

Preaching Graveside

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I

Dear Preacher:

I understand some of you approach this coming Easter Sunday with trepidation. This may not only be because some of you find Easter to be the most difficult preaching day of any year. Nor is it because Easter Sunday falls earlier in 2023, shortening the time between packing up Christmastide themes and readying for Lent and Holy Week. Rather some of you are already apprehensive about preaching Easter Sunday because we are not *back to normal*. And we are not sure that we will ever be back to normal.¹

We have participated in these discussions of normalcy. During the severest stretch of time of the COVID-19 pandemic, we were counseled on many fronts that we must adapt to a new normal: more pandemics on the horizon, derailed supply chains, economies unable to right themselves, and that all our losses and all our griefs would change us forever. Some of us had never been through times quite as trying as those intense pandemic months (that stretched to years), and we were discovering that as individuals, we would never be the same. We coped differently with these stressors and traumas.

Then came the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, galvanizing millions. Many of us whites became aware, as if for a first time, that BIPOC identified-persons live with the constant simmering threat of violence that erupts (at the most benign and mundane of daily activities like changing driving lanes) because of racially motivated violence against them. The names we read and heard like those of Trayvon Martin, Breonna Taylor, and Philando Castile now cease being categorized as isolated deaths but are revealed to be the violent warp and weft of the whole racially woven cloth of our nation.²

The vast and deep political wound of the nation finally gaped open, erupting with vitriolic speech and actions poured as into the wound like salt. Armed persons in brash and freakish dress assembled, and so many of these rioters, adapting tactical “stack” formation, stormed the capital building on January 6, 2021. We must add to this the ever-lengthening list of mass shootings: in a grocery store, a movie theatre, and elementary schools. Mourning the death of one is too many, but the death of the littlest ones....

The *new normal* includes these collective traumas and more. This remembering is what those of us in ministry touch on again and again, naming these truths for ourselves for purposes of pastoral care and as a reality check. Is it all true? Have we truly

had to endure all this? Yes, the pandemic fractured local, national, and international governance. Simmering anger and fear spilled out in general public incivility and on social media. Heightened anxiety and desperation make for wakeful nights and increased crime as we gazed at new wars that continue old wars, identifiable nuclear threats, schisms in churches, a volatile marketplace, increased costs of living, and threaded through it all, the vitriol and brutality of racism. As I write, 2022 draws to its close, and more than ever these recent years feel like a bad dream, a nightmare, another twelve months of terrors to keep at bay. More than ever pastors are working in triage manner, attending to the most dire situations without time to attend to all the rest. As a result, pastors focus on what needs to happen at a local level.³ Mantra-like, we say to one another the poetry of William Yeats:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.⁴

The centre cannot hold. The centre is not holding.

II

In the midst of the pandemic, the word *liminality* found prominence. “Some are using the word *liminal* to describe our time: the unrest, the instability, the very blurring of much that seemed normal for commerce and life.”⁵ *Liminal* captured the sense of being in the midst of great flux without a way forward. “Liminality, used this way, focuses on describing the ‘betwixt and between’ as not normal. . . as a time of chaos.”⁶ The word named our reality: the center was not holding; everything was unstable.

But *liminal* means more than chaos. Originally it described a place and time of transformation that involved both an undoing of what came before and an intentional re-forming toward something new. The ethnographer Arnold van Gennep gave the world this word, and he meant it to describe the middle of three stages in a rite of passage.⁷

The liminal state, in its classical anthropological usage as referring to life-crisis ritual passages, for example from boyhood to manhood, is always clearly defined both temporally and spatially: there is a way into liminality and a way out of it. Members of the society are themselves aware of the liminal state: they know that they will leave it sooner or later, and they have masters of ceremony to guide them through the rituals.⁸

During the pandemic, some people found affinity with the concept of liminality because it captured the pandemic sense of being adrift, of unending unknowing, and world-weariness (*ennui*). According to Bjorn Thomassen,

Compared to liminality in ritual passages, two evident differences appear when the concept is applied to large-scale situations of wholesale collapse: (1) the future is inherently unknown (as opposed to the initiand whose personal liminality is still framed by the continued existence of his home society, awaiting his re-integration); and (2) there are no real masters of ceremony, since nobody has gone through the liminal period before.⁹

These comments offer critical insights for the church and our leadership: the pandemic and the societal traumas we must navigate (which are chronic) are instances of *liminality-as-inherent unknowing*.¹⁰ The *#PandemicPastoring* report refers to the work of educational theorist Deborah Kerdeman, who speaks of pastors and lay leaders being “pulled up short” since we’d never been through times like this and didn’t know what to do.¹¹ All of this is true.

And yet the original meaning of the word is vital. Liminality names a time and place of transformation. Elsewhere I have written about our baptismal liminality, that Christians have a particular connection with liminality as we live out our baptisms our whole life long, growing in Christ.¹² The punctiliar moment of baptism initiates us into a particular liminal mode of existence: “of that baptismal death and that baptismal mode of becoming.”¹³ Whereas some traditions speak of growing in Christ as holiness or *theosis*, my tradition speaks of sanctification. This is “growing in the likeness and image of Christ.”¹⁴ *Baptismal liminality* is the journey or process of Christomorphic growth of each Christian’s life until our death in Christ and it is a mark of our corporate identity in Christ for the life of the world. David Willis says, “Thus human beings become new beings, are continually in the process of becoming new beings, as they are called out of their propensity to chaos and nothingness and given a new identity in God’s reconciling purposes.”¹⁵

A crucial and central aspect of liminality, when used this way, includes the understanding that liminal passage is *not* a place or time one entered into alone. There was *always* a trusted guide who knows both *the way in and the way out*. Pastors are exactly those trusted guides. The pastor/preacher, as one who is also becoming-in-Christ, is the trusted guide. The pastor/preacher not only accompanies us in our liminality (as a fellow human) but is one whose *work it is* to point the way forward.

Dear Preacher: we need this guidance.

III

How, then, to preach this year for Easter Sunday? Given all the traumas, the experiences of inherent instability, *what* should be preached this year for Easter Sunday? Of course preachers reading this essay represent distinctive ecclesial commitments

and live out a variety of preaching traditions. That said, one image repeatedly comes to mind when I think about preaching on Easter Sunday in such upended times.

What I see in my mind's eye is the preacher, the minister, standing graveside and leading that final part of a funeral service, proclaiming resurrection. I am invoking a pastoral memory. In my mind's eye, I see myself standing at the head of a freshly dug grave, having arrived from the funeral (whether funeral home or church). The body has been processed to the grave. Now we have arrived at the place of burial, the place of committal.¹⁶

This is a poignant moment among all the stations of the funeral. Now the casket is closed, the cemetery grounds' keepers linger on the outskirts of the circle of mourners waiting to begin their work lowering the casket and filling the space with soil, nestling the deceased into the tomb of the earth. The mourners may add dirt too after the minister casts dirt on the casket at the words "earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust," evoking Genesis 2:7.

The graveside service is the rite of burial and therefore the rite of our final goodbye in the presence of the body of the deceased. The finality of their death is before us, and the finality of our own death is before us.

It is to this fraught moment, at this final gathering, just before the body will be lowered into the womb of the earth, that the minister declares the scriptural witness that is a part of so many church traditions and has been declared over so many graves for so many centuries: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live . . ." (John 11:25).

At that moment we declare the core essence of what the church has to say: resurrection in the face of death. The words in my pastor's funeral service book are not "it was God's will" or "they are better off now" or "death is a natural part of life" or "let us celebrate this person's life," but instead starkly, plainly, clearly "I am the resurrection and the life."

It seems to me that this astounding moment is just what pastors turn to and draw on when preparing to preach for Easter Sunday. In this year of our Lord 2023, it is time to honestly acknowledge that *we are preaching a graveside service on Easter Sunday*.

To think about preaching graveside on Easter is not a new image. Preachers often gesture to the grave on Easter Sunday. But we refer to the empty grave, the tomb that no longer contains Christ Jesus. The grave of Easter morning is vacated space, an empty tomb signifying victory.

This is not what I mean by graveside preaching. I mean instead what ministers have done century after century, in every corner of the globe, no matter the season, and no matter the cause of death. We stand graveside with the deceased before us while proclaiming the foolishness of faith: "I am the resurrection and the Life," audaciously, starkly, boldly proclaiming resurrection in the presence of death.

What is distinctive about this image for Easter Sunday preaching? It does not deny death or the power of death's sting. It does not aim to make people feel happy. It is not replete with heart-warming stories of good outcomes. It does not tell people

they ought to feel glad. It does not pretend like our life of sufferings and struggles are non-existent. It does not erase pain, indignities, violence, or oppression. It acknowledges with Martha at Lazarus's grave that death "stinks" and that this death is pervasive, an ever-present rot in the world (John 11:39).

My tradition accepts the creation of the world by God as original blessedness—the created natural world and humans dwelling together, all things in harmony. And yet forsaking God and forsaking God's ways not only defames humans but the natural order as well. Another way to say this is that God did not create a sacred sphere and a profane sphere, e.g. church versus world, but all was created and called good (Gen. 1). All was sacred. And we profaned it. All was good. And we profaned it. All was harmonious. And we profaned it. All was in balance. And we profaned it. "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23).

I do not mean that our Easter sermons are a litany of the decay of the world and of the life that God has given. I do mean that hearers of the word recognize their reality and are not asked to pretend that their lives are perfect, content, void of difficulties, but instead that the decay of things around us and the tombs of our pains and struggles and sufferings are exactly the tombs addressed by the preacher's pronouncement of Good News. These things do not have the last word. These things will not have the last word. Christ came among us to restore the world and raise us to life abundant now. Even now the power of resurrection is unleashed in the world, and the Spirit of the Risen Christ is making all things new. Not new things, but all things new. In a pastoral sermon, St. Gregory the Theologian says,

Yesterday I was crucified with Christ; today I am glorified with Him. Yesterday I died with Him; today I am given life with Him. Yesterday I was buried with Him; today I rise again with Him... Let us make recognition of our own dignity. And let us give honor to Him in whose likeness we are made.¹⁷

Easter proclamation is standing in the presence of death and decay and proclaiming resurrection.

This is the good news that caused followers of Christ in the early centuries to risk persecution and gather together: "Christians meet because of the resurrection of Christ, around the resurrection of Christ."¹⁸ This weekly keeping of the day of resurrection is attested to in scripture and in the practice of early Christians.¹⁹ The followers of Jesus gathered every Sunday to hold fast this good and life-changing news: that Jesus of Nazareth was not dead but risen as he promised, all-powerful in the face of death. Preaching repeatedly reorients us again and again to this reality, to this world-view.

Of course there is much to say about this one word, *resurrection*, lest it be repeated like a cliché. It is not a simple word; it contains, rather, many layers of meaning. Recall the songs and hymns that we sing at Easter and notice how a variety of phrases and images are needed to articulate the cosmic range of good news contained in that one word. We need more than one word or one image to say what resurrection means.

In my spouse's church tradition, an Orthodox church, one particular song summarily announces the news of resurrection: "Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and on those in the tomb bestowing life." This is the wording of their paschal *troparion*, one of the thematic songs for Pascha/Easter.²⁰ It succinctly says several things at once: Death is not what God wills for us. Trampling down death by death means that God dies in order to kill off the power of death once and for all. God enters inside the very power of death and so destroys its power. Death in God now becomes a passage to life (Romans 6). God's life-giving power extends to those in the tombs; we are all caught up in this life-bestowing act of the risen Christ. God is about new life, and this new life is for us all now.

The Eastern Church's paschal *troparion* speaks directly of death and of the dead. The song does not ignore suffering and death, it does not only speak of joy and triumph, but it pointedly connects these realities. Resurrection always speaks *to* the tomb-like realities of suffering, of death, of sin because the resurrection is inseparably related to the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. Resurrection cannot mean joy, triumph, and release from suffering as if all sorrow and grief is forgotten or erased. To speak (or sing) of the resurrection of Christ always includes his passion and death as he is raised *from* death (meaning in relation to it) and is raised *in spite of* suffering and death.

Scripture tells us that his risen form included the very wounds of his suffering and dying. This is to say that the wounds, which visually and tactilely mark suffering and death, remain present in his resurrected body (John 20:20). The deep and abiding juxtaposition of the one raised from death still bearing the wounds of death confirms that his resurrection continues to hold our woundedness, our sufferings, and our death. It does not pretend they did not happen. In his resurrection Christ is still closer to our sufferings and death than our own breath. There is no place that we can go where he has not been, even suffering and the grave. The crucified-risen One holds the losses and traumas and grief of our lives and, as his body (i.e., the church as the body of Christ), we each hold the wounds of one another and of the world,²¹ writes Gail Ramshaw. And in all of this, we trust God to be the one who makes all things new (Rev. 21:5).

Dear Preacher: each week you guide us through actions of worship that are microcosms of our baptismal liminality, turning us from our own tombs of death and decay and turning to who we are as restored beings in Christ for the life of the world. As Gordon Lathrop says, "The wiping away of tears has begun in the resurrection, and that beginning is washed over us in baptism. God's grace for the world is washed over us, and we are made a witness of the coming."²²

- You lead us in our baptismal growth each week as we confess our sin and accept the truth of the assurance of pardon.
- You lead us to renounce the powers of death and decay that fragment,

disintegrate, and estrange our life together in God.

- You lead us to exercise our baptismal identity as we pray intercessions and act for others and the life of the world.
- You lead us to be nourished at the Lord's table so that we can be bread and cup for the needy world.
- You lead us as ones charged to live as salt and light.

Dear Preacher: you are our trusted guide as we grow in the likeness and image of Christ. You continually show us that weighed down though we are, there is a way forward, which is to trust our true life in the One who is The Way. You boldly proclaim resurrection and new life so that our eyes may focus on that horizon, and we live it here and now. You feed us with this good news each week. You help us see how weekly worship actions are intense liminal moments when we turn from the ways of death and decay in the world and turn to who we are as restored beings in Christ for the life of the world. Your preaching is world making, a counter-proposal to all evidence at hand. Dear Preacher: be of good courage because you are given power to stand graveside, proclaim resurrection, and call us forth from our tombs for the life of the world.

Notes

1 Eileen Campbell-Reed, "Ministry is taking on shape and form not previously inhabited," #Pandemic Pastoring: A New Report, <https://eileencampbellreed.org/pandemicpastoring-report-download-2022/>.

2 <https://sayevery.name/say-their-names-list>.

3 See #Pandemic Pastoring.

4 William Butler Yeats, "TheSecondComing,"

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43290/the-second-coming>.

5 Jennifer L. Lord, "Our Baptismal Liminality: The Church's Betwixt and Between," *Re Shaping the Liturgical Tradition Ecumenical and Reformed*, ed. Jonathan Hehn and Martha Moore-Keish (Franklinville, NJ: Order of Saint Luke Publications, 2021), 225. See also Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going: Leading in a Liminal Season* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Pub. Group, Inc., 2019).

6 Lord, "Our Baptismal Liminality," 226.

7 He introduced the concept and coined the word *liminality* in his 1909 publication *Les Rites de Passage*. Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage: A Classical Study of Cultural Celebrations* (Chicago IL: Chicago University Press, 1960 [1909]). Through his study of indigenous rites he noticed a common three-fold pattern: rites of separation (the pre-liminal), transitional rites (the liminal), and rites of incorporation (the post-liminal rites).

8 Bjørn Thomassen, *Liminality and the Modern: Living Through the In-Between* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2014), 210. Liminality is from *limen* (Lt., threshold). It is easy to see why the word threshold is substituted for liminal; we speak of being on the threshold of a new thing or a new way. A threshold, like a doorway, is transitional space. However we tend to pass through thresholds quickly. In these rites of passage the liminal rites required time and a separate space.

9 Thomassen, 210.

10 This version of a liminal state is pervasive and has been called permanent liminality. Permanent liminality includes the recognition that sometimes liminality is coerced. See "Our Baptismal Liminality," 238–242.

11 See #Pandemic Pastoring.

12 Lord, "Our Baptismal Liminality," 232.

13 Gordon W. Lathrop, *The Pastor: A Spirituality* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2006), 117. See

Rom. 6:6; Gal. 2:20.

14 See 2 Cor. 3:18; Col. 3:9-10 (NRSV).

15 David Willis, "The Sacraments as Visible Word," *Theology Today* 37, no. 4, (January 1981): 455.

16 I am imagining an earth burial rather than burial at sea, for instance.

17 "The Paschal Sermon by St. Gregory the Theologian," <https://www.goarch.org/-/paschal-sermon-of-st-gregory-the-theologian#:~:text=Let%20us%20give%20all%2C%20offer,put%20to%20death%20with%20Him>.

18 Many are familiar with the saying "Easter is a big Sunday" or "every Sunday is a little Easter." Lathrop helps us understand the relationship between the weekly and the annual: "What the eighth-day meeting is to the seven days, the Easter festival is to the year." Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 39 and 68.

19 See Justo L. González, *A Brief History of Sunday* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2017).

20 Pascha is the term many Christians around the world use instead of Easter. Pascha derives from *pesach*, the Hebrew word for Passover, hearkening to Paul's words in Romans 6. Using Pascha emphasizes Jesus' passing over from death to life and our own share in that passing. The saving mystery of Christ is our pasch, our passover, our being carried in Christ in his Passover from death to life.

21 See Gail Ramshaw, *Treasures Old and New* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 77.

22 Gordon W. Lathrop, *Central Things: Worship in Word and Sacrament* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 62.