the form of lingering regret or a heavy emotional weight that, with care and time, can be worked through. For others, the wound feels so deep that forgiveness seems perpetually beyond reach, and shame threatens to consume the self entirely.

The scholar Brad Kelle, in his excellent book *The Bible and Moral Injury: Reading Scripture Alongside War's Unseen Wounds* (2020), highlights examples of moral injury in the biblical narrative, long before we had a name for it. King David, for instance, may have recognized the strategic and political rationale for ordering Uriah's death, yet he seems to carry a lingering shame that echoes through the Psalms. There is a sense of lament and shame that is deeply planted within his soul.

Perhaps you carry memories from your own years of service, especially if you have participated in combat operations. Or maybe you fear that future actions might erode your sense of what a moral life should look like. What if we are ordered to strike? Will you be able to rest in the days and years that follow, knowing that you played a part in the death of others? What if a fight materializes and you must choose between saving the ship and saving individual lives?

Such questions are not abstract or theoretical for us, as they may be for others. They could become reality tonight, tomorrow, or next week. At times, it feels as though we stand in the space between the moral and the immoral, called to protect peace and deter aggression, yet prepared also to wield lethal force. Ecclesiastes reminds us that there is “a time for war, and a time for peace” (3:8b). We often live in the implied space between the two.

This reality—this tension—places us at a heightened risk for moral injury. Of course, anyone can experience it. Yet it is probably fair to say that your potential for it is greater. You are required to make life-changing decisions in moments. Those decisions carry extraordinary weight, marked by urgency and moral consequence. To add to this, we’ve asked you to leave your families and friends for extended periods, something which feels unnatural in its own right.

Today, a lot of effort is focused on preventing and treating moral injury, and rightly so. These efforts are valuable and show genuine concern for those burdened by difficult decisions or mistakes. However, it is also here where the similarity between moral and physical injury begins to break down. Both require care, but I believe that moral injury, unlike physical injury, is not something to be *prevented* so much as something to be *confronted*. In fact, I think that attempts to prevent moral injury, often under the guise of “resiliency,” may be more damaging than the injury itself.

What I mean is this: if we are serious about Christian ethics, about living in a way that reflects the teachings of Jesus, then we must acknowledge that emotional pain is not only inevitable but *appropriate* when our decisions cause others to suffer, die, or become marginalized. If we genuinely believe that every person, enemy or not, bears the image of God, then we should expect to feel spiritually wounded when, through our own labors and choices, they are harmed.

This is not to say that war has no place in the Christian moral universe. I believe it does. But even in war, we are tasked with actions that run contrary to the vision of a world made whole in Christ’s redeeming love. The prophetic image of the lion lying down with the lamb is ruptured by the necessity of killing, and by the destructive realities of conflict that so often bring suffering to multitudes of noncombatant civilians. War brings our fallen world into stark focus, and for us, it often illuminates the role we play in this brokenness.

Such realities should never leave us untouched. They ought to press upon our conscience, stir our emotions, and break our hearts. If they do not, then something essential has been lost: *the moral and spiritual sensitivity that reminds us who we are, and whose image we bear*.

Moral injury is indeed a serious issue. Yet perhaps an even greater danger would be a humanity that ceases to feel altogether, a humanity that loses its concern for others. I do not want to live in a world where those who kill, even justly, feel no responsibility, no pang of anguish, no trace of pain. I do not want to see a world of moral indifference, where people can kill or hurt others and act as if nothing happened.

To lose that capacity for sorrow is to lose the very compass of our humanity. Moral injury, painful as it is, signals that our conscience is still alive and that our hearts remain attuned to the sacred worth of others. The greater danger is not the wound itself, but the silence of a soul that no longer feels. It is right, indeed it is necessary, that we should feel something in the wake of consequential decisions that touch our most closely held moral beliefs.

As emerging technologies continue to reshape the character of war—technologies such as autonomous weapons systems, cyber weapons, and other tools that distance us from the battlefield—humanity itself risks becoming increasingly removed from the costs of conflict. Even today, many of us can watch overwhelming wartime suffering on TV and feel very little. These realities can weaken our sense of responsibility, diminish our sensitivity, and lead us to downplay or ignore the effects of our actions. The hazard before us is not only the crisis of moral injury, but the competing crisis of souls that can look upon devastation and suffering and remain unmoved.

As your chaplain, I want you to do the difficult work you're called to, but I am not interested in forming you in a way that causes you to cease feeling moved by human suffering. I want you to reflect deeply on your decisions. I want you to feel the breadth of human emotions, including, where appropriate, despair, regret, and pain.

The gospel itself insists that our hearts must remain tender. When Jesus looked upon the crowds, Matthew tells us that "he had compassion, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."⁴ Compassion was not an accessory to his ministry; it was a foundational reality. To follow Christ is to cultivate that same capacity to feel, to allow ourselves to be moved by the suffering of others, even when those others are counted as enemies.

In our reading today from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had directed this point specifically at enemies: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."⁵ This is not sentimental or whimsical advice; it is a radical command that keeps our humanity intact even amidst the backdrop of conflict. To love even those who oppose us is to resist the temptation of moral numbness. It is to insist that every life bears the image of God, and that every death, wound, and tragedy should move our conscience and break our hearts.

Jesus is pushing back on what I might call "easy love." Anyone can love people who already love them. But to love even our adversaries—those whom we go into battle against—that is uniquely Christian love.

Here, I suppose, is where my primary point today comes into sharp focus. For the Christian, it is impossible to love our enemies and not feel something when they are harmed, even if that harming is justified by a state of war. The Christian can't look upon the helpless crowds, impacted by the disruption and devastation of war, and not yearn for compassion.

It is out of this tension that the morally injurious effects of war arise. Moral injury grows in the soil of moral clarity, which is something that I want for you.

Certainly, the Church can, should, and must help lead people towards forgiveness and spiritual restoration. This is our sacred work. This is why the concerns I am discussing today are not about the care or *treatment* of moral injury, but about its *prevention*. This is hard and important work, as many people who experience moral injury genuinely struggle to feel and accept the reality of Christ's merciful forgiveness in their lives.

It's the prevention issue that bothers me. Because when people say "we should do more to prevent moral injury," what I hear is "we should help form people to be more morally passive." No! We must not strive to insulate ourselves from the potential of moral injury by numbing ourselves to the realities of war.

We talk a lot about "resilience" in the military, and for good reason. We need you to be able to take a hit and keep going. But true *spiritual and emotional resilience* should not be understood as the absence of feeling. Instead, it is the courage to *keep feeling*, to keep caring, even when the world would prefer to harden our hearts. Spiritual resiliency is active rebellion against moral passivity.

I return to Odysseus, who proclaims, in the wake of a decision that would cost the lives of six people, that "this wrenched my heart the most." I grieve for him, for he must bear that pain. But I also rejoice, for a heart that is wrenched is a heart that feels, and a heart that feels is a heart that loves.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Notes

1 Homer. 1996. *The Odyssey*. Translated by Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin Books. XII.119–120.

2 Fagles, *Odyssey*, XII 267-270.

3 Fagles, *Odyssey*, XII 280-283.

4 Matthew 9:36, NRSV

5 Matthew 5:44, NRSV

Sermon: “The Scars of Love”

Rebecca Gurney
Ashville, North Carolina

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors were locked where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

- John 20:19-31

There is a member of our congregation who is known for his sweaters. It began when he worked for a non-profit aimed at bettering the lives of children. Part of his work meant advocating before the state legislature, and he wanted the lawmakers and staff to know him when they saw him in the halls. He needed a trademark that would command their attention, so he started to wear vibrant, colorful sweaters. It worked. Some of the legislators learned his name, but they all remembered his sweaters. These days he’s done lobbying, but he still wears the sweaters. Not everyone at church knows his name, but everyone knows exactly who you’re talking about when you say, “You know, the guy with the sweaters.”

It’s interesting how we come to recognize other people. Sometimes we remember them because of a connection we made. We share the same hometown or the same love for baseball. Maybe we recall a certain physical characteristic, or we as-

sociate a person with a certain place. You know how it can take a child a few minutes to catch her bearings when she runs into her teacher in the grocery store because Ms. Roberts is out of context.

It's curious that after Jesus's resurrection even the people who know him best don't recognize him. There is something a bit different about his resurrected body. It's not like he was simply brought back to life, same as before. He is different (and, of course, there's the added fact that no one expected to see him again, at the supermarket or anywhere else).

He is risen; he is changed. And his disciples come to recognize Jesus in unexpected ways: when he speaks their name, when he feeds them like he did at the last supper, and, more often than not, when they see his scars. He is revealed by his wounds. When Jesus appears to his disciples, who are terrified and hiding in a locked room, he greets them, and then he shows them his hands and his side. And just a few days later, understandably skeptical of their account, Thomas tells his fellow disciples, "Unless I see the nail marks and touch them, unless I put my hands on that gash in his side, I won't believe it." To know and experience the Risen Lord is to see his wounds. Which isn't exactly what we'd expect, is it?

We don't like scars, wounds, or other signs of imperfection. We do whatever we can to get rid of them. So if God is vindicating Jesus, raising him from the dead, appointing him Lord of All, victorious over the grave ...then a little scar removal seems entirely appropriate, doesn't it? We have lasers and vitamin E oil for things like that. Surely it comes as a complementary part of the resurrection package. Surely he won't be marked by the cross forever.

And yet the gospels tell a very different story. The gospel of John shows us that to recognize Jesus is to see his wounds, to touch them, to know them intimately. But then John goes even further, reveling in the marks of self-giving love poured out on the cross for the world and declaring those wounds as God's glory. The marks of shame, of loss, of suffering are worth bearing forever in the name of love. So Jesus will wear them for all time, even when he is seated on the throne in glory. To know him is to know him by his wounds.

And to follow him is to be willing to bear similar wounds in the name of love. Years ago, when he was the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams gave a sermon on the unveiling of a new icon depicting the resurrection at the Church of St. Andrew Holborn in London. We in the Protestant tradition aren't as familiar with icons, which are a kind of sacred art that help guide our meditation and our prayer. They aim to help us see into the heart of things and contemplate the divine mysteries. This particular icon shows the Risen Lord, standing on the broken doors to hell and lifting Adam and Eve out of their tombs. Williams invites this icon to speak into our understanding of a resurrected life in Christ. He writes:

The resurrection is the story of the word of God speaking in the heart of darkness to bring life out of nothing, and to bring the human race into ex-

istence as the carriers of his image and his likeness. The resurrection is the beginning of the new creation; the resurrection is the rising not only of Jesus, but of Adam and Eve. Then you look more closely at Adam and Eve in the icon, and you see that this is Adam and Eve grown old.

They are not the radiant, naked figures of the beginning of the story. Their faces are lined by suffering and experience, by guilt, by the knowledge of good and evil, scarred by life and by history. This is Adam and Eve ... who are of course ourselves, we who carry around with us the marks of history, of experience, hurts received and hurts done. So, when we speak of the resurrection as a new beginning, a new creation, it is in the sense that the risen Jesus reaches down and touches precisely those faces: Adam and Eve grown old. He doesn't wave a wand and make them young again, strip off their clothes and leave them standing in their first innocence. What he deals with is humanity as it has become, our humanity, suffering and struggling, failed and failing. The resurrection is not about the wiping out of our history, pain or failure, it is about how pain and failure themselves—humanity marked by history—may yet be transfigured and made beautiful.¹

Easter gives us a new beginning, but not one that is severed from our old selves, our old wounds, our troubled history. These things are not erased, they are transformed, caught up into the story of who we are and who we are becoming.

But that's not the whole of it. It's not just that our pasts are transformed or that our wounds are healed but still visible, that we bear the marks of our history. It's also that, as we become like Jesus—*carriers of Jesus's image and likeness*—those marks that we gained in the service of love become our glory, the precise way we look like Jesus and conform to his image. We are recognized as his people by the scars of love.



There is a legend about the German Renaissance painter Albrecht Dürer related to his famous sketch *The Praying Hands*. The story goes that Dürer and a good friend of his, some say his brother, both aspired to study painting, but neither one of them had the money to go to the academy. So his friend offered to work and pay Dürer's way. They agreed that when he finished school, Dürer would come home and work to pay his friend's way. His friend went to labor in the coal mines and Albrecht went off to study. He returned a number of years later, an accomplished young artist ready to send his friend off to school, only to find that his friend's hands had been battered and broken in the mines. His friend could no longer use his hands for fine work, especially painting, so Dürer decided to honor those bruised and battered hands by drawing them folded in prayer. The sketch is a detailed study of all that his friend gave up for him, inscribed forever on his hands and glorified in that work of art.



When we think about the gift of a resurrected body, it's easy to assume it will be the best version of ourselves.² You know ... young faces, working knees ... none of the stuff we've learned to put up with over the years. We will be glorious in our restored youth and vitality. But the only clues we get about resurrected bodies come from Jesus himself. All we know is that he isn't immediately recognizable, *except for his wounds*.

In his letters, Paul often talks about bearing the marks of Jesus on his body. He seems to understand what is happening here. This notion that what really lasts, what endures, is not some youthful bliss we've achieved through a rigorous wellness routine and some serious stints under a red light. But instead, what endures in us is the ways we have followed Christ in his suffering and his self-giving love. And love takes its toll. It is hard work, it means we will suffer. So perhaps we need to imagine our new bodies a bit differently. There we will be, made new, with dark circles under our eyes from all the nights of waking up with an aging parent or taking care of a sick child. Hands worn and wrinkled from months of mucking out flooded basements.³ Knees still scarred from the surgery we needed after all those hours on our feet working extra shifts to cover for a sick colleague.

There we will be, with our wrinkles and sags and everything that could've looked fancier and better if we had spent more money on face creams and thigh-masters instead of giving it away. Maybe, too, we're bearing those invisible wounds of the spirit. The times we went to apologize and had our pride cut to the core, or the moments we moved toward someone to try and reconcile only to be rejected again. Or the effort it took to give up something we loved and prized, or something that made our lives more comfortable, so that someone else might thrive.

Jesus, in his death and resurrection, has glorified forever those acts of love—often unseen, undervalued, even scoffed at—that mark the lives of those who follow him.

Of course, none of us are or can be Christ, the great Redeemer. We will never bear wounds like his, the wounds that changed the fate of the world and made the way to new life. And if we are honest, we recognize that we are complicit in his wounds. We do harm in our selfishness, complacency, pride, and sin. We have participated in and bear responsibility for what is wrong in the world. We are just as likely as anyone else to send him to the cross.

So first, like Adam and Eve and every human since, we are in need of his healing, his goodness, and his redemptive grace. But by that same grace, we don't stop there. We are made new, and, then, we are made able to follow him in living out his great love for the world. We follow him imperfectly, to be sure, but by the power of his Spirit we can do it nonetheless, acquiring our own welts and scars in the work of love.



Eudora Welty's "A Worn Path" tells the story of Phoenix Jackson, an elderly Black woman living in rural Mississippi during the Great Depression. Phoenix regularly walks a long road through the woods and fields to get to town. It's a walk that symbolizes all the thorns, terrors, and difficulties of her life. She makes this journey repeatedly, despite its dangers, to get medicine that will soothe the throat of her young grandson who has swallowed lye. She knows the medicine won't heal him, but it helps ease his suffering. And so she walks the road, legs aching, because she loves him. It's a path she's traveled so many times her legs remember the way even in the moments her weary mind forgets where she's going.

A group at our church read this story together during Lent, and during our discussion one member observed forebodingly, "She's going to die on this road, I know it, if not in this story, then sometime soon." And he is right. The road is lined with dead trees, ominous shadows, and lots of crows. We're meant to see death everywhere. Phoenix Jackson is going to die on this road.

She's going to die there because of the oppressive evils of the world she lives in, a world where there's little help and a deficit of love and care. But she's also going to die there because she's determined to care for her grandson until the very end. She is pressing on in love despite the obstacles in her way and the difficulties of circumstance and age. So, first and foremost, her story is a vision of determined, self-giving love. At the story's end, a receptionist from the doctor's office gives Phoenix a bottle of medicine for free, marking it down as "charity." In that moment, the story turns its piercing eye on us and asks: what is charity anyway? Is it really that easy, just checking a box? The answer is clear enough, and Welty's story concludes with the same exhortation we hear again and again in scripture: would that all of us might be given the grace to die as we lived—walking the costly road of love.

Notes

1 I first encountered this quotation in a piece by Rowan Williams on the dedication of a new icon at St. Andrew Holborn in London. One version of this piece is still accessible in the adapted essay, "When Jesus met Adam and Eve" in *Reform Magazine*, April 2017.

2 A few years ago, I stumbled upon a wonderful conversation on the resurrection between Paula Gooder and Rowan Williams. Gooder in particular remarks on our expectations around a resurrected body. You can find their conversation, entitled Resurrection, on St. Paul's Cathedral Youtube channel. April 13, 2021.

3 Our congregation had spent the last six months recovering from Hurricane Helene and helping their neighbors clean up and restore their homes and land.

Look! A New Creation: Easter Preaching as Glimpses of the World Set Right

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The Resurrection of Jesus was more show than tell. It was an in-breaking of the promised new creation—a glimpse, a hint, and a pointer of what is to come for us all.

The Apostle Paul's declaration in 2 Corinthians 5:17 puts it well: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being!" This translation from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition rightly captures the social reality of newness rather than just the personal transformation of the individual. Other translations speak of how being in Christ makes one a new creature, but Paul's words are totalizing—they declare a new creation. They are an evangelical appeal to look at the world in light of this event that changes everything. And because it changes everything, it can also change us.

Paul Tillich captured this by prioritizing the new order of things: "Here and there in the world and now and then in ourselves is a New Creation, usually hidden, but sometimes manifest, and certainly manifest in Jesus who is called the Christ." We know the world is still broken, but here and there we see it whole. We know we are yet yearning to be fully integrated selves and to experience reconciliation in relationships, but now and then we sense a coming together within and without.

Easter preaching is proclamation of the good news of God's all-encompassing *shalom* coming to pass among us at last. For all the *not yet* to acknowledge, there is an *already* right before our eyes. The hidden is showing itself. The mystery is being revealed. Easter preaching points to this new reality. It paints a picture with words of God's promises fulfilled. This invites people to live into the new creation that presents itself as an alternative to the old creation that yet lingers among us.

The Preacher as Docent of Kingdom Come

Edward Hicks painted more than a hundred versions of his famed depiction of "The Peaceable Kingdom." A 19th century Quaker, Hicks wanted to portray a tamed world based on the vision of the prophet as described in Isaiah 11:6-9. In the midst of a violent, red-in-tooth-and-claw world, the prophet imagines a time to come when "the wolf shall dwell with the lamb ... and a little child shall lead them." He organizes wild and domestic animals, along with children, coexisting in a natural way in the foreground. In the background, he depicts the scene of William Penn's treaty with the Lenape (Delaware) Native Americans. Hicks invites us to see the world as God intends it to be.

Seeing is believing. Beholding opens our faith faculty to believing, inviting us to enter the vision and live accordingly. Beholding leads to believing, believing to

belonging, and belonging to behaving. “You can’t be what you can’t see,” we say. By seeing the way life can be, we can choose to participate in that reality. And the way we participate in it is by living according to its values.

Proverbs 29:18 (KJV) says, “Where there is no vision, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he.” While this verse is often torn from its original context to fit our strategic planning needs for a vision statement to guide our organizational missions, its true intent is to tie seeing with doing. The possibility of happiness that comes from keeping the law grows out of the predicate of seeing the way clear.

Preaching the good news of resurrection life during Easter might be compared to Hicks’s obsession with the subject of the peaceable kingdom. Over and over, he painted the picture of what that world would look like in hopes that those who saw it would join the peacemaking work of bearing witness to it in word and deed. When we approach texts during Easter that demonstrate God’s surprising reordering of personal, social, and economic relationships, we should look for ways to help our hearers see their way clear.

In this way, we are like docents in a museum. A good docent doesn’t just talk about the historical context of the painting’s creation, the biography of the artist, the arrangements of color and line, et cetera. Nor does the docent exhaust the experience of the museum-goer with words. She isn’t seeking to elicit the one rightful interpretation of the painting from the viewers. She is inviting them to see for themselves. The painting presents itself to the viewers. The docent suggests where to look and how, but she doesn’t rob viewers of their own discoveries.

Preachers should avoid getting to the point too quickly. When we rush to point, so to speak, we tend to moralize before we socialize. That is, we fail to provide vision that invites participation. We may persuade people to follow rules, but we will not have helped them see why they are there. Why they are there is captured best in story form. Seeing how we are part of the story of God’s redemptive work in the world gives meaning to why we would act in certain ways and not in other ways.

The Destabilizing Angularity of the Resurrection

Preaching resurrection follows the destabilizing event of the Resurrection itself. If the grave can’t be trusted to hold the dead, what else might be in danger of being changed?

Sometimes our preaching succumbs to the liberal impulse of being a self- or social-improvement project. If we could just organize better, argue better, exercise power better, then the world would be better. But the new creation doesn’t grow out of the old in an evolutionary way; it breaks into the old creation in a revolutionary way. The Resurrection was earth shattering. The stone was rolled away. Old certainties gave way to new possibilities.

The opponents of Paul and Silas in Thessalonica got it right when they said of them and other Jesus followers that they had been “turning the world upside down”

(17:6). Jewish religious authorities, along with “ruffians from the marketplace,” rightly sensed the threat to the established but unjust order they were living under and had accommodated.

The Resurrection contradicted the powers of the world rather than reinforcing them. The church’s preaching of the Resurrection should do the same. If it sounds like we are calling for acquiescence to the values of the marketplace, the arrangements of social hierarchies, or the xenophobic spirit of nationalism, we need to go back and read the story again.

Flannery O’Connor understood the destabilizing angularity of the Resurrection. In two of her short stories, *Revelation* and *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, she showed how the good news confronts the settled culture. In the first, Ms. Turpin, a poor but vain white woman looks down on her Black neighbors. She believes divine design is behind the way things are. “Thank you, Jesus,” she says, “for making everything the way it is! It could have been different!” But the “revelation” she receives in the end is a complete inversion of the social hierarchy she depended upon. This revelation broke into her consciousness as a judgment. It turns out Jesus was making everything different.

In the latter, a sociopath criminal called The Misfit is the one who sees the truth of things. “‘Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead,’ The Misfit continued, ‘and He shouldn’t have done it. He thrown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it’s nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him ...’”

Easter preaching should show as well as tell how Jesus’s resurrection has “thrown everything off balance.” It shouldn’t confine itself to promises of perpetual peace in the life hereafter. It should call the church to participate in resurrection practices that bear witness to the new creation coming to pass before our eyes. What’s more, Easter preaching should not fall victim to the prophetic tendency to point out all the evils of the world as if that is the end of our work. It should raise our sights and our spirits to see and be inspired by the new creation the Resurrection inaugurates.

Lectionary Examples of New Creation Showings

Each Sunday in the Easter season we are given texts from the Gospels (mostly John) and the Book of Acts. The logic of this shows the link between Christ and the Church. The Resurrection happened to Jesus when the Spirit raised him from the dead, thus vindicating his way of life as the way of love. The force of the Resurrection of Jesus continues in his work as the living Christ in the Church. The Spirit empowers the followers of the way of Jesus to break all kinds of barriers that have stood in the way of the new creation.

The psalms chosen for the Easter season all have new creation language. Psalm 118 on Easter is typical. From “this is the day that the Lord has made” that calls for rejoicing to the stone the builders rejected becoming the cornerstone, we hear language of reversal and see signs of newness. These psalms pair nicely with the Gospel and Acts texts each Sunday.

The Epistle texts are predominately a semi-continuous reading of 1 Peter. While the pericopes themselves are more tell than show—which is standard fare for the New Testament Epistles—the texts lend themselves to pastoral exhortation to live out of and into the new creation in the face of worldly opposition and even persecution. First Peter reminds us of how our baptism is a break from the old and an embrace of the new creation. Baptism has resurrection power, moving us from death to life, reordering our priorities, leading us into a new community, giving meaning to our suffering, and fostering hope that allows us to persevere to the end.

Focusing on the Gospel and Acts texts makes the story of the gospel vivid. Here are a few summarizing sentences about each text and how the new creation is making itself known by making itself shown.

Easter Day

Acts 10:34-43: Peter's declaration that God shows no partiality embodies new creation as he crosses the threshold into Cornelius's home, breaking down centuries-old barriers between Jew and Gentile through table fellowship.

John 20:1-18: Mary encounters the risen Christ in a garden—echoing Eden—where Jesus sends her as the first witness, reversing the curse and beginning the restoration of all things.

Matthew 28:1-10: The women running from the tomb with fear and great joy become the first evangelists of resurrection, their faithful witness inaugurating a new order where the last are first.

Second Sunday of Easter

Acts 2:14a, 22-32: Peter proclaims that death could not hold Jesus, demonstrating that God's new creation cannot be contained or conquered by the powers of this age.

John 20:19-31: Jesus breathes the Spirit into his frightened disciples—a new Genesis moment—and speaks peace three times, embodying the reconciliation and shalom at the heart of God's restored world.

Third Sunday of Easter

Acts 2:14a, 36-41: Three thousand people respond to Peter's message with baptism, forming a new community that transcends old divisions and anticipates the gathering of all nations.

Luke 24:13-35: Two despairing disciples are transformed through encounter with the risen Christ, their journey from isolation to community mirroring the movement from death to resurrection life.

Fourth Sunday of Easter

Acts 2:42-47: The early church's radical sharing of possessions and daily breaking of bread shows new creation economics where no one is in need, and all find their place at the table.

John 10:1-10: Jesus promises abundant life for the sheep, portraying God's dream of a world where all creatures flourish under the care of the Good Shepherd.

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Acts 7:55-60: Even as Stephen is stoned, he sees heaven opened and prays for his persecutors' forgiveness, embodying the new creation's triumph over violence through love.

John 14:1-14: Jesus promises many rooms in the Father's house, revealing a new creation spacious enough for all, where no one is excluded or cast out.

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Acts 17:22-31: Paul proclaims that in God "we live and move and have our being," pointing to a new creation where all humanity discovers its true home and unity in the Creator.

John 14:15-21: Jesus promises the Spirit will dwell within the community, making disciples into a living temple where God's presence transforms the world from within.

Ascension of the Lord (sometimes used in place of the Seventh Sunday of Easter texts)

Acts 1:1-11: The ascending Christ promises the Spirit's power for witness to the ends of the earth, commissioning the community to embody new creation throughout the world.

Luke 24:44-53: The disciples return to Jerusalem with great joy, their worship and witness becoming the means by which resurrection life spreads into every corner of creation.

Seventh Sunday of Easter

Acts 1:6-14: The community devotes itself to prayer together—women and men, Jews and Gentiles—forming a new family that transcends old divisions of gender, ethnicity, and status.

John 17:1-11: Jesus prays for his disciples' unity and protection, envisioning a community whose oneness reflects the divine life and reveals God's character to the world'

Day of Pentecost

Acts 2:1-21: The Spirit falls on all flesh—young and old, men and women, slave and free—reversing Babel's division and creating a community where all languages proclaim God's deeds of power.

John 20:19-23 or John 7:37-39: Jesus breathes the Spirit and commissions the disciples to forgive, giving them authority to enact the reconciliation that defines God's new world.

Preaching with the Bible in One Hand and the Internet in the Other

The Gospel and Acts lections are powerful starting points for preaching in the Easter season, but preaching isn't finished when we have told Bible stories. We have to show how the new creation that began with the Resurrection of Jesus is still showing

forth in our world today. Our preaching should give followers of Jesus in our pews the lenses through which to see in current events where and how the Spirit of Christ is making all things new.

Karl Barth famously said that we should preach with the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. In our digital age, we have so many more sources of information available to us online. Of course, the challenge is finding reliable sources. AI makes searching for stories in the news easier than ever. Likewise, prompts about identifying works of art, books, film, music, human interest stories and the like is easier than ever. Just be sure to do due diligence in verifying authenticity. Some things are too good to be true. On the other hand, the gospel is too good not to be true.

Stories that link the Resurrection to life today inspire us to live resurrection lives. Some examples:

- A Turkish ultranationalist, Mehmet Ali Agca, shot Pope John Paul II in St. Peter's Square in 1981, nearly killing him. Two years later, fully recovered, the Pope visited Agca in his Italian prison cell for 21 minutes, talking quietly and forgiving him completely. Where sinners are forgiven and restored, rather than retribution reigning endlessly, we see a sign of the new creation.
- Firebrand Protestant preacher Ian Paisley and Sinn Féin Catholic Irish Republican leader Martin McGuinness were mortal enemies during the days of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. After the 1998 Good Friday agreement that ended armed hostilities, the two men also began to make peace with one another. McGuinness became First Minister and Paisley Deputy First Minister in 2007. But it wasn't just an expedient political truce they made for the good of the country; it was a genuine friendship. The pair came to be known as "the Chuckle Brothers" for how frequently they were caught laughing together. When Paisley died, McGuinness even spoke at his funeral. Such surprising reconciliation characterizes the new creation.
- The spiritual transformation of the Russian dissident and democracy advocate, Alexei Navalny, gave him courage and confidence to fight for a new Russia. After the birth of his first child, the self-described militant atheist began to question how the wonder of life could be reduced to biology alone. He found significance and solace in the beatitude in Matthew 5:6: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied." That verse became for him "more or less an instruction to activity"—not a passive spiritual ideal but a call to concrete pursuit of justice, integrity, and moral clarity." If in the end, justice would be satisfied in the new creation, then sacrificing oneself

to promote it now would give life meaning. Navalny was killed while imprisoned in a penal colony in the Arctic, but his witness to a new creation characterized by justice lives on.

Stories like these go beyond telling the good news of resurrection life. They show it. In the work of preaching about things that cannot be proven but only believed, show surpasses tell. It opens our imagination to what we never thought possible. Like the Resurrection itself.

Sermon: “The Voice of Love”

Amy Miracle
Richmond, Virginia

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’s head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed, for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes. But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb, and she saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, “Do not touch me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord,” and she told them that he had said these things to her.

— John 20:1-18

I was the brand-new pastor, and I was doing my first hospital visit. I was eager to make a good impression. I found the right hospital room. I found the parishioner. Her daughter was there. We talked, we visited, and then I prayed for the woman in the hospital bed.

I prayed that God would bless Marge, I prayed that Marge would experience God’s love and care. I prayed for Marge’s daughter and family and friends. I was

on a roll when her daughter interrupted me. Oh, for God's sake, my mom's name is Mary not Marge.

Not my finest moment.

We all want to be known by name. The correct name. Our names aren't just convenient tags that distinguish us from one another. Our names represent us. They summarize us. Our names have power.

Maya Lin, designer of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C., was explaining to a TV interviewer why the memorial she created has come to have such a strong grip upon the emotions of the American people. "It's the names," she said, "the names *are* the memorial. No edifice or structure can bring people to mind as powerfully as their names."

I am a big fan of the musical *West Side Story*. It tells the tale of two rival street gangs by focusing on the star-crossed love between Tony and Maria. Tony's love for Maria is beautifully contained in her name. He sings a song about her name.

Maria. The most beautiful sound I ever heard.

Maria. All the beautiful sounds of the world in a single word ...

He continues:

Maria!

Say it loud and there's music playing—

Say it soft and it's almost like praying—

Maria ...

I'll never stop saying

Maria! The most beautiful sound I ever heard. Maria.

Hearing our name in the voice of someone who loves us—it just doesn't get any better than that.

That's what happens to Mary that day in the garden.

Let's back up the story just a little bit. Mary is one of the women who are doing the things one does right after someone dies. Meet with the funeral home, plan the service, order flowers, write the obituary. If you've been through that experience, it's a lot. But it's better than the alternative. As long as there is a to do list, you don't have to face the fact that your loved one is just ... gone. And you will never hear their voice again.

One of the things on the first century after-someone-dies checklist is anointing the body. Mary arrives early to do this important work and finds that Jesus's body is gone. As if his arrest, trial, slow death by crucifixion wasn't enough. Someone has taken his body. Mary leaves the tomb and stumbles into a nearby garden, tears clouding her vision. She sees someone out of the corner of her eye. The gardener? That makes sense. She's in a garden. He asks her a question. She barely gets out a response.

And then the gardener speaks again. This time he says one word: her name. Mary. And she hears the voice of love. It's the voice of love. It's Jesus.

Two syllables and Mary knows everything she needs to know about ... everything.

It is such a tender moment in the Easter story. This big world-changing, reality-altering, tradition-shaping event we call resurrection becomes beautifully small and intimate and tangible.

Two syllables. A name spoken in the voice of love.

I remember the first time I was prayed for by name.

I remember everything about that moment. I remember the layout of the room, the pattern of the rug and the exact color and texture of the faux leather chair I was sitting in when it happened. I remember the slant of the light through the windows. It was that powerful. I had no idea what it would feel like to be prayed for by name by a group of people. Let me tell you, I am still recovering from that experience.

I invite you to stay in that moment in the garden as long as you need to. It is more than enough if this day all of us hear the voice of love calling us by name.

But I don't think Mary wants us to stay there too long.

Mary doesn't stay very long in the garden. She goes and tells the disciples what happened: "I heard love call my name. Can you hear it too?"

It's not enough for us to hear the voice of love. We need to invite others to do the same. Especially those who have not yet heard it. Or to those who have been told a lie—that the voice of love is not for them—that there is something deficient or lacking or broken in them that makes them ineligible to hear the voice of love.

It's our job to tell them otherwise. To speak words of love and acceptance. You are enough. God loves you just as you are. You are enough. God loves you just as you are. I have never met anyone who doesn't need to hear those words.

We also can imagine a world where everyone hears the voice of love call their name. Back to *West Side Story*. If you aren't familiar with the story line, it is a retelling of Romeo and Juliet which means there isn't a happy ending. Tony is killed and while Maria cradles his body in her arms, the rest of the cast sings a song in which they imagine life to be different. Imagine a life where people aren't written off because of where they are born or who they love. A world in which all of us have a place at the table, in which all of us hear the voice of love calling our name. There's a place for us, they sing.

Easter invites us to work to create that world in tangible, material ways—by offering food and housing support and tutoring to our neighbors. We work to create a better world. But first we have to imagine it. First, we have to catch a glimpse of it.

A little over a week ago, I was in Juneau, Alaska, visiting my daughter. We attended the Youth Traditional Games. This is a gathering of native people from all over Alaska who compete in events rooted in their history and culture. The event was held in a high school gym.

The first night there was a welcoming ceremony. There was a native dance troupe who played drums and chanted. Their final song was a summoning of the clans. The one doing the summoning was this older woman. Short in stature and long on charisma. She had a warm booming voice that filled the gym. First, she called the Eagle clan into the dance. People of all ages came down from the bleachers and joined the dance. They did the movements of the Eagle clan.

They sat back down in the bleachers and the woman called the Wolf clan. Again, people came down from the bleachers and joined the dancers and did the movements of their clan.

This was repeated with the Orca clan and the Raven clan. Then she called all the clans onto the floor and into the dance. We watched as people poured down onto the gym floor. The only people left in the stands were people like me and my daughter and her friends. It was a privilege to experience this and see it and it was so understandable why we were not included.

And then the most remarkable thing happened. The woman invited all of us to join in the dance. We knew right away from her voice and her motions that we were truly welcome, and we ran out of the stands and into the dance, joy on our faces, tears in our eyes. And at the same time, we felt awkward—I'm sure we looked awkward. And I never wanted it to end.

But of course it did and we all went back to our seats and back to sitting next to the people who look like us and the moment was gone and yet I can't stop thinking about it and because it was me who had that experience I kept thinking about Easter and how the voice of love calls Mary by name and amazing things happen when all of us hear the voice of love call our name and resurrection continues in us and through us.

I want to live in a world where every clan, every community, every family, every person is welcomed into the dance. Is called by name. Called by the voice of love.

I want to help create such a world. I want to live in such a world. It's possible. Someday. Somewhere. It all begins with Mary hearing her name spoken in the voice of love. It all starts with you and me hearing our names spoken in the voice of love. It all starts with resurrection.

Christ is risen.

He is risen indeed!

Amen.

Easter Sunrise Sermon: “I Have Seen the Lord”

Aaron Shepherd
East Walpole, Massachusetts

Scripture: John 20:1-18

In amongst this bouquet of Bible verses, each one smelling sweetly of the Good News of Easter, I would like to pluck out and place before us this morning the words of Mary Magdalene: “I have seen the Lord.”

Depending on your familiarity with scripture, you may or may not be aware that the story of Easter morning is told not once, but four times, in each of the four Gospels attributed to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. All four Gospels agree on the basic fact that when the visitors arrived at the tomb on Easter morning, they discovered it empty. In each account, some angelic messenger (or *messengers*) explain the absence of Jesus’s body: “He is risen!”

But only here, in John’s Gospel, do we have a first-person account: the testimony of Mary Magdalene, in her own voice, recorded for posterity: “I have seen the Lord!”

On Easter Day, we say together, “Christ is risen!” “Christ is risen indeed!” We declare it as fact, report it as “Good News.” But Mary’s words remind us that we are to be more than mere reporters of the news. It is altogether different to greet this Easter morning not as a fact to be deemed true or false, but as a reality that we accept as our own—to say, with Mary, “*I have seen the Lord.*”

What does it mean to “have seen the Lord”?

In the text, Mary’s report that the tomb is empty unleashes a frenetic response. Peter and the so-called “Beloved disciple” engage in a footrace to the tomb, each trying to outrun the other. Their urgency seems to be born of a lack of trust in Mary’s report; perhaps they think her an unreliable witness.

Or maybe they believe her ... they just aren’t exactly sure what she means. In that case, these disciples are in good company, for there have been many folks throughout the years—maybe even some of us here today—who have heard this tale of an empty tomb and not quite known what to make of it.

Or maybe it is, in fact, that they trust Mary *so deeply* that they are rushing to see what she has seen.

We tend to latch onto this frenetic activity of the disciples on Easter Day, because it mirrors our own frenetic pace. Children wake up before dawn to seek out hidden baskets and eggs filled with chocolate (or sometimes even money!); there is the rush to get into the new Easter dress, or Easter suit, to get out the door, get to church, and then off to Easter brunch.

Christ is risen! There’s so much to do! Indeed, upon experiencing the empty tomb, Peter and the other disciple return home quickly ... no doubt to begin spreading the Good News.

But early this morning, note how John’s Gospel does *not* rush on after the way of

Peter and the other disciples, but instead lingers with Mary. She remains there beside the empty tomb, in what is described as a “garden” near the place where Jesus was crucified (John 19:41), *weeping*.

This persistent focus on Mary is one of the unique features of John’s telling of the Easter story. Only in this version does Mary come to the tomb alone, rising before dawn to visit the grave. In the other Gospels, it is a group of women disciples who go to the tomb. They go with a specific funerary purpose: to anoint the body of Jesus, which had been impossible as he died too soon before the sabbath day, upon which no work—not even the care for the dead—could be done. But John’s Gospel modifies the timeline a bit, such that there is no reason to assume that Jesus’s body had not been properly cared for before being placed in the tomb.

No, in this story, Mary rose before dawn, and went to the tomb alone—not to do care work, but grief work.

I don’t know about you, but there is little chance I would be standing here at this Sunrise Service with you all this morning without the aid of my alarm clock, with its nagging beeping that roused me from bed before dawn.

But there were no alarm clocks in those days. We can infer, then, that her early departure for the gravesite was the result of troubled sleep.

Doesn’t grief do that to us sometimes? The pain of loss can keep you from the renewing comfort of deep sleep, or prod you awake in the wee hours before the dawn. Mary could not stay in bed that morning; she had to get up, even before the day began, and go to visit the tomb.

Why do we go to gardens of grave stones, to stand by the tombs of those we care for? We go to remember, I think; sometimes to commune ... even to speak with the dead. There is a famous poem by Clare Harner about this phenomenon—sometimes it’s even inscribed on gravestones (a bit ironically I think).

Do not stand
 By my grave, and weep.
 I am not there,
 I do not sleep—
 I am the thousand winds that blow
 I am the diamond glints in snow
 I am the sunlight on ripened grain,
 I am the gentle, autumn rain.
 As you awake with morning’s hush,
 I am the swift, up-flinging rush
 Of quiet birds in circling flight,
 I am the day transcending night.
 Do not stand
 By my grave, and cry—
 I am not there,
 I did not die.¹

I think it's meant to be comforting, but I also think it misleads us. For the dead have indeed died. Mary saw Jesus die on that cross, heard his words, "It is finished," saw his chest rise and fall for the last time. She had seen and believed that he had died. And so she went to stand at his grave and cry, because that is what you do when someone you love has died.

And even when she discovered the tomb empty, and Peter and the other disciple had rushed to confirm her report, and then just as quickly rushed back home, Mary stayed by the tomb and cried. She tarried there, in the garden alone, as the old hymn says.

And as she did, as she lingered in the perplexity and the confusion of a grief magnified by mystery, the Word of God came to her.

At first she didn't recognize him. People often don't recognize God's Word, because the world is so full of its own words that we can lose our attunement to the special way in which God speaks. But there, in that garden, God came and spoke to Mary, asking why she wept.

She supposed it was the gardener speaking to her; and in fact, it was. For long ago, God planted a garden, and would, from time to time, walk there. The people who lived in that garden hid themselves from God, because they were ashamed of who they had become. But God called out and asked, "Where are you?" and "who told you to be ashamed of what I made you to be?" (Genesis 3).

Now to Mary, the Gardener again asks, "Where are you? Why are you weeping? Who told you grieve here without hope, when I promised that death would not be the end?"

Mary confessed again her confusion, disorientation, and deep sadness to this mysterious stranger. As it was in the beginning, God's questioning was not enough to move her from anxiety to assurance. And so the Gardener, who knit her together in her mother's womb, who had crafted creation and breathed life into humankind, who had healed her of her afflictions, and invited her to walk with him as he tread the paths of righteousness—that Gardener graciously took a different approach.

God called her by name: "Mary." No more questions; just recognition.

"Mary," Jesus said, in the same voice that said "Let there be light;" that had addressed Adam and Eve in the garden; that had spoken from a burning bush, and through prophets; that voice that had said, "I am the resurrection and the life;" that said, "There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends;" that said, "I go before you to prepare a place, and indeed, to bring you to me"—the gardener spoke, and the pain of grief and uncertainty washed away—because that is the power of the Word of God to transform our sorrows into joy, and our mourning into dancing.

So Mary did not say, "Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!" Mary said, "I have seen *the Lord*," the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the creator of the Universe, the Alpha and Omega, the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us as Jesus of Nazareth. She had seen him face to face, and this time, it was Mary who was transfigured.

And so friends, this morning, here in this garden, the Word of God has spoken again. Christ is alive, and he is on the loose in this world to find the lost and the hurting, to meet us in our sorrows and our uncertainties, to call us back to ourselves—not the selves we have crafted according to our own devices and the world's designs, but our truest and deepest selves, the ones which God has always been lovingly calling us to be.

What does it mean to have seen the Lord? I think the Prophet Isaiah put it best:

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.
He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.
Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint. (Isaiah 40:28-31)

Have you seen the Lord? He is Risen!

Christ is risen indeed!

Note

1 Clare Harner, "Immortality," *The Gypsy Magazine*, 1934.

Sermon: “What are We Waiting For?”

Ibhar Jasiel Hernandez
Kerville, Texas

Scripture: John 11:1-7, 17-27, 40-44, and 20:1-18

Easter takes a while to get where it's going.

We generally forget that resurrection cannot exist without the stillness of the tomb. We are people who struggle to understand and accept death, pain, and suffering. We want joy without the endurance, the answer without the question, the light without the long night. Easter morning reminds us that “all good things are worth waiting for.” Yes, Easter morning will come, but we cannot rush its timing.

All we can do is wait.

Last week, while doing some spring cleaning in our garage, I noticed my road bike gathering more dust. The last time I rode it was last summer. The weather last weekend was friendly, pleasant, and sunny. I thought to myself: “Why not?! Let's dust it off and go for a ride.” And so I did.

Unfortunately, as I was making my way back home, a group of people was gathered around the trail. In an attempt to evade them, I went off the trail, lost control of my bike, and fell onto my left side. Since my shoes clip to the bike's pedals, I couldn't respond fast enough. I had a few scratches all over my arms and legs, but my wrist was the most painful. People nearby offered help, of course. After a serious debate regarding whether to go to urgent care or not, I finally decided to get my wrist x-rayed as the pain worsened.

As I waited in the lobby for a couple of hours, I tried my best to focus on something else by looking at my phone, watching videos, or scrolling through social media. But every so often, my mind kept thinking, “What if my wrist is broken? What if I can't write or help move stuff during this busy week? What if I'm in pain all of next week? Why did I get on my bike to begin with?”

Waiting for the X-ray results reminded me of how difficult it is to wait.

Research shows that as uncertainty increases, the brain shifts control to the limbic system, which generates anxiety and fear. And trust me, I was very anxious and stressed.

As we reach the end of our Lenten sermon series following Jesus's provocative and truthful “I am” statements this Easter morning, we encounter two stories profoundly shaped by the impossibility of waiting.

Our first story is John's detailed account of the resurrection. Besides Jesus, of course, Mary Magdalene is our primary character in this story. She is the one who goes to the tomb first thing in the morning. After witnessing the cruel death of her beloved friend and teacher, we can visualize Mary Magdalene agonizing over the period she had to wait before she could visit Jesus's body at the tomb.

It was the Sabbath. She had to wait at least 36 hours before she could be allowed near that tomb after the crucifixion. She wasn't allowed to grieve next to the one who redeemed her, offered her a second chance, and made her a disciple. She couldn't demonstrate her love, care, and devotion.

You see, there wasn't anything she could do but wait. She had to remain at home, perhaps alone, with her thoughts and emotions, pacing around her house, not being able to eat or sleep, sobbing uncontrollably at various times.

Can you imagine the powerlessness she felt during those agonizing hours as she waited? Can you feel the tremendous desperation of wanting to see the one you love, but that's just not possible?

I wonder if Jesus's words about his possible resurrection influenced her thoughts as she made her way to the tomb. Perhaps she was hopeful. Perhaps she was devastated. Perhaps she expected a miracle. Perhaps she just wanted closure.

We do not know what was on her mind and heart that Easter morning. But we can be certain that waiting was the hardest part of her journey towards that tomb.

Now, our second story takes us back to when Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus regarding their brother Lazarus, who was very ill. Jesus does not travel immediately to see them. Instead, he spends four days journeying all over the region. We are not given any details about what he does during those four days before seeing his beloved friend Lazarus.

It is in this story that we hear Jesus's proclamation, "I am the resurrection and the life." These words feel different this Easter morning because we know how the story ends. We know there is life in the valley of shadows and death. But this proclamation happens in a unique way.

Unlike all the other "I am" statements, this time we do not encounter large crowds asking Jesus for sustenance or for groundbreaking teaching. There are no tricky questions about faith and the afterlife. There are no religious authorities eager to find a word or a phrase that may incriminate Jesus.

The setting is rather unique—very personal. This is a very different scene from what we are used to at this point. What we find in this story is two women and their closest friends mourning over the death of Lazarus.

There are two women asking why Jesus wasn't there in time to heal their brother. There are two women, filled with grief, most likely angry at Jesus for ignoring their message. There are two women wrestling with their beliefs and the cruel reality before them. There are two women, brokenhearted, yet hopeful.

We may never know how Mary and Martha felt when they finally saw Jesus enter the town of Bethany. But what we can be certain of is that the hardest part, besides losing their brother, was waiting for Jesus.

It is the three women in these two stories who must wait to see and be near Jesus finally. The waiting may seem different in nature, but it is the result of a series of events

beyond their control. Many of the things we wait for are out of our control. This is why waiting is one of the most humbling and excruciating elements of our human existence.

How do we find the courage, hope, and patience to wait for that which matters most to us?

How can we stay grounded and hopeful while we wait ...

- for a medical diagnosis after several invasive tests?
- or a message from a loved one in a war-ravaged country?
- or a child who hasn't made it home by curfew?
- or that job we desperately need to make ends meet at home?
- or the right person to fall in love with to start a family?
- or a warm meal and shelter while experiencing homelessness?
- or reuniting with a loved one after a season of separation?

We've all been in situations like this at some point. We have been in the dark of night, in the confusion, in the frustrated hopes and unfulfilled desires, in the riddles and questions, and the doubts.

The term "threshold" is used in the Bible to describe those moments in life when waiting changes everything. Some of us refer to this waiting period as a "liminal space."

The threshold is often used in the context of the temple or places of worship—the physical space between the sacred and the mundane. However, this term also symbolizes a point of decision or change, representing the boundary between the known and the unknown, what we hope for and what we receive.¹

Mary, Martha, and Mary Magdalene are found in this threshold moment.

They all have been waiting to see Jesus.

And what about you? This morning, on this, the first day of the week, you have gathered in this holy place with a purpose. And like the women in our stories, you have probably been waiting to see Jesus, too. You may also be located in a liminal space or a threshold moment.

Perhaps you've been waiting a few days, a few months, or even a few years. Jesus has taken longer than you expected. You sent him word of your needs and requests, yet Jesus is nowhere to be found. You may be hurting or deeply disappointed. Maybe this is the last try before finally giving up on Jesus and your faith. Perhaps you've started to believe that God has abandoned you.

My dear friend, if you're feeling that way, know you're in the right place.

You are not alone. We have been waiting for him, too. And like you, we have chosen to show up this morning.

Think about it. We left the comfort of our beds, made some breakfast, chatted with those in our home, and even fought with our children so that we could be at church on time. You could also blame your attendance this morning on your grandparents, who gave you no choice but to attend worship, or on the friendly neighbor who has been inviting you to church for months now.

Whatever the reason may be, know that something far deeper brought you to this place.

Like Mary Magdalene, Mary, and Martha, your heart has been longing to see Jesus.

I came across the story of Karen, a student at Union Theological Seminary, a few days ago. The Rev. Dr. P.C. (Buddy) Enniss told this story in one of his sermons.² Enniss describes how Karen was living and studying in New York City while her new husband had gone to work for a law firm in Harrisburg. They saw each other only on weekends.

In her homiletics class, Karen described what her Fridays were like when John came into Pennsylvania Station on the train in time for supper. She said, “I usually get up early on Friday to clean the apartment before coming up here to school,” she said. “Then, after classes, I make a kind of safari down Broadway. I stop for groceries, pick up a bottle of wine, stop at a favorite flower stall for fresh flowers, and when I get home, I have just enough time to get myself and supper ready. Then John comes.” Only Karen went on to add, “The funny thing about it is that from morning until he arrives, I have this strange feeling that he is already with me ... not really ... but really.”

That’s the mystery and beauty of Easter morning.

Like Karen, like Mary Magdalene, like Mary and Martha, and like so many of us who have waited in silence, in fear, and in hope—we discover something profound in the waiting:

Jesus was already with us. Not really ... but really.

We thought we were alone in the darkness.

We thought the silence meant absence.

We thought the delay meant denial.

But Easter tells a different story.

It tells us that resurrection doesn’t happen in a rush.

It breaks through at just the right time, and it often finds us while we’re still waiting.

So wherever you find yourself this morning—in joy or in grief, with answers or still holding onto questions—know this: Jesus has been with you the whole time. In your longing. In your doubt. In your hope. And today, as we declare the good news that “He is risen,” we also declare that we are not alone.

So take heart, dear one. The waiting is not wasted. The silence is not empty. And the tomb is not the end.

“I am the resurrection and life”—Jesus says to us today.

Do we believe this?

Amen.

Notes

1 <https://biblehub.com/topical/t/threshold.htm>

2 <https://day1.org/speakers/5d9b820ef71918cdf20023b8/view>

Sermon: “What Are We Supposed to Do with This?”

First Sunday of Easter

Keith Grogg
Montreat, North Carolina

Then the disciples returned to their homes. But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb, and she saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, “Do not touch me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord,” and she told them that he had said these things to her.

– John 20:(1-9)10-18

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. In the first and early second century from which John’s gospel emerged, as at various historical moments ever since, it may have been tempting to add, “despite all evidence to the contrary.”

In a world where creeping shadows seem more and more to obscure the sun, the children of God need whatever testimony we can get that the light is still there—not barely hanging on, the way so much feels right now, but unkillable, inextinguishable, inexhaustible.

Into our shadowy landscape ventures the witness who has seen, heard, and realized the Good News, and is now sent with the message “He is risen!” to a world that is abundant with what looks, too convincingly for comfort, like a mountain of evidence to the contrary. What are we supposed to do with this?

In the murkiest hour of night, Mary Magdalene had come to the tomb, found it disturbed, and run to tell Peter and one who will be listed in the credits as “Other Disciple.” The two of them raced to the tomb, saw the scene, believed what they saw, didn’t understand, and went back to their homes. Mary stayed, standing just outside the scene, and wept. Hers may have been tears of confusion, or sorrow, or lament,

or awe. I see no indication that they were tears of despair. She may have been overwhelmed in the moment, but not so much that she has given up hope.

In John's poetically multilayered delivery, she had concluded, quite reasonably, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him" (ἐθηκαν, related to words like "put," "placed," "appointed," "fixed," etc. They have taken away the Jesus I know, and I don't know where they've stuck him—although some years ago on the Fourth of July I did see a statue of him in front of a church, in the arms of which someone had inserted an American flag for him to carry).

She saw Jesus, but at first didn't recognize him. When she did, he said, "Do not touch me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father." Whether she finds that statement even remotely comprehensible is treated as irrelevant by both her and John. Jesus sent her to the disciples with the message "I am ascending" (the verb is both present tense and the wonderfully titled "prophetic aorist," indicating a future event so certain that you might as well call it already completed) "to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."

She went to them and witnessed: "I have seen the Lord," and told them (without grammatical editorializing) what she had heard him say.

Wise people have spoken of living between the crucifixion of Good Friday and the victory of Easter Day, of the now and the not yet, of the delusional hazards of shouting Christ's universal triumph while injustice and cruelty run unchecked and rampant, lament remains untended, and reconciliation is an illusion enjoyed by those for whom claiming its achievement is a circumstantial convenience.

So what am I supposed to do with this breathtaking, life-changing, universe-re-defining good news?

Let us not draw some tortured analogy to athletic competition, which for many is about as welcome as another Ted Lasso anecdote requiring five minutes of backstory to set up a punchline that lands nowhere for anybody who needed the backstory in the first place. As I may have been told. But having graduated from Indiana University some eons ago, I can say that we alums are accustomed to the proud achievement of having accumulated more football losses, historically, than any other college program in the country, a tally initiated in the debut campaign of 1887 (season record: 0-1) and built up faithfully over many human lifetimes. Occasional moments of optimism have invariably receded back to reassuringly predictable disappointment.

Suddenly, in 2025, we found ourselves with the nation's longest home winning streak at 15 consecutive games—while still nursing that historic record of reliable failure. When the program started its win streak, fans were admonished to celebrate with dignity: "Act like you've been there." We don't even know what that means. *We have literally never been there.*

How are we supposed to act? What are we supposed to say?

What does the thrillingly empty tomb mean to the people around Jesus—including one who had denied him in those most dreadful hours, still painfully fresh—who

endured and must continue to endure a militarily, economically, and politically brutal occupation?

What do Hallelujahs mean in John's time, decades later, when the first generation of the Church has passed and the ultimate fulfillment is nowhere to be seen?

What does "He Is Risen" mean in an ICE age which will be justly reviled by history alongside the appalling Japanese American detentions of the 1940s, while people in churches who worship the same Christ I do insist this is all OK and, affronted, express enthusiasm for the unambiguously inexcusable cruelty of untold "collateral" human damage—Christ followers who, make no mistake, consistently run circles around me in public testimony and often in acts of profound generosity and kindness.

What am I supposed to do with Easter Day, in a world of heartless, brutal economics, misinformation, toddler madmen with awesome powers of destruction at their disposal, and social distrust on an epic scale?

Several years ago, I was surprised to find, in a list of the supposed 100 greatest singers of all time, 79 places above Art Garfunkel, 66 spots ahead of Dolly Parton, two spots higher than Stevie Wonder and just below Marvin Gaye, at #7, Bob Dylan. I was sputtering my objections to no one in particular, until I read this explanation from the editors, who reported: "When Sam Cooke played [a Bob Dylan record] for the young Bobby Womack, Womack said he didn't understand it. Cooke explained that from now on, it's not going to be about how pretty the voice is. It's going to be about believing that the voice is telling the truth."

In 2018, T-Mobile presumably paid the \$10.4 million fee to run a 60-second spot during the Super Bowl, a piece called "Little Ones" in which a camera pans over an assembly of beautiful babies in a reverie of joy, wonder, and awe. About halfway through the optimistic narration, the gently assertive, disembodied voice assures them, "Some people may see your differences and be threatened by them. But *you—are—unstoppable.*" May it be so, little ones; may God protect you all.

But that narration did not tell the truth. Holy Saturday 2026 falls on the fifty-eighth anniversary of the evening a minister who spoke far and wide, prophetically and eloquently testifying to an awesome God of extravagant love, speaking out for justice and peace, lifting the human soul to address the human condition, walked out onto a hotel balcony in Memphis at the same time that, many yards away, hate, fueled by fear, madness, and a desperate belief that there is not enough for everyone, crouched in the shadows of history.

As the first Covid Easter approached in 2020, Tom Long mentioned the conductor Nikolaus Harnoncourt and his version of Handel's timeless masterwork, *Messiah*. Harnoncourt's interpretation seems to look back to the first post-resurrection days when the disciples knew fear and great joy together. It is now my favorite version, sometimes sounding alarmed and disoriented, its triumphant scriptural declarations clear, but furtive—a rumor of something great and glorious, but which has to be whispered, lest the authorities, the pundits, and the wet blankets hear about it

and move in to stamp out the young embers of this new and exhilarating faith before it can grow into a flame.

Intrigued, I looked up contemporary reviews of Harnoncourt's interpretation, and found that critics were, by and large, baffled. They, too, even in the secular world, seemed to demand an Easter that's more about spectacular musicianship than faith that fumbles and gropes its way through dim, pre-dawn light. "And so it goes," wrote one reviewer, noting that Harnoncourt's 'Hallelujah' "takes off like an overloaded cargo plane, the most laid-back opening to this powerhouse chorus I've ever heard. It eventually picks up and really socks a punch," but the reviewer still can't figure out what the point was of, in his words, "the as-if-we're-not-sure-if-we're-really-happy beginning."

Another music critic suggested "the 'Hallelujah' Chorus begins so modestly you'll think it is a rehearsal," rounding out the review by noting, "There are plenty of finer, and more interesting Messiahs available." Preach.

As Buechner said about the resurrection, "It doesn't have the ring of great drama. It has the ring of truth ... The narrative is as fragmented, shadowy, incomplete as life itself."

Recently I was invited to share, in a one-hour presentation for our church, some of the DMin work I had completed having to do with the medieval women mystics. Among my topics were the compositional techniques of Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179). I spent a considerable portion of the hour outlining the clunky spiritual theology I had extrapolated from her use of mode, melisma, and soaring intervals in composing her liturgical music—a spirituality of the soul's audacious reach up and out into the vastness of God in its ecstatic search for union with the divine. Or something like that. It would have been immeasurably more effective had we simply heard the music for 45 minutes without offering or soliciting any comments, and then just gone home, bumping into door frames in exhilarated, grateful awe as we made our way back out into God's everyday, cosmic world.

All we can say is what we have encountered, each of us Leonard Cohen's baffled king composing Hallelujah.

Mary went and told the disciples: "I have seen the Lord." And she told them what she had heard him say. That's our model. The duty, the job, the joy of being witnesses is to tell what we have seen and heard and experienced. Our responsibility is to witness to the true Christ we have encountered in the world as we truly see it.

Like Peter and what's-his-name, we won't always understand, and we don't need to—can't, actually—until God gives us understanding.

But we can believe what we have seen. And we can tell the truth.

And you have seen the evidence, and I have seen the evidence, and the evidence is all around us, that God's narrative is deeper and greater and better than our narratives; that God has much to say about the greed and the self-interest and the competitiveness that falsely claim to be the only way for humanity to be the best that

we can be; that all may appear to be dark and cold and silent, but God is not finished with us yet.

An Easter of bright light, perfect clarity, and all-resolving triumph lies somewhere in our cosmic future, and as one witness to another, I am proud to move toward it alongside you. But if, for you, this is an Easter of hopeful listening, baffled discipleship, kind humanity, and a desire not to impose your will but simply to say what you have seen and try to make sense of it, I am just as proud to be your sibling on the journey.

These days, that's all the Easter witness I can ask you to give me. And in this light-in-the-darkness moment, it is a gracious plenty.

Notes

1 John 1:5.

2 <https://www.thedailyhoosier.com/indiana-football-no-longer-has-the-most-losses-in-division-i-history/#:~:text=And%20the%20losses%20just%20kept,the%20most%20all%2Dtime%20losses>. Accessed Nov. 23, 2025.

3 *Rolling Stone*, "100 Greatest Singers of All Time: Our 2008 List of the Best Vocalists Ever, as Voted on by a Panel of 179 Experts" (*Rolling Stone*, December 3, 2010).

<http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/100-greatest-singers-of-all-time-19691231#ixzz3ZfWWpxlD>. Accessed November 26, 2025.

4 "Little Ones" (T-Mobile 2018 Super Bowl TV commercial), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBRoe836RT8>. Accessed November 26, 2025.

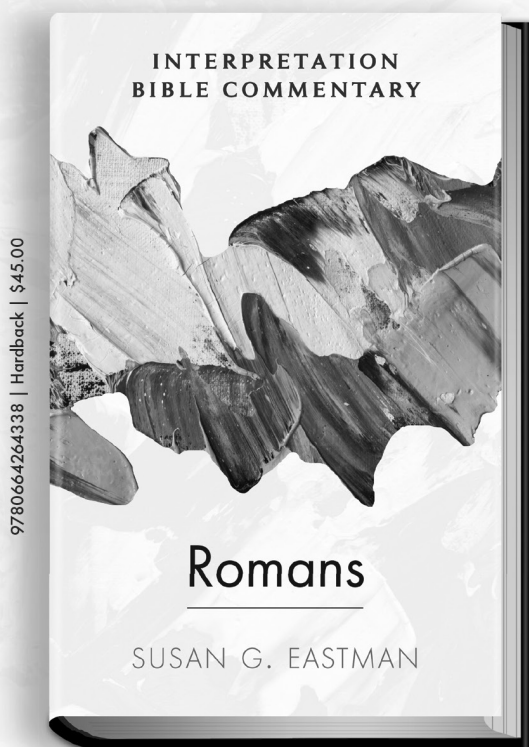
5 David Vernier, "Handel: Messiah/Harnoncourt" <https://www.classicstoday.com/review/review-12202/>. Accessed Nov. 26, 2025.

6 Robert Levine, Amazon.com review of Niklaus Harnoncourt's recording of Handel's Messiah, retrieved April 6, 2020.

7 Frederick Buechner, "Easter," in *Whistling in the Dark* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), 42.

8 Leonard Cohen, "Hallelujah," 1984 (Stranger Music, BMI).

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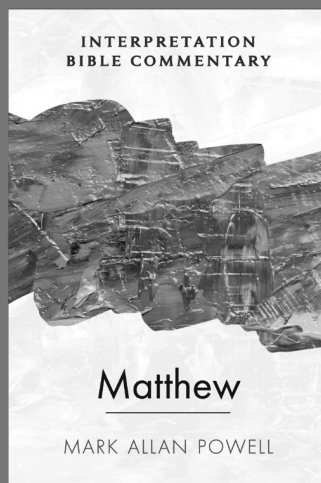
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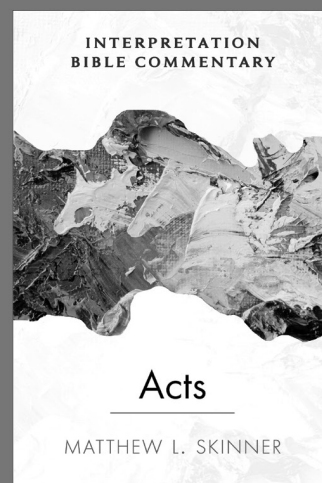
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