

Easter Sunday Preaching

Colleagues,

Pastors all around the world are beset at the moment with the heaviest preaching burden of the year. The great majority of them have a minimum of three key messages to deliver, one today on Maundy Thursday, the next tomorrow on Good Friday, the third on Easter Sunday. Each is different in character. Each cuts to the core of the Christian Gospel and the heart of the pastoral calling. If you make a hash of these it's time to quit. Call the elders or council together and hand in the keys to the pulpit. So thinks the preacher with a conscience, at any rate.

Said conscientious preacher, I'm guessing, is sweating especially hard about now over the forthcoming Easter sermon. Let's hope so, at least. How it is in the rest of the world I cannot say, but in the U.S. preachers will be looking at their biggest crowds of the year this Sunday. Come then the questions. How do you reach them? Of the nuggets you mine from Mark or John (assuming you follow the lectionary), which will you try to tell as of first importance to this set of people? And how in the telling will you best serve the Holy Spirit's aim of grabbing ears, lifting hearts, and injecting dying sinners with sturdy hope in the God who raised his Son from the dead for them all, not just the regulars, but the once-a-year types too? Any chance while you're at it that you'll tempt one of the latter to start checking in a tad more often? Christ no doubt would be deeply pleased to see that.

And with questions comes the problem. Sermon preparation is for most of us a lonely exercise. That's certainly how this preacher has experienced it for 30+ years. We browse our books, chat up our colleagues, check out the current text study at crossings.org (well, I hope you do), but then, inevitably, come

the conversations within our own heads. It's from these that the sermon spills. How well or poorly it manages to feed the flock we're invariably left to wonder, in part because the folks we serve it to are loathe to comment on its quality. That's especially so of the part-timers, the ones one most hopes to reach on Easter Sunday because they won't be there on Easter 2. So the preacher gropes. And the younger the preacher the more the groping. With older hands there's at least a chance that a fragment or two of useful feedback has drifted his or her way from hearers over the years, though even then one thrashes. Inevitably.

It's with the above in mind that we bring you today's offering. Think of it as pre-preaching feedback for Easter Sunday preachers. I got it from two sources. First, and of greater significance, from veteran listeners, a handful of people I know and honor as steadfast saints who can't recall an Easter Sunday when they weren't in church. Earlier this week I asked them to "tell me in 50 words or less...what you want Easter preachers to be thinking about as they prepare for Sunday? Or to put that another way, what's your tip for them if they're going to get the job done the way it needs to be done where Easter Sunday hearers are concerned?" Almost everyone I asked responded with alacrity. Hardly any managed to do so in under 50 words. So be it. In Section I below you'll find what they said.

Section II delivers some comments from a few veteran preachers, of whom I asked: "What counsel (50 words or less) do [you Easter-preaching vets] have for young preachers just starting off, or maybe for each other?" Again, responses came quickly. The first to answer was my bishop, Elizabeth Eaton of the ELCA's Northeastern Ohio Synod. I'm especially pleased to pass along what she had to say.

God guide the telling and bless the hearing this Sunday,

wherever it happens.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

I. On Easter Preaching, by some Veteran Hearers
+ From a Lutheran middle-school teacher, late 50's, Associate in Ministry (ELCA)–

“I want to hear pure JOY. I want to get excited about the incredible work that the Father accomplished through his Son. I want to be reminded, encouraged, and challenged to live as a grateful person who has been given the gift of salvation. I want to hear the name of Jesus spoken with confidence and joy multiple times during the sermon. I want my pastor to smile and have his/her eyes light up when proclaiming this incredible message.”

+ From a spouse, mother, and late-blooming entrepreneur, early 50's, coincidentally a great-granddaughter of LCMS patriarch and dogmatician Francis Pieper–

*“A great Easter sermon shouts shocking, unthinkable, nearly unhope-able news– death will not win the day. God has turned the way things work upside down and He has gone to graphic lengths to make it so. Not at a blip on the timeline, but carefully planned and anticipated since the beginning of time. His plan and He saw me in it, and, then, what need I fear? And not just a happy ending, but triumph for now. I can leave behind the cloaks of sorrow and selfishness and fear for I am Christ's and Christ is God's. I pray that the pews are littered with such cloaks when the postlude fires up!”*Another thing that I personally thrill over is hearing deeper meanings in root words, cultural insights, and details in the accounts that I

have never considered before. Not only for the depth it adds to the accounts, but for the wonder of glimpsing the tapestry God has woven in His Word and in His Plan. Alive and inexhaustible—and available to me. Who knew?”

+ From a high school math teacher, late 20's—

“So what about good Friday? How can a death of a perfect human being be so good? Isn't that an oxymoron, Good Death? And not only his death, but my death too. A complete death, to the bone, and here is the thing, I'm the one that killed him. I'm the one that killed myself. I tried so hard to get it right, I tried so hard to depend on grace, I tried so hard—I, I, I—I killed him because of my dependence on me. So then, what is so Good about that Friday? Well, it's good because we know the end of the story. It's good because today he is risen. Today he says, “For you, you who killed me, here, have it all, take my righteousness, take my purity, take all that is mine, I did it for you, leave everything that is yours, I'll trade you.” Today we make the trade, no more trying, no more needing to get it right, no more me, only him. And with that, live. Live today in the resurrection. Live tomorrow, the next day, and the day after knowing that regardless of the mistakes and how numerous they may be, know that he whispers in your ear, “For you.” Go now and love each other, and keep in mind that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead (your death), he is our risen Lord, he is Joy for all ages.”

+ From a firefighter and law student, early 30's—

“Sometimes I can't help but think about people that we only see on Christmas and Easter. It reminds me of a bar review strategies book I read that asked what was preventing me from spending the three months before the exam being the kind of

student I wished I'd been during three years of law school. So I wonder if some want to get some solid time in when it counts or something—and I wish they knew that Christmas and Easter are really celebrated every week at my church and other churches (in the same way that I'm learning to celebrate it every day).”[Translation: “Pay attention to these folks, preachers. Tempt them. Hook them. Give the Holy Spirit a chance to reel them in!” –JB]

+ From a supervisor of teams that secure foreclosed properties against damage and decay, mid-30's—

“[Tell us that] God came through! He did exactly what He set out to do.”The feeling of being disappointed or ‘let down’ is so familiar to so many in life. Let down by the stories we see in the news. Let down by people we interact with or encounter. Disappointed by the general hand dealt in life. Isn't this exactly where a cynic is born?

“Easter is where God Almighty delivers on his promise and gives us every reason to put that skepticism away and trust him. Isaiah writes in my favorite Old Testament reading, chapter 53, “bruised for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities... On him the chastisement that made us whole”. That was the sacrifice—Him for me. Easter morning seals the deal! God smiling down with a smug ‘I told you so!’ face.

“There was pain and struggle for hundreds of years in between when the promises were made and when they were realized. Same goes for me and my life. Years of ups and downs. In the end the point remains—God came through! Good to His word. He raised Jesus from the dead. Time to be confident that he will do it again...with me, with you and with all who have even the slightest inclination to trust it be true!”

+ From a church musician and Associate in Ministry, mid-60's–

“See ‘A Lamb goes uncomplaining forth,’ LBW 105, st 4. We know the end of our story which is Christ’s story. I am now free of all that binds me–death, my possessions. I am free to love and care for my neighbor. Satan cannot harm me, nor can the world.”

+ From a bank employee, musician, and self-taught lay theologian (e.g., absorber of Luther’s Bondage of the Will), late 30's–

“Without Easter (and Ascension), what happened from Christmas through Good Friday is just ‘news’. What happens from Easter through Ascension is what reveals it to be ‘Good News.’ Until Easter, all we really have is a sensational story, just like we hear on our tired out news programs every day. We have hero-worship, spectacle, betrayal, brutality, injustice, opinion, all of it ultimately useless to us without Easter and Ascension. Secondarily, Easter is a delicious example of the future determining the past, just like God’s work always does. Where humans work, the past determines the future—we sow what we reap; God works in the opposite direction–‘reaping where he does not sow.’”

+ From a Lutheran elementary school teacher, Associate in Ministry, late 50's, –

“Press the question: ‘Who are YOU looking for?’ or ‘Who ARE you looking for?’ Asking us as Christians to put ourselves in the shoes (sandals?) of the women who came to the tomb.”

+ From a consecrated deaconess (Lutheran Deaconess Association) and long time member of a synod staff, mid-60's–

“[Tell us–]

- *Why this abhorrent reality (the crucifixion of Jesus) is good news.*
- *Why it makes a difference.*
- *What the empty tomb means.*
- *Are terror and amazement the right responses from me? Then what?"*

+ From a missionary's daughter, long married to a pastor's son, late 50's-

What I intently listen for in an Easter sermon is three connections—Good Friday, Easter, and my life. I know that sounds self-centered, and I'm rather ashamed of that, but in the end, I really want to hear again (because I'm such a disbeliever) WHY (and wherefore?) what happened to Jesus ends up being good for ME and my world. HOW does it give me hope in the face of my degenerating body and assured death, in the face of my abject inadequacies and miserable shortcomings, in the face of the suffering, selfish world in which I live? I want to rejoice and be happy and sing, but PLEASE, tell me again, WHY? I doubt so much.

+ From a project manager, currently overseeing a laborious upgrade of his company's management software, early 30's –

"I read this quote from a Luther sermon while thinking about your question: 'If the conscience is to be comforted, it can only be by the preaching of Christ's death and resurrection—this alone comforts. In contrast, all other preaching of law, good works, holy living, whether commanded by God or men, is incapable of comforting a person in times of need and death; instead it leaves him uncertain and in despair, frightened and tormented. If we consider God without Christ, we find no comfort but only righteous wrath and displeasure. But

whoever preaches Christ proclaims and brings true comfort, so that it will be impossible for hearts not to be joyous and of good cheer.'"

II. On Easter Preaching, by some Veteran Preachers
+ From Bishop Elizabeth Eaton, Northeastern Ohio Synod-

"Always preach one point, never fewer.

- *Mention Jesus. (You'd be surprised how many sermons from Lutheran pastors I have heard that do not mention Jesus. Not even once.*
- *If you don't preach the cross and resurrection you haven't preached the gospel.*
- *And this from my homiletics professor, Krister Stendahl, 'Don't start with a joke; it's all downhill after that.'*"

+ From Pr. David Kukelhan, Triune Lutheran, Broadview Heights, Ohio, aficionado and master of the bon mot-

"Easter is for joy. A little humor never hurts."

+ From Pr. Marcus Felde, Bethlehem Lutheran, Indianapolis-

"Read 2 Corinthians 4:1-15 before proceeding. Then think 'Self: Clay Pot; Gospel: Treasure.' We 'do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord; and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake.' Imbibe 4:13: 'We also believe, and so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence.' Is that Easter preaching advice or what?"

+ From Pr. Ruth Hanusa, hospice chaplain, Reno, Nevada-

“Keep it pruned. The folks who hear you preach all of the time have the story down pat; those who don’t, don’t need your entire Christology trotted out as catch-up, or to make them feel guilty. Give them all something—lean and clean—to catch their breath over. Mark 16 is especially good for this; it’s edgy.”

+ From Pr. Steve Albertin, Christ, Zionsville, Indiana-

“Words from the late Jerry Pelikan—I think spoken shortly before his death—summarize for me the decisiveness of preaching the resurrection: ‘If Christ is not raised, nothing else matters. Nothing else matters, if Christ is not raised.’”The annual celebration of Easter and the unique audience it provides gives preachers an unusual opportunity to lay it all out on the line in a decisive, clear and definitive manner. This is the day to boil it down to the essentials. This is the day to make sure that “the good news...is good news. Because if the good news is not good news, then it is not THE good news.” Clearly using Christ WILL bring COMFORT (and good news) to searching souls. On this day—perhaps more than any other day of the church—folks come looking to hear the genuine good news of Christ risen and the difference that makes for life not only in eternity but NOW!”

+ From Burce, your editor, Messiah Lutheran, Fairview Park, Ohio-

“Preach to THEM, the folks in front of you, right now, this morning. You’re charged in this moment with real-deal, real time stuff, God’s urgent, vital Word to THESE people through YOUR mouth. So spit it out already! ‘Christ-for-you (yes, YOU) is risen! Don’t be afraid!’”