

Caveat Caesar, Emerging from the Shadows, and Other Thoughts for Easter

Colleagues,

I dare this week to pass along some notions I threw together eighteen years ago, A.D. 1999, about the texts we'll be listening to again this coming Easter Sunday. I shared them that year with a text study group. I unearthed them this morning, quite by accident, for today's version of the same group. On scanning them it crossed my mind to share them here. Dated though they be—I haven't troubled to correct that, a bit of light editing notwithstanding—there's still a chance that something said below will help to underscore why the resurrection of Christ continues as unthinkably good news for the world of 2017.

Appended at the bottom are a couple of quick ideas for people who will be preaching or listening in churches on Palm Sunday and Good Friday.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

Monday, 3/15/99, i.e. the Ides of March

Caveat Caesar. Christus Regnat.

To: Study Group Colleagues

Fr: Burce

Re: Easter Texts, Matt. 28:1-10 and John 20:1-18 (Year A, Revised Common Lectionary). Random jottings as the day unfolds.

9:05 a.m.—See the dateline above. One of the points of Matthew's Easter account, surely, is that Caesar's power (as in soldiers guarding the tomb) gives way to Christ's as butter to a hot knife. I know, I know, the soldiers are in the scene to make the point that the body wasn't stolen, and not for the sake of grinding an early Christian axe about the Roman imperium and its pretensions. Still, one can't help but assume that the faithful who cowered in catacombs at the 2nd century's turn drew the obvious promissory conclusions about Caesar's ineffectiveness at keeping *them* buried. Are there any among those we're preaching to who feel buried by Caesar as the millennium turns? If so—see possible leads in Harvey Cox's "[The Market as God](#)" in the March [1999] issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*—then this is good news indeed for them.

9:25 a.m.—Cut to John. As I got ready for yesterday's preaching (Jn. 9, the blind guy, remember?) it hit me that there's a parallel between reactions to the guy post-healing and to Jesus post-resurrection. See 9:8-10, where "neighbors and those who had seen him as a beggar" get tangled in a debate as to whether this new "seeing guy" is or is not the former blind guy. Apparently some are hard to convince, as the tense of the verb in 9c suggests: "He *kept saying*, 'I am the man.'" (Tangent: might there be a connection between "I am the man" here and "Behold the man" in ch. 19?) Though it seems that his much protesting merely aggravates the skeptics, v10: "They *kept asking* him 'Then how were your eyes opened?'" Note, then, the parallels. a) The consistent failure, ch. 20, of the first witnesses—Mary Magdalene, then the huddled ten, then the late-coming Thomas—to make the connection between the One they now behold with the one they saw being killed on Friday past. For

one and all the penny drops only when Jesus himself makes it drop (thus also Luke, first with the Emmaus Two, 24:31, then with the eleven, 24:38-43). b) The unrelenting stubbornness of the skeptics, manifested (for example) in our own day by those who insist on that hideous wall of ontological separation between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith ("They kept asking him, 'Then how were you raised from the dead?'"")

11:28 a.m.—The parallels noted above got me thinking about the mud on the blind guy's eyes. It seemed suggestive to me of two things: a) God playing in the mud as he formed the man from the dust of the ground, Gen. 2. (Here then is the Son of God re-creating; cf. Paul, 'if anyone is in Christ, bingo, new creation!') b) The moment to come, first for Jesus, then the man, when it's not just dirt over the dead, cold eyes but dirt over the whole dead, cold corpse. And then what happens? *Mirabile dictu*—incredibly, in the strict sense of the word—baptized eyes see, baptized corpses live, and in both cases as never before.

11:46 a.m.—Which means, among other things, that John leaves us no choice except to preach the resurrection in the richest, most robust and realistic sense of the Dead One Raised.

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Continuing, 14 days later—Monday in Holy Week, to be precise:

1. The penny dropped this morning. I now know that I will preach on the John text, along lines suggested above and sketched below.
2. For those of you preaching on Matthew, a late suggestion: the Matthean detail of guards at the tomb kicks open the door for reflection—no, that's too mild; how about jubilant proclamation?—on the fate of bullies in light of the resurrection. The bullies abound: corporate,

bureaucratic, legal, political, economic, military; intellectual, artistic, athletic, ecclesiastical, intra-familial, etc. *ad nauseum*. All do what the lout on the playground does to Scrawny Little Four-eyes, or what the soldiers standing guard will surely do to the women when they approach the Lord's tomb for their final respects, i.e. they will mock them, taunt them, diminish them, harass them, squeeze another pint or two of life from their sagging spirits, and laugh with malicious glee as they do it; which is also to say that they will do to the women, though on a smaller scale, as they did to the women's Lord on the Friday previous. Ah, but now is Easter, and Christ is risen indeed! So much for the best-laid plans of said soldiers and all other would-be *Übermenschen*. See the promise of Matt. 5: "The meek shall inherit the earth." Good news indeed for so many of those to whom we preach. Even better news when one considers that the Easter Gospel contains the promise of bullies themselves being redeemed from the bullying spirit that holds them in its enslaving grip. Note, for example, what will become of the bully Saul [of Tarsus]. As we'll hear him say in Easter's second lesson: "You (I) have died, and your (my) life is hid with Christ in God" (Col. 2).

3. Regarding John: I plan to go to work on the detail of Jesus Unrecognized. This, of course, is a persistent motif in the Easter accounts, not only here with Mary Magdalene, but also on Easter Evening with the ten (Jn .20) and the Emmaus 2 (Lk. 24), also on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Jn. 21 and with the eleven on the Galilean hill, Mt. 28:17 ("they fell down and worshipped him; *but somedoubted*"). Two things are asserted by these accounts: a) Jesus who was Crucified (and none other) is alive; the One now seen by apostolic witnesses is ontologically

identical to the one whom they also saw “breathing his last.” b) The same Jesus he may be, but there’s also something so different about him that those who see him now can’t—on their own—make the connection to the one they’d just seen.

4. Images and phrases leap to mind. Who of us, as children, were able to make an unassisted connection between the grandparents we knew and the figures who appeared in that ancient, dusty wedding-day photograph? Again: one speaks of athletes—Muhammad Ali comes to mind—who are “shadows of their former selves.” Dare we apply this frame of reference to Jesus, understanding that resurrection has turned him into a shadow of *his* former self, only in reverse? Thus C. S. Lewis, especially in his Narnia books, where the reality now known is but a shadow of the things to come (though whether he’s indebted in this more to Plato than to Paul—cf. Col. 2:17—I’m not prepared to say).
5. Theologically understood, the shadowing of the former self is a sign of divine judgment. Since Christ’s resurrection constitutes a reversal of that judgment, it follows that the shadowing itself is likewise reversed.
6. The apostolic witnesses are unanimous in their assessment of that resurrection’s significance *for us*. What God accomplished in Christ, he intends to accomplish also in those who are bound to Christ through faith. Again the second lesson: “Our lives are hid with Christ; when Christ who is our life appears, we also appear with him in glory,” i.e. un-shadowed. Note how Peter’s assessment of Easter’s import in his preaching to Cornelius and company (First Lesson, Acts 10:34ff.) focuses on Christ’s present role as “judge of the living and the dead.” Good news this is: the Judge, capital J, is the Forgiver of Sins, i.e. the Reverser of Prior Judgment, i.e. the Un-Shadower—putting flesh on dry bones (cf. Ezekiel 37, Lent

5) and choosing What is Not to bring to nothing (to overshadow?) That Which Is, 1 Cor. 1:28.

7. Thus some likely pieces of the proclamation from Messiah's pulpit on Sunday morning:

"Brothers and sisters, it's already Easter, and wasn't it only last night that we gathered in this place to celebrate Christmas Eve? How the days, the weeks, the months have sped by. And for the over-the-hill gang—all of us who are 40 or older—we see how the years are sprouting wings. We look from mirror to scrapbook—that dusty, buried scrapbook, where the old photographs reside, the ones that make the grandkids ooh and ahh and sometimes giggle—and we see clearly how we're becoming shadows of our former selves. But thanks to Jesus Christ our Lord, what God would have us hear this morning is that we are all of us—old *and* young alike—shadows in truth, but shadows of our *future* selves. This indeed is the power and promise of Easter *for us*: that in Jesus Christ, for our sakes crucified and now raised, the direction of history (our own *and* the world's) has been thrown in reverse; so that instead of moving, as we seem to be, from present light to future darkness—the shadows increasing with every new wrinkle and every fresh sin—we are to be taken instead from present darkness to future light; to a Goodness, a Beauty, a Love, a Joy, of which the best and finest that we now know is but the palest imitation. And we ourselves shall be so changed by God's mercy that those who know us now at our present best will be hard pressed to make the link between the persons we are and the persons we will be, so much better and finer will God have made us.

"We find this promise in the person of Christ—the firstborn of the dead, as one of the apostolic witnesses call him. Mary got to know him when he was busy "bearing our sins" as we often hear it said. Then his shoulders were stooping beneath the

weight of the responsibility he had assumed for who and what we are. Maybe the reason she doesn't recognize him this morning is that those shoulders of his are now straight. The burden has been borne. His responsibilities for us have been attended to, to the Father's satisfaction. Now he stands tall, and in that standing tall is the promise that we who are his by faith will one day be standing straight as well. Not merely before each other or before the world, mind you, but—much more to the point—before God.

“Of course the temptation is to think that all this is so much a matter of the future that we won't see it happen till “we get to heaven,” as we also like to say. But resist the temptation. God's re-creating of us—his raising of us to new life—is a project that God is embarking on already now. Think for example of people you've heard about: Peter the Craven Denier become Peter the Fearless Pentecost Preacher. Saul the Pharisee with murder in his heart becomes Paul the Apostle. Augustine, the young, promiscuous wastrel, become Augustine, Doctor of the Church. John Newton, slave transporter, becomes John Newton, English abolitionist and author of “Amazing Grace.” Charles Colson, political hatchet man, becomes Charles Colson, servant to the Christ he encounters in the persons of convicted, incarcerated criminals. And a little girl from the back hills of Croatia turns into Mother Theresa. Come to think of it, maybe you haven't only heard of such people. Maybe you yourself have also seen one. For all I know, you *are* one.

“As we prepare for the Eucharist this morning the consecrating prayer the pastor prays will contain the phrase, ‘We cry out for the resurrection of our lives’ (2nd option, *Ministers' Desk Edition, Lutheran Book of Worship*). We cry for this because God has promised it. For some of us he'd like to get the project rolling ASAP. For others—many more of us, I think—he'd

simply like to pick up where the Spirit of Christ left off the last time we sat here being exposed to the Word of God and nourished with the Blessed Sacrament. Consider this: God's goal and intention, also with you, is to turn you into one of those Peter/Paul/Augustine/Theresa-ish types who help others to see that, in Christ, the temporal relation between shadow and reality has been reversed.

"Or putting that same thought into more down-to-earth terms: you've heard it said that 'you can't teach an old dog new tricks,' and that's correct: *You* can't. But God can. And God will. That's what Jesus died for, the right to make old dogs do new things they've never done before, Easter means this, that the right he died to earn was granted to him. Please expect him then—this living Lord of ours—to seize hold of your lives and make of them what they weren't and couldn't be before. And please—above all else—trust him enough to let him do it.

"Above all else, remember that trusting Jesus involves telling the truth about the present lives we're so enamored with. 'Don't cling to me,' says Jesus to Mary when the penny drops at last and she understands who he is. Daughter of a dying world that she is, Mary still takes it for granted—as do I, as do you—that all good things inevitably must end, whether suddenly or in a long, sad slide from better to worse, from livelier to deadlier. Therefore one grabs for the gusto as it shoots on by because gusto gone is gone for good—se we believe. In Mary's mind is the memory, still fresh, of life at its best, which for her was life in Jesus' company in those heady pre-crucifixion days when he drove out the demons of fear and loneliness and bitter self-loathing, and in their place he blessed her with first-ever inklings of what hope and love and joy are really all about. Torn from her, he was. And if, by virtue of one of these freak glitches in the inexorable

grinding of fate she should find the lost joy momentarily restored—well, thinks she, I’m going to hang on to it for all I’m worth. ‘Let go,’ Jesus says. ‘By far the best is yet to come; and even the best of the joys you have known with me is but a pale shadow of the Joy to come. I go to the Father to make it so.’ How much more does this same Lord Jesus invite and command us to let loose of the lesser joys—in some cases the tawdry and selfish pleasures—to which we cling; to give our hearts instead to Him, to the future he promises, to the hope he excites: and in that giving, to spend our lives freely on the spreading of that hope.

“Can you imagine a congregation, a community, a world, in which everyone lived in this hope? Do you understand how important it is that there be some—at least a few—who live with fierce determination as shadows of their future selves in Jesus Christ their Lord? Christ is risen indeed. Go in peace, in hope, and serve him!”

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“Hey Burce, enough already!” —Thanks, colleagues, for your patience. What will become of the above ramblings I know not yet. *Veni creator Spiritus*. Amen. To each and all of you, a blessed proclaiming, an Exuberant Easter.

JEB. March 1999

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Addendum: Two Notes on the Passion Accounts this Year

Like others of you I’m facing two Passion homilies, one on Matthew’s account for Palm Sunday, the other on John’s account for Good Friday. Here is one idea for each that I’m toying with at the moment as the driver for a longer reflection. I have

attended to neither in 30 plus year of prior Passion preaching, and it's way past time to fix that:

From Matthew, the infamous line that blind and wicked Christians have historically seized on to excuse doing evil to Jews: "His blood be on us, and on our children" (27:25). In a note I was copied on a few days ago, Ed Schroeder cites Fred Niedner as source for the following:

"[This is a] parallel to the blood on the doorposts at the first Passover in Egypt. Namely, when you have the passover-lamb-blood marking you, you get rescued. Could Matthew, who is full of Old Testament parallels throughout his twenty-eight chapters, be telling his readers about this 'ironic' request to have '*his* blood be on *us* and our kids'? Asking to have *this* blood on you is not asking for a curse, but a request for redemption from the curse."

And from John, the famous line, declaimed by Pilate as he trots Jesus before the crowd: "Behold the man!" (19:5). But as Steve Turnbull reminded us in his superb essay at the 2016 Crossings Conference, it's not "behold the man," but "behold the *anthropos*," i.e. the human being. One of John's great concerns, throughout his Gospel, is to address two questions: what is humanity, and what does God intend that humanity should be? Both questions get answered definitively in that picture of Jesus crowned in thorns, standing before the mob—the human being simultaneously at its most destitute and most glorious. Here is what "rehumanized" humans will look like today when God has had God's way with them. But for more on this, see [Steve's essay](#). I touted it in the lead up to Holy Week last year. I do so again.

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