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Easter

Oh, Angels, Quit Your Lamenting!
Isaiah 25:6-9; John 20:1-18

When speaking about God, language is always the challenge. In the words of the medieval Saint, Bernard of Clairvaux, used in the hymn we sang on Maundy Thursday, his words become our own:

*What language shall I borrow to thank thee, dearest friend,
For this Thy dying sorrow, Thy pity without end?*

Whether we are seeking to express the mystery of creation, the birth of Jesus, the power of the cross and resurrection, or the end of life and beyond, the most we can do is reach for images, metaphors, poetry, and song. Because, what we are trying to express goes so far beyond the reach of ordinary language.

Language is the barrier when trying to preach on Easter—something so common, so central to the Christian faith. Without Easter, we would know nothing of Jesus. He would have been just one of the thousands of Jews who was crucified by the Roman Empire in that bloody first century. Without Easter, there would be no Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, or Good Friday, because there would have been no community of faith whose ongoing lives have been changed by him.

The difficult caveat is doing so without leaving resurrection in the first century. If it was only a historical event, then what was the meaning of it? That we follow someone who has defied death? Or is there a more profound reason that this one from Galilee lives on today?

Most of us who grew up in Christian homes and in Christian churches have a “preunderstanding” of Easter, just as we do of Good Friday, that shapes the way we listen to these stories. Our understanding is usually a product of combining Easter stories from all the gospels into a composite and then seeing the whole through the filter of Christian preaching and teaching, hymns and liturgy. We bring this preunderstanding of what Easter is about to the gospel

stories.¹ Most of the emphasis is on the historical factuality of the stories. We are left with questions of “How large was the stone in front of the tomb?” “Was there one angel at the grave site (Mark and Matthew) or were there two (Luke)?” The earliest Easter story from Mark includes no information about a resurrected body, ending in its original form with the three women, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome leaving in fear at the sight of the stone rolled back. For Paul, the oldest of the New Testament writers, resurrection is not focused on bodily resurrection, but on the power of the living presence of Jesus.

If we aren’t careful, we develop the resurrection story into just another miracle that Jesus performed. If we confine “resurrection” to just one event—the death and coming-back-to-life of Jesus’ body, we miss the point. Don’t misunderstand what I am saying. I try to remind you of the power of resurrection every Sunday you leave this place. The last of a trilogy of beliefs I give you is this: “...and by the love of God, fully revealed in the face of Jesus, you are being redeemed”—transformed, healed, given newness of life, resurrected...you are being resurrected through the living presence of Jesus.

The language we use with children in trying to teach the power of resurrection is that of Easter Eggs and cocoons. New life comes from the egg of a chicken or duck. A transformation of life comes from the cocoon of a caterpillar. What language, what metaphors do we borrow to communicate the living presence of Christ?

If Easter is just about one person defying death, then we’ve missed the meaning of the story. If Easter is just about life after death, then we haven’t really gotten it. Easter is about the power of the living presence of Jesus—here...now! Resurrection means that comments like “it’s over” and words like “impossible” are out of place. Easter means, in the words of John Claypool, that “the worst things are never the last things and the final sounds of history will not be ‘Taps’ but ‘Reveille.’”² True belief in resurrection draws us into the mystery of life and faith in which events cannot be fully predicted.

¹ Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week* (New York, HarperCollins: 2006), 190.

² John R. Claypool, from his sermon “The Worst Things and the Last Things,” preached at First Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, Georgia, September 16, 2001.

One of the prophetic readings—language—the early church used to understand the death and resurrection of Jesus was from Isaiah 25. Three practical images are provided in those four verses.

The first image (Isaiah 25:6) is that of a great banquet on Mount Zion, the place where the temple stood. In that image, a gathering of all people, irrespective of race, religion, or culture embrace the shared truths of God.

The second image is that of life in the face of death, with no mourning. Death is swallowed up in victory and God wipes away the tears from their eyes—words later borrowed by the apostle Paul and John on the island of Patmos (1 Corinthians 15:54 and Revelation 21:1-5).

The third image of Isaiah used by the early church to understand Jesus' death and transition is God's promise to bring an end to death. "In life and in death we belong to God" we say today in "A Brief Statement of Faith." The early church borrowed the language of Isaiah to describe their experience of Jesus' resurrection. What language shall we borrow to proclaim this day we celebrate? In her poem, "And the Glory," Ann Weems says:

*The silence breaks into morning.
The one star lights the world.
The lily springs to life and
Not even Solomon...
Let it begin with singing
And never end!
Oh, angels, quit your lamenting!
Oh, pilgrims,
Upon your knees in tearful prayer,
Rise up
And take your hearts
And run!
We who were no people
Are named anew
God's people,
For He who was no more
Is forevermore!*

We seem to feel more comfortable keeping Jesus at a distance, allocating him to a setting with a tomb, a stone rolled back from its entrance, and the death shroud left behind, rather than allowing him to have a living presence within our lives...in all his humanity and in all our humanity.

Barbara Taylor tells of arriving early at a beautiful old 1920 Episcopal Church in Alabama at which she was to preach. With extra time, she decided to look around. The sanctuary had beautiful tiffany-style stain glass windows and a striking mural of Jesus emerging from his tomb over the altar. Forty-five minutes ahead of time, she had the place to herself, except for a member of the altar guild who was polishing silver in the sacristy. Barbara described her as a “pulled-together” woman, wearing expensive clothes, with every hair on her beautiful head in place. Her manicured fingernails were flying as she polished a silver chalice with a soft gray rag.

They politely acknowledged each other’s presence. Barbara adjusted the height of the podium and the angle of the microphone. She then walked up behind the altar so that she could see the mural up close. It was a masterpiece. Up above her head, Jesus was stepping out of his tomb looking as limber as a ballet dancer with his arms raised in blessing. Roman soldiers slumped in sleep on either side of the tomb with Easter lilies blooming under their noses. Except for a white cloth swaddling his waist, Jesus was naked. His skin was the color of a pink rose. His limbs were flooded with light.

The painting was so realistic that she leaned in for a closer look. She couldn’t ever remember having seen so much of Jesus’ skin before, especially in church. She felt protective of him, all exposed like that in such a public place. But she could see the artist’s point. Even in Jesus’ most transcendent moment, the moment that set him apart from the rest of humankind, he remained recognizably one of us. He was wearing skin. He did not leave his body behind.

As she continued looking at the painting, allowing that art form to be a point of meditation, she felt something was missing but couldn’t think what it was. The wounds were visible in his hands, feet, and side. His upraised arms looked thin but strong. Staring at his underarms, she realized with a sudden awareness why he looked so ethereal. Jesus had no body hair.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it” The pulled-together woman in the sacristy was watching Barbara through the open door.

“It surely is,” Barbara said, “but did you ever notice that he has no body hair? He has the underarms of a six-year-old. His chest is as smooth as a peach.” Her manicured fingernails stopped moving as the smile froze on her face.

“I can’t believe you’re saying this to me,” she said without moving her red lips. “I just can’t believe you’re saying this to me.”³

Resurrection is about more than pretty murals, icons to wear as jewelry, or ancient sites in historic Jerusalem. It is about a real human being, flesh and blood, filled with the Spirit of God, motivated by the relentless and reckless love of God, who was executed for the sake of justice in the world—he died for us. The power of his resurrection is the transforming power of “God being in Christ” transforming the world. In the wake of such an event, I borrow the words of Ann Weems: “Oh, angels, quit your lamenting! Oh, pilgrims...rise up and take your hearts and run! ...he who was no more is forevermore.” AMEN.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World* (New York, Harper Collins: 2009), 35-37.

Isaiah 25:6-9

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death for ever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

John 20:1-18

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 towards 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' 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 round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?" 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 hold on to 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.