The Resurrection of Our Lord – Easter Sunrise

In the admittedly limited materials I have on hand today, Luther does not address a single sermon to the Easter texts which are here. He preached all the time, but apparently not at the sunrise service! Of course, that is a modern invention. He preaches multiple times on Mark 16, and on a variety of other texts. He seems to have preached Easter Day, that evening, Easter Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, but not on these texts. At least I have to say that this is true of the texts that we are considering here.

So I am including here a reflection by Luther on the resurrection itself, a catechetical sermon which was preached on the night before Easter. (Did this man do anything other than preach?!)
This comes from his “house postils” a series of sermons he preached at home, often because he was ill, as he mentions below. Unable often to get to the church to preach in the morning, he would then preach to the large group of students and others who lived in his home. Much more intimate and sometimes more like a Bible study than a sermon, these house postils were written down and published by some of those who heard.

Luther

1. On Easter we celebrate the great, comforting article of our Christian faith: the descent into hell and the joyful resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. This festival was instituted in order that this article might be preached, inculcated, be truly comprehended, and retained by the people. For this reason we now want to devote our attention to this article and discuss it. We owe it to our God to praise and honor him, and to preach his Word as long as we live.

2. We confess it in the Creed, the holy Gospels teach and testify to it, and it is customary to preach about it during this season, that our Lord Jesus Christ died and was buried, descended into hell, and on the third day rose again from the dead. I would like now to speak on that theme. I have not been well and do not know how long I shall live; fanatical spirits are everywhere, and because that is so, I want to leave my teaching and confession behind for pious hearts that they might know my thoughts on this article.

5. It is true you may talk about the Lord’s descent into hell in two ways. First, plainly and siply, by means of childish words and pictures, which may also be the best and safest, as stated. Second, it may be discussed point for point, just as the account gives it, that Christ descended into hell, while his body lay there in the grave until the third day.

7. Now,...I cannot fathom or grasp how Christ descended into hell. Christian faith confesses that he descended into hell, and Holy Scripture established this article as true in very explicit words, “Thou will not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thin Holy One to see corruption” (Ps. 16:10). And Ephesians 4:9: “Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth?” But how it all took place, that you will not fathom; and even though you were ten times wiser than Solomon, you still would not get it. Therefore, my sincere advice is, stick to the simple words and childish pictures and do not let the astute spirits, who want to cogitate deeply, without sketches and apprehend it with their keen intellects, trouble you.
19. That is the first part of this sermon, concerning the article that Christ descended into hell. That is, that he has overcome the devil and smashed hell, so that no Christian need henceforth fear and be terrified of the devil. This is he did with the banner, that is, with the heel whereby he crushed the serpent’s head...

20. The world with all its powers was unable to deliver anyone from the devil’s bonds or take away the agony and power of hell for a single sin, even though all the saints were to go to hell for one man’s sins. Indeed all of them together, as many as have ever lived on earth, would have to stay in hell eternally, if the Son of God had not gone there personally and overthrown it and gained the victory by his divine power.

21. The second part of our sermon deals with the fact that our Lord Jesus Christ rose from the dead on the third day. For this a strong, firm faith is required, making this article strong, firm and salutary. The words, Christ is risen from the dead, we should blazon and inscribe with letters so large that just one letter would be as large as a steeple, yes, as heaven and earth, so that we would see and hear, know and think of, nothing but this article.¹

23. If now we believe this, we can live and die in peace, for Christ did not overcome death and rise from the dead only for his own person; but we must perceive that it ties us mutually together with Christ so that we also are included in the resurrection, and on account of and through it we also must rise and live with him eternally; also that our resurrection and life in Christ have already begun and are as sure as if they had already happened, save that they still lie hidden and are not manifest. So intently should we look upon this article that by comparison, all other considerations are as nothing, as if there was nothing else for us anywhere, in heaven or earth. When you see a Christian dying and being buried, and nothing but a dead corpse lying there, and nothing else to see and hear but grave, funeral chants, words of death, yes, utter death itself, you should still put the picture of death out of sight and beneath the surface, by faith, a grave and a dead corpse, but pure life and a beautiful, cheerful garden and paradise, in which there are no dead people but now, living, happy human beings.

24. For because it is true that Christ rose from the dead, we already possess the best part of the resurrection, so that the bodily resurrection of the flesh from the grave (which is still in the future) is really secondary by comparison. For what are we and the whole world compared to Christ, our Head? ... Therefore, because we already possess better than half of our resurrection, since head and heart are already in heaven, only the least still needs to be done, that our body be buried in the ground so that it also may be renewed. For where the head is, there also the body must be presented, as we see in the case of all animals as they are born into this life.

25. Moreover, a second half has also occurred, yes, far more than half: namely, that already through baptism we have faith spiritually risen from the dead, that is, according to the best part in us; and so not only bodily has the best part of it occurred, that from the grave our Head

¹ This is somewhat ironic considering he just preached 20 paragraphs on the article which deals with Christ’s descent into hell. But he seems to see these as the same article.
ascended into heaven but also spiritually our soul possesses its portion and is with Christ in heaven, and only the husks and shells or fragments remain here below; but for the sake of the main part, they must also journey there. For the husk and shell must still rise, but the chief part and the kernel has already risen.

28. No one can deny that a dead human corpse is a miserable thing. But if it were a matter for human reason to adjudicate, then I could speak just as derisively as you do. People regard reason’s judgment as very keen. But if I wished to judge according to what I see, I would be willing to bet that in any contest of intellects, I could make it much worse and more miserable than you could.

29. But I have a greater insight than what the eyes behold and senses feel, something which faith teaches me. For there stands the text, which reads: He is risen; he did not remain lying in the grave and in the ground but rose from the dead; and not for his own sake but for our sake, so that his resurrection is ours, and we also all rise in him and not remain in the grave and death, but in our body celebrate with him an eternal Easter.

30. Look what the farmer does when he sows seed in the field and tosses it into the ground so that it must decay and rot; it appears as if it is lost altogether. Yet he shows no concern, as if it had all been in vain. Yes, he forgets where the seed is. What is happening to it does not worry him in the least, whether the worms will devour it or otherwise destruct. (sic) He just leaves the scene with only thoughts like this, that around the time of Easter or Pentecost, beautiful stalks will come forth, bearing many more ears and kernels than the seeds he has sown. If a young farmer, who had never before observed seeds grow, were to see that, he would surely say, O father, what are doing? How did you hit upon the follow sowing seed into the ground? There it is lost, it will decay, there it can benefit no one. Let it remain on the floor, so that we can bake bread from it…But the father says, Dear boy, just shut your eyes and let me do the sowing; I’m not intending it to be lost. God speaks the same way: My dear fellow, let me deal with my Christians and don’t be bothered about whether they will be beheaded, burned to death, and killed; let me take care of this.

33. If you look at the body degenerating, decaying, and being devoured by snakes and worms, you are lost. But if you look to God’s Word and continue faith, you are buoyed up. For as God’s work year for year and experience also, attest, the seed which the farmer casts into the ground, letting it decay and in the summer come out of the ground, in another form and with much fruit, so our faith and Holy Scripture attest that our bodies, which God has buried during the winter and lets decay, at his time, on Judgment Day, will again rise much more beautifully than the sun.

35. Consider the story about St. Agatha: As she was led away to prison and to death, she said, I am going to dance; and when she was martyred, she said, Behold, how deep is my hurt; they are piping me music that I might dance…
36. Let us also learn to imbed this article into our hearts and take comfort in it; then we can ward off the devil when he sharpens his spear to use against us and threatens us with death and hell; we can respond to him and say, Devil, don’t you know any better than to threaten with death? Holy on, I am not afraid of your threats; you are singing me a beautiful little song and persuading me to dance; my grave is a pretty garden. For since Christ, my Head, on whom everything depends, has risen, lives, and is seated in heaven, and I am baptized in him, I thus am more than halfway there already, and but little remains for me to do but completely to remove the old skin, so that it too might again be renewed. For since the inheritance is already wholly mine, the husks and the shells must then surely follow as well.


Collect of the Day

Almighty God the Father, through Your only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, You have overcome death and opened the gate of everlasting life to us. Grant we, who celebrate with joy the day of our Lord’s resurrection, may be raised from the death of sin by Your life-giving Spirit; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

The first collect starts us off with God’s power. That is a good thing to start with when you are dealing with terrible and implacable foes whom you cannot conquer. And foes get no more dreadful and implacable than death. I might deceive myself into thinking that I can amend my sinful life and be a better person, but death has a cruel way of mocking my delusions of immortality. The cemetery I drive by on the way to work, the anniversary of a loved one’s death, the disturbing pain that has shown up in my neck or my back, all remind me that I am dust and to dust I shall return. I can mask the pain with the right pills, but I cannot make the cemeteries and the sadness go away. This problem will simply take larger help than I can provide myself. I need God.

He has answered that need. Jesus has come. The reference to opening the gate of everlasting life seems to be an allusion to the angel who was set at the gate of Eden with a flaming sword to keep Adam and Eve out. The gate, once barred, has been opened.

We pray that this joyful celebration would also transforming experience for the living of life. The same God who raised Jesus and will raise us from our graves also is called upon to raise us from another death, the death of sin, by the same life-giving Spirit.

Does that distract from the day? It might. I really like to keep things simple. Easter always seems to me a good time to talk about the conquering of one death, the big one, the bad one, the one that scares us, if you get right down to it, scares us to death. We will get the chance to preach the morality and the repentance later.

Or
O God, for our redemption You gave Your only-begotten Son to death on the cross and by His
glorious resurrection delivered us from the power of the enemy. Grant that all our sin may be
drowned through daily repentance and that day by day we may arise to live before You in
righteousness and purity forever; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you
and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

This collect uses the metaphor of redemption. In the ancient world bankruptcy often meant that
the person who could not pay bills was sold into slavery along with his family. A relative could
go to the slave market and purchase that loved one and set them free. That was redemption. It
meant a lot more to the folks of the first century than our usual use of the word “redemption”
today: coupons.

The price God paid to have us back as his children, was the price of his own Son, dead on a
cross, but also today raised to life. We are through this gift, delivered from the chains, the
power, the lordship of an ancient enemy, a cruel Scrooge who would have crushed and
consumed us.

Again, this prayer brings us to the new life which is lived every day in the resurrection. Both
collects bring us there. Perhaps it is time not to fight it, but I would like to just to preach the
resurrection today and not the moral resurrection.

Readings

Isaiah 25:6-9 I have given us the whole chapter today. The context is necessary to keep us from
triumphalism, but also to see that God simply means business when he says that he defeats our
enemies.

25 O LORD, you are my God;
I will exalt you; I will praise your name,
for you have done wonderful things,
plans formed of old, faithful and sure.

2 For you have made the city a heap,
the fortified city a ruin;
the foreigners' palace is a city no more;
it will never be rebuilt.

3 Therefore strong peoples will glorify you;
cities of ruthless nations will fear you.

4 For you have been a stronghold to the poor,
a stronghold to the needy in his distress,
a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat;
for the breath of the ruthless is like a storm against a wall,

5 You subdue the noise of the foreigners;
as heat by the shade of a cloud,
so the song of the ruthless is put down.

6 On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples
    a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine,
    of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.

7 And he will swallow up on this mountain
    the covering that is cast over all peoples,
    the veil that is spread over all nations.

8     He will swallow up death forever;
    and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces,
    and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth,
    for the LORD has spoken.

9 It will be said on that day,
    “Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us.
    This is the LORD; we have waited for him;
    let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”

10 For the hand of the LORD will rest on this mountain,
    and Moab shall be trampled down in his place,
    as straw is trampled down in a dunghill.

11 And he will spread out his hands in the midst of it
    as a swimmer spreads his hands out to swim,
    but the LORD will lay low his pompous pride together with the skill of his hands.

12 And the high fortifications of his walls he will bring down,
    lay low, and cast to the ground, to the dust.

There might be a great sermon in the “all’s” of this text. “all peoples” “all nations” “all the earth” and “all faces.” There is a marvelous universality to this text. But if you read a little further as we see in the subsequent verses we notice that Moab is not included. He is drowning in a cesspool and swimming for his life in excrement. (Not something I would suggest for an Easter reading!)

What does the preacher do with this? Does Isaiah contradict himself here? Is Moab excluded? Does God not love the Moabites? What if Moab repented? What is Moab in this text? Is he the impenitent or the unbelieving person who rejects Christ? Is this the check against the impulse to universalism? Yes, God loves all, but….? Do we really need to preach this? Do we simply lay out the objective and universal invitation which seems to be encapsulated in the earlier verses we read and just pass over verse 10 and following?

Or is Moab in fact a personification of my own sinful self, whom Luther says daily drowns in contrition and repentance? The alternate reading for the day has dead Egyptians and their equipment littering the shores of the Red Sea. God does save and destroy and sometimes in the
saving he is also destroying. It might be instructive to remember that Moab was a cousin of Israel.

Moab was a problem for the Israelites because they had tried to prevent the children of Israel from entering the Promised Land. Is Moab anything that would keep us from the Promised Land? Does this in fact demonstrate how much God dislikes those who would hinder anyone from entering the kingdom? Better a stone hung around the neck of someone who leads a little one to sin.

If you want to preach this potent text, you can sound smart courtesy of Ed St. John, whose family operates a winery in Sonoma County, CA. Here is a little wine chemistry from Ed: Tannin in red wine does interesting things in the saliva in your mouth. Your saliva interacts with the tannin and forms little strands and these strip away the coating from your tongue and the natural coating of your mouth. This leaves your tongue a little raw. The reason you want rich food with highly tannic red wines is that the fat in the good meal creates a new coating and make the taste. A young wine has more raw tannins; it really makes the mouth raw. The food which Isaiah describes above perfectly complements the wine: The marrow is rich, and the rich food fits that well aged wine.

This text is a familiar one at funerals; it is one of the few OT passages which actually mention the Resurrection. Here the metaphor is food, so the preacher will want to be thinking in terms of sacramental life. Heaven, the eschatological celebration is compared to a great feast with marvelous wine, lots of protein, rich food. All the stuff your cardiologist says to avoid except for that occasional glass of red wine.

But this is a metaphor, this is picture language. God is swallowing up death. The occasion for the party is more important than the menu items. God is swallowing up death forever, the universal covering, the sheet, the pall, which no one escapes. It is a veil that is spread over every single human being on the face of the earth. Death and Taxes are the unavoidable realities. The good news we have to preach today is that in heaven there will be neither, death nor taxes! You might want to save this for another week, since April 15 was just yesterday and your tax forms are due on Tuesday.

Does the Christian, the one who is in communication and contact with the eternal and deathless heaven, perhaps feel the pang of death more acutely? It is true that as Christians we are not grieving like other men who have no hope, but that does not mean we do not grieve, perhaps we grieve death’s horrors more sharply because we know it should not be. The pagan can only look at death and call it “natural.” We look at death and realize it for what it really is. Death is the fundamental contradiction of God’s will for this person’s life, and for my life. Too often the therapeutic “acceptance of death” has permeated our Christian witness. Death is not natural, and it should hurt. Too often we have thought that grief, the expression of profound emotion, is simply the sinful self seeking attention. But has not God given us those emotions and has not God himself in Christ expressed such emotions?

The Christian who grieves has something that the non-Christian mourner does not. We have more than the memory of our loved ones, we have hope, the joyful, solid, expectation that the one whose loss we grieve will be restored to our embrace again. We shall look in their eyes and
laugh, our tears will be dried. In this way our grief is not like the others who grieve, but we do
grieve.

Our hope lies in the promise which Isaiah makes for us here: The Lord will swallow up death
forever and wipe away all the tears. The shame and reproach of his people will be done. No
longer will we be the rebellious creatures, broken by a terrible fall from the pinnacle of creation
to its sullied cesspools. We will resume our created place, the place of honor and respect in the
kingdom of God, his servants, given to care for his garden.

On that last day will simply say, “This is God, we waited and that was a trust well placed. We
waited and he delivered.” We don’t have much choice about waiting. As I saw on a T-shirt at a
youth gathering once: It’s not that life is too short, it’s just that you’re dead so long! We wait,
perhaps oblivious to the passage of time, we wait, as Father Abraham has waited now for nearly
four thousand years. We wait. This is a waiting on a really long time scale. We could learn a few
things from the Jews who have made waiting a way of life. They are really good at it.

Sermon Idea: God has swallowed up death forever (OT - That the hearer would rejoice with all
humanity that God has conquered our implacable foe, death. We swallow Christ’s crucified
body, he who swallowed death, has in his own dying liberated us from that cruel bondage. We
are free!)

Hebrews loved a good pun, or even a bad one for that matter. They loved to play with words.
They would have delighted in the suggestion that dead was swallowed. You can see this in a
number of ways:

1. A funny pun, a joke for us today. The voracious monster has choked on its favorite meal.
   Death thought it had gobbled up another victim on Friday, and our enemy rejoiced.
2. But the entrée has in fact become the host. In swallowing Jesus on that cross, death
   literally bit off much more than it could chew. The dragon who thought to consume
   Christ has broken his teeth, unhinged his jaw. Jesus has smashed open that gate through
   which all must pass.
3. So today the feasting is on Jesus and we are the feasters, not death. We partake of a holy
   meal, a foretaste of feasting to come, with anticipatory joy.
4. In this Eucharistic meal we do something strange. Normally when we eat a something, it
   is dead and it had to die to become our meal. Jesus died to become this feast, but he is not
dead. This is strange and worthy of pondering. We bring the living, resurrected Christ
   into ourselves with this eating and drinking.

Working off the food metaphor, this sermon envisions a verbal play on the idea that God has
prepared a rich feast for us, but the feast is because God has eaten the gruesome repast of death
itself. Consuming something has a double meaning for us. On one hand we nurture our bodies
and celebrate with food. God has prepared this feast for us. But on the other hand, consuming
something also involves its destruction. We consume the feast and rejoice. God has swallowed
up death, consumed it, and thereby destroyed it. This is why it is so important that Jesus be the
one who hangs on that cross, the second Person of the Trinity, God himself. His is the only death where by death can be destroyed. Literally, death bit off more than it can chew, choked on him, and in being devoured by death, he destroyed the one who devoured him. Jesus swallowed it up. The victim has become the priest, the entrée the host. We are idlers in this feasting. We who once were little more than cattle and sheep for the great, insatiable appetite of death now are invited to a feast of another sort, the celebratory feasting of God’s redeemed, resurrected people. Hallelujah! And oddly, our feasting is not on some dead thing but on the very living Christ.

The preacher has a question to ask himself. Where does this sermon become something more than interesting or a really fun intellectual puzzle? Where does this death swallowed up become real? The preacher will want to stand with the people by a grave today. This sermon needs to speak to the weeping widow and the tearful friend who has tasted the bitterness of death. We might point to the Egyptian Christian martyrs in Libya who stared their persecutors in the face and did not flinch. But more than heroic individuals from afar, we also might point to members of our own parish who have faced death with courage and bravery rooted in the promise which God has made to all of us. Our tombstones don’t have the last word. Jesus does, and that is a word of life!

Or Exodus 14:10-15:1

10 When Pharaoh drew near, the people of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them, and they feared greatly. And the people of Israel cried out to the LORD. 11 They said to Moses, “Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt? 12 Is not this what we said to you in Egypt: ‘Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.” 13 And Moses said to the people, “Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. 14 The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent.”

15 The LORD said to Moses, “Why do you cry to me? Tell the people of Israel to go forward. 16 Lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the people of Israel may go through the sea on dry ground. 17 And I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they shall go in after them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, his chariots, and his horsemen. 18 And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I have gotten glory over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen.”

19 Then the angel of God who was going before the host of Israel moved and went behind them, and the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them, 20 coming between the host of Egypt and the host of Israel. And there was the cloud and the darkness. And it lit up the night without one coming near the other all night.

21 Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. 22 And the people of
Israel went into the midst of the sea on dry ground, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left. The Egyptians pursued and went in after them into the midst of the sea, all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots, and his horsemen. And in the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and of cloud looked down on the Egyptian forces and threw the Egyptian forces into a panic, clogging their chariot wheels so that they drove heavily. And the Egyptians said, “Let us flee from before Israel, for the LORD fights for them against the Egyptians.”

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand over the sea, that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots, and upon their horsemen.” So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the sea returned to its normal course when the morning appeared. And as the Egyptians fled into it, the LORD threw the Egyptians into the midst of the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the horsemen; of all the host of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea, not one of them remained. But the people of Israel walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left.

Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great power that the LORD used against the Egyptians, so the people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.

Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the LORD, saying,

“I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.

This is probably the best reading for this day. Jesus himself couches his passion, death, and resurrection as an event which was connected to the Exodus. That is what the disciples were observing in that upper room, the Passover Seder, or at least part of it. John suggests that the chronology is a little different, but we will leave that be. Jesus clearly wants to connect his passion to the liberation of the Hebrews from Egyptian bondage.

If you celebrated the Easter Vigil, you read this text the night before. But not many ore observing vigils these days so it has found a place here in the 1 year series. Of course, Luther in his day had no OT readings on Sunday. They read those during the week.

The people are terrified, as well they have reason to be. The Egyptian army is bearing down on them and they have no ability to defend themselves. But there is a pillar of fire and cloud handy. Their faith is weak and they stumble. Here is a great thing for the preacher to say. God does not wait for our faith to get itself in order before he effects a rescue. He just does it.

That said, however, his rescue does demand faith. When walls of water on either side of you as you are walking, being held back by the wind which God has caused to blow. You have to trust him to set foot on that sea floor. They do. In this they triumph. But of course, it is God who triumphs on that day.
The church has historically seen this event as a prophecy of what Christ does for us. As Paul says, they were all baptized into the cloud and the sea (I Cor. 10:1-4). These events are not accidents of history but are deliberately planned and executed for our learning. This is our story. We were in bondage, we were enslaved, even dead in our sins (Eph. 2:1-10) and Christ has rescued us. He has led us through water (Baptism) and fed us along the way (Eucharist) and brought us to a Promised Land, a Canaan flowing with milk and honey. The preacher who is attracted to this text will want to preach baptism.

He also will want to use the second option for his psalm this day which is the song which the Israelites sang on the banks of the Red Sea as they saw the Egyptian army destroyed.

Sermon Idea: We are an Easter People! (That the Holy Spirit would strengthen in some, and impart to others, the identity that we are the people of Easter, defined by this event.)

The preacher of this sermon will likely want to have in mind that the word for Easter in most languages is actually Passover. That word has perhaps a little more to say to us than Easter, which is a word without meaning outside of this day. We are the people who have passed over from death to life, from sin to righteousness, from slavery to the real freedom in Christ.

Some of our folks probably feel like they have been reduced, the Church is in trouble. When we wrote these words we thought of the Native American who had been reduced to living on a reservation after roaming freely. Many feel like we are becoming an enclave church, a remnant which is in hiding. To raise your head and confess your Lord is a dangerous thing sometimes. The former Archbishop of Chicago, Cardinal Francis George said that he would die his bed, his successor would die in prison, his successor would die as a martyr in the public square, and his successor will pick up the shards of a broken world and start the rebuild society as the church has always done.

Easter is a day when we proclaim a completely contrary vision. Like the children of Israel who stood there under Moses staff as the waters closed back over the army of Pharaoh, we stand today and look back at the enemy vanquished and forward to the freedom that lies before. As one Jewish guy said to me, “Every Jewish holiday boils down to this: They tried to kill us, we got away, let’s eat.” Today we are a people defined by our escape, our escape from sin, death, and devil, the forces of this world which would do us terrible harm, even devour us.

This imparts an intense joy. We are free and the calluses from shackles can still be felt on our wrists and ankles. We remember those bonds and we marvel at the lightness of hands which work freely instead of under the lash of obligation and the tyranny of earning. Christ has taken all that to a grave, nailed our sins to a cross, and now they are buried there, never to rise again. We are free.

But Easter people are not just free from, but they are also free to something. God has risen from the dead so he may care for us. He has called us to life from the waters of Baptism so we may live in the newness of life. (Romans 6) That is not some shapeless joy, but a real life lived and a
real joy embodied in the relationships which we have. We are an Easter people, a people whom the joy of Christ has possessed and it shows. Here it would be good for the preacher to have some examples from his parish of that joy. The lately departed saint who is lovingly remembered, the joy of a fundraiser recently held which was really fun even though you were extracting money from people’s wallets. The joy of a work party which cleaned up the property and was a great time.

The Christian today finds joy not in the standing we have in the world. The world will not love what we say. As John says, they have not understood us because they do not understand him. When we lose the need for that approval of the world, the enclave is blown open. Jesus calls us to live as he lived in this world, rubbing elbows and shoulders with the sinners, being a beacon of light, laughing in the midst of this world’s pain because he knows the love of the Father and the Father knows us.

Psalm 16

1 Preserve me, O God, for in you I take refuge.
   2 I say to the LORD, “You are my Lord;
      I have no good apart from you.”
   3 As for the saints in the land, they are the excellent ones,
      in whom is all my delight.
   4 The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply;
      their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out
      or take their names on my lips.
   5 The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup;
      you hold my lot.
   6 The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
      indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.
   7 I bless the LORD who gives me counsel;
      in the night also my heart instructs me.
   8 I have set the LORD always before me;
      because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken.
   9 Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices;
      my flesh also dwells secure.
   10 For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol,
      or let your holy one see corruption.
   11 You make known to me the path of life;
      in your presence there is fullness of joy;
      at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.
Or Exodus 15:1b-18 The Song of Moses and the People of Israel

Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the LORD, saying,

“I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;
   the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.

2 The LORD is my strength and my song,
   and he has become my salvation;
this is my God, and I will praise him,
   my father's God, and I will exalt him.

3 The LORD is a man of war;
   the LORD is his name.

4 “Pharaoh's chariots and his host he cast into the sea,
   and his chosen officers were sunk in the Red Sea.

5 The floods covered them;
   they went down into the depths like a stone.

6 Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power,
   your right hand, O LORD, shatters the enemy.

7 In the greatness of your majesty you overthrow your adversaries;
   you send out your fury; it consumes them like stubble.

8 At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up;
   the floods stood up in a heap;
   the deeps congealed in the heart of the sea.

9 The enemy said, ‘I will pursue, I will overtake,
   I will divide the spoil, my desire shall have its fill of them.
   I will draw my sword; my hand shall destroy them.’

10 You blew with your wind; the sea covered them;
   they sank like lead in the mighty waters.

11 “Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods?
   Who is like you, majestic in holiness,
   awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?

12 You stretched out your right hand;
   the earth swallowed them.

13 “You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed;
   you have guided them by your strength to your holy abode.

14 The peoples have heard; they tremble;
   pangs have seized the inhabitants of Philistia.

15 Now are the chiefs of Edom dismayed;
   trembling seizes the leaders of Moab;
all the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away.

16 Terror and dread fall upon them;
because of the greatness of your arm, they are still as a stone,
till your people, O LORD, pass by,
till the people pass by whom you have purchased.

17 You will bring them in and plant them on your own mountain,
the place, O LORD, which you have made for your abode,
the sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands have established.

18 The LORD will reign forever and ever.”

I Corinthians 15:1-11

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. 6 Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. 8 Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. 9 For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. 11 Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

(This is the reading for Easter in Series B. Here are the notes from the last time we treated this text with some light editing.)

Paul notes that he was the most unlikely candidate to be an apostle. But God’s promise is not in vain (vs 10) By the Grace of God he was what he was – an apostle. By the same grace of God we are what we are – God’s resurrected and eternally living child. We are his precious and dear children. We are what we are!

Paul also says, “According to the scriptures...” We wondered which scriptures spoke of Jesus death and resurrection? As we talked about this in the past we have looked at Genesis 22, the binding of Isaac, but also Judges 11, the vow and sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter. Jonah is an OT story that prefigures the death and resurrection of Jesus. Of course Isaiah 53 and other places in the prophets. Psalm 118, 22, et. al.

The letter to the Corinthians is a grab bag of problems that might make our parish look positively healthy. The Corinthians are really messed up and Paul seems to see their mis-belief in the resurrection as the key to all their problems. The preacher may well want to remember
that the letter to the Corinthians was written before the Gospels. Here we have an account of the
Christian story which likely predates any of the written accounts we have in the Gospels. .

Paul urges them to remember these things first. This is a reminder, Paul has preached all this
stuff before, but they need to be called back to that preached message. This message is the heart
and the core of salvation itself. Of first importance is the bare Gospel story. Christ died for us
and Christ was buried and raised in accordance with the Scriptures. This is the heart of the
Gospel story, rooted in an historical fact attested to by numerous witnesses. Cephas (that is
Peter), and the twelve all saw him and to a man will be willing to die a martyr’s death rather
than traduce that confession. He also appeared to up to 500 folks at once; although, Luke does
not record that story for us in Acts but this is not the only place where we get an inkling that
there were many more resurrection appearances. At Paul’s writing, it appears that there are a
number of witnesses who are still accessible, one could go and talk to them, although some have
died. Then he appeared to James, presumably the James who at the writing of this letter had
been the head of the congregation in Jerusalem, author of the letter by that name in Scripture,
and the brother of Jesus but recently martyred by a mob in Jerusalem. Then to the other
apostles, which tells us that there were more apostles than the twelve. Last of all, he appeared to
Paul, like one untimely born, a strange thing, out of place. Of course this is the appearance we
know perhaps better than any other, this is the road to Damascus. From the dating of Paul’s
letters and the mention of this event in Galatians 1 and 2 we can pretty well concur that the
Damascus road event took place within five years of Pentecost.

Paul is the least of the Apostles, but he is still an apostle. He sees his whole ministry as a great
gift from God, spurring him on to work harder than any of them. But it does not matter who
preached, the message is the same, they believed, and through that faith they are saved.

The preacher today will want to focus on the first part of this pericope, it seems to me. The
proclamation of the resurrection which we celebrate today is the center and the heart and core
of our faith. This is what we have come to celebrate, this is the center of Christianity. Jesus has
risen from the dead. He is alive, and in a relationship with us right now. There is power in that
proclamation, the power of salvation itself. How will we preach it today with power? How will
we connect our people to that powerful message? Will they experience that power today? What
would that feel like? Do they, like the Corinthians, need reminding of this?

By the grace of God I am what I am. God makes himself important to us by his death and
resurrection and his appearance. He had made himself into the most important thing ever.

Or I Corinthians 15:12-25

12 Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no
resurrection of the dead? 13 But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has
been raised. 14 And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in
vain. 15 We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he
raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. 16 For if the dead are
not raised, not even Christ has been raised. 17 And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is
futile and you are still in your sins. 18 Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. 19 If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. 

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21 For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. 22 For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. 23 But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. 24 Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. 25 For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.

(This text appears on Easter Day in year C. Here are the lightly edited notes from the last time we treated this.)

Has our reductive materialistic culture left us in the same place as the ancient Corinthians to whom Paul wrote? They apparently thought that this life was it. We were raised in baptism and that is it. God’s kingdom is only for this life, there is no real life to come. Our cartoons portray it as a vaporous existence on clouds. It just isn’t real. Biology tells us that life is impossible without death. So we cannot really believe in a resurrection, a real resurrection with body and senses and the whole of the created life. Do many of those who sit in pews struggle with this too? Is this something we need to preach? I am not sure that this is an Easter sermon – but perhaps it is. Do we preach as if this is true? Or do we grab this bull by horns and wrestle it to the ground? Both are pastorally defensible.

There are a couple of films in theaters either now or just recently which make for an entry point. One has to be careful here. The films are most likely trite and often have questionable theology. But they can also raise important questions.

Vs. 19 reminds us that our proclamation of the resurrection always has an eschatological element to it. If we preach the transformation of lives without the hope of resurrection, we are simply lousy therapists and the church is a pitiable NGO. I say this because there are powerful voices which are advocating for exactly this. There is a strong movement which says that God will prosper the Christian right now. It is called prosperity Gospel. There is another movement which says that the purpose of Christianity is solely to be a force for social change. Both of them miss this element. God has gathered the Church to hope, and without that hope, that joyful expectation in Christ’s reappearance in glory and our resurrection, we might as well simply close our doors. We are pitiable.

What about the logic of vss. 21 and 22? It seems that this logic is utterly inside the tradition. But perhaps a biological example might be helpful. If one man brings a contagion into a population which has no resistance to that bug, he brings death to all. On the other hand, if one man’s body generates a resistance, his antibodies can be the salvation of all.

Many consider that this chapter of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians is the key to understanding the whole book. It seems that the many problems which the Apostle found in this troubled parish came back to a root in their understanding of the end of Christ’s salvation, its goal and especially the resurrection, especially what would happen to us after we died.
I say this because I wonder if we are not in a similar situation. Most consider that death means we become some sort of a spiritual, but not physical, being. Heaven is a place of harps, halos, clouds, wings, and see-through people who float around, just read the Family Circus or watch a “Tom and Jerry” cartoon. And so our understanding of this world is also skewed. Some see it as more real, more substantive than the world to come. If you ever get a chance and have not yet done it, read CS Lewis’ “Great Divorce”. Despite what you might conclude from the title, Lewis is not talking about marital discord at all. In it some folks get the chance to journey from hell to the outskirts of heaven. There they find they cannot walk comfortably on the grass because it is so much more real than they are, it cuts their feet.

All this makes for a better bible study than an Easter morning sermon. But the proclamation of Easter will best be based on this factualness. God cares very much for the physical world in which we live. He has gone so far as to shed real live red blood on a hard wooden cross to save it, not just our souls, but us, all of us. The resurrection we proclaim today has real physical characteristics to it. We will walk the streets of heaven, our hands will pluck its fruit and our mouths will taste its sweetness and we will be satisfied wholly there. I have been struck by how stubbornly held this mistaken idea of heaven is among the young people I teach. It is simply infused into their language and their way of thinking. “Heaven is a wonderful place, I will be able to float around there and pass through real things.”

Paul’s rejection of this notion is expressed in the incarnation of Christ. Jesus has assumed the flesh of broken humanity, run that human race to a perfect end and in so doing given every human being hope and joy. Our expectation is that because Christ has done this, death itself is undone. We are simply waiting for that process, that prison house to completely collapse and free the rest of humanity.

All this is on its own time table, now we must wait, but because that tomb was empty so long ago, our tomb is empty as well.

The preacher who opts for this text may also want to hit that authority piece. Our proclamation of the resurrection, its good news, is really an act of authority. I am authorized by God to preach today, I have a message delivered first to women and fisherman but to two billion Christians today from God to proclaim this message. He reigns until every enemy is utterly subdued and lies prostrate at his feet, the last enemy will be death, but it is no longer a matter which is in any question. Death has already been defeated, we await the day when utterly subjected it owns up to Jesus victory. Now it stubbornly holds on, but its day comes.

An Easter Sermon Outline (I usually like to preach fairly briefly this day – let the music also bear some of the load – the hymnody of Easter is just too good to shorten because I want to talk. I will have lots of opportunities over the next seven weeks to talk about Easter.)

I. A proclamation – Death is Undone – Christ has Risen, Alleluia!

II. Know the enemy – name him, for our victory is assured

   a. Cut to the chase here, don’t spend a lot of time, but don’t speak limpidly either. The cruel reality is that every one of us will taste death’s bitter dregs.
Our hope is not that we will eat right, exercise and live forever. That is a fool’s dream. We will eat right, exercise, take our vitamins and die anyway!

b. Our death is the fruit of this world which was broken by sin. We can no more stop it than we can stop the earth from circling the sun. We are too wrapped up in this world, its living and its dying. We cannot free ourselves from it.

c. Death is a real problem – it cuts us off from God. Dead people are not just happy ghosts – they are dead.

III. Hear the doom of this enemy – Christ has crushed his power by his death upon a cross

a. But one is able to stop the earth from circling the sun. He stood outside this broken world and ruled it as its creator, but he has also entered it that he might save it. Jesus has come because he hates death. He suffered death himself that he might defeat this foe of ours.

b. This Friday past we call Good, because on it, Jesus Christ has taken your death and my death and nailed it to a tree. He has crushed its power and now it cannot hold us because it could not hold him.

IV. Celebrate the victory – Christ has indeed risen from the dead and death no longer has power over us!

a. Now, no-one lies forgotten in a tomb. Christ who cared for the little and the least has remembered them all. They are all connected to the one who is the Life of the World.

b. Now, Jesus lives and reigns to all eternity, and nothing shall cut us off from that blessed kingdom, not even death. He has conquered and we are blessed!

The end of Romans 8 seems appropriate to quote here.

John 20:1-18

Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. 2 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.” 3 So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. 4 Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, 7 and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. 8 Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9 for as yet they
did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10 Then the disciples went back to their homes.

11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. 12 And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. 13 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.” 14 Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” 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.” 16 Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to him in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher). 17 Jesus said to her, “Do not cling to me, for 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.’” 18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”—and that he had said these things to her.

This Gospel text has been the Easter text for people for a very long time, and is, I believe, part of the reason that there is such a piety around Mary Magdalene. That said, it appears that Luther did not preach this text on Easter morning, but always preached the Mark account of the resurrection.

The picture to the right is the statue of Mary carved nearly six hundred years ago by Donatello. He was a famous artist who rediscovered ancient techniques and created beautiful new works of art. Here he explores in wood the complicated person of Mary. She was a demoniac prior to meeting Jesus. You can see this today in Florence, Italy.

Mary has come out to mourn and treat the body of Jesus. He was her rescuer. She undoubtedly felt both grief and great fear. What would happen now? Would the demons come back?

She finds the stone rolled away. She runs and gets Peter and John who quickly retrace her steps to the tomb. They find it as she said but go in. Then they “faith” what Jesus has said. They had not really understood what Jesus had been saying, but now they do and they return, undoubtedly wondering, perhaps also rejoicing, but surely wondering what this all meant.

In their excitement they seem to have forgotten Mary. She remains, weeping. Have they told her? Did they stop to put an arm around this poor woman in her fear and grief? No, they have left her. But she is not forgotten. Jesus remembers and sees her. First he sends his angels to question her weeping. But angels are not the best as calming people down. So Jesus himself comes.
The ensuing conversation suggests that Jesus is heading somewhere and is in a bit of a hurry to get there. I have always imagined that he has descended into hell itself, harrowed its grim halls, proclaimed his victory and shaken Satan’s kingdom to its core. Now, as he says, he is on his way to the Father. But as he is shooting up and up, like some comic hero rocketing into the sky, he hears Mary weeping. That sound draws him, pulls him, compels him to take a detour. He will not leave her to grieve on this morning, but he comes and says the words which Jesus needs desperately to hear. He simply says, “Mary.” And with this word everything has changed.

The picture to the left is taken from this scene: “Noli Me Tangere” an early work by Titian (c. 1512).

The preacher might develop this scene into a sermon. Jesus has much important work to do, but none of it is more important than the tears of this woman, this former demoniac, this poor woman, this little person.

We celebrate the resurrection of Jesus today, but have you ever wondered what he is doing right now? Good Friday paid sin’s price. But Easter proclaims the victory for us to believe. But Jesus also rose for another reason. He rose to take care of us right now. The tears of Mary pull him from cosmic affairs to a garden where she stands weeping. She does not understand. Jesus is risen. He won’t leave her in that dark place but comes to shine is light and dispel her gloom. His business is urgent, she is not to hang onto him. He really has to go, but he won’t go before she has heard him speak her name.

Sermon Idea: He is risen to dry our tears (The proclamation of Christ’s resurrection will comfort the grieving, give hope to the despairing, and strengthen those enfeebled by fear and doubt.)

Too often we imagine that Christ has risen is a thing of the past, a historical factotum we must defend against the liberals who deny it, but little more. The resurrection of Jesus is great news for today. For Jesus risen from the dead is not just sitting in heaven today listening to his angelic choirs belt out celestial top 40 and blandly waiting for the eschatological clock to tick down to zero. He is active in the lives of his people, doing much, comforting us, and drying our tears. He has risen from the dead because you need him in your life right now.

The next six weeks of the liturgical year will explore this great work of the resurrected Christ in more detail. Jesus will be seen to dispel Thomas’ doubts, seek out the lost sheep, and care for the little ones. He will be the good shepherd whom we need.

But today we get this tender picture of what Jesus is up to. He apparently has big business. He is on the way to the Father. He has descended into hell as our creed confesses, he has risen from the dead and John portrays him on the way up to heavenly realms for who knows what purpose,
surely something greater than I can imagine. But has he is zooming through the spheres he hears something. He hears Mary crying. The loutish disciples have entered the tomb, believed that Jesus has risen from the dead, but in their wonder and joy they have rushed right past grieving Mary and left her in her misguided grief. Confronted by angels she is only confused.

Jesus, who has important things to do just cannot, it seems, leave her to cry this morning. He changes course and finds her in this garden. Her eyes are bleary with weeping and she cannot see straight and thinks he is a gardener. But her ears work just fine. The sheep know the voice of the shepherd. He speaks her name, “Mary.” And her world is transformed from grief to joy in a wonderful, divine moment.

His duties still press. He has not yet returned to the father. She cannot hang on to him, though she would. Her Jesus is risen from the dead and she would never let him go. But he must return to that Father so that the Spirit of God may be poured out on all flesh and all may know the joy that Mary feels right now.

That Jesus has risen from the dead to hear your prayers right now. It is with that love that the resurrected Jesus listens to you.