

Festival of the Resurrection: Easter Sunday April 1

What can you say, is there a better time to be a preacher? I don't think so, except perhaps at a funeral, but then the message is largely the same, isn't it. If Easter presents a challenge to the Lutheran preacher, it is that this is a day when we might feel a little odd. The news is all good, and we are so used to having some Law to preach against when we speak the Gospel that it almost is hard to preach just Gospel.

Of course, the Law is there, don't worry. It just made its dramatic entrance onto the scene on a cross on Good Friday when Jesus died. Death is lurking, it is what draws those women to the open tomb. Do not worry that I have somehow lost my Law/Gospel preaching compass and feel the need to check my Lutheran card at the door on the way out. But this day is given over to the proclamation of the good news. I will include a little .pdf file for your enjoyment which is a sermon written by John Chrysostom, it is short and to the point and does a marvelous job of proclaiming the gospel.

Chrysostom does some really good things with this. He goes looking through his Scripture for metaphor and picture language that make this work. He addresses the fears which his people bring to the day in a creative explanation of the parable of the workers in the vineyard, the one where everyone gets the same salary, despite working different amounts of time. The scandal is in the joy, you see, not, as the world sees it in the suffering. The real scandal is that God gives occasion for joy to everyone, even the guy who hasn't been in there since Christmas, if then.

This is, you see, simply not the day to remind people of their failings or their need, it is a day to proclaim the goodness and the grace of God. Of course every Sunday is for that, but usually we get there by developing the need, the sin, the Law. Today, we simply proclaim the Gospel and let it hit the needs which the folks bring. It might just feel a little odd to us who are used to that Law/Gospel tension in our sermons, but I think this is actually a very important thing to do. This Sunday stands in an archetypal relationship to the other Sunday celebrations of the year. We have all heard the trope that every Sunday is a little Easter, a miniature celebration of the Resurrection. And that is true, and at the heart of that saying is an objective reality, a truth which is true for all humanity. Jesus, crucified and dead, has risen from the dead.

As one preacher said a number of years ago, believing the Easter proclamation of the resurrection should either have you huddling in fear under your pews or standing on top of them shouting hallelujah! You cannot sit blandly in those pews stifling a yawn. That bland indifference is the posture of the skeptic, the cynic, not a Christian. I believe that the issue is a real one here. I am not sure that as a people we don't need a renewal of faith in this most basic Christian truth. The Resurrection is absolutely the center of our faith.

A few years ago Herb Hoefler, one of my colleagues at Concordia had a guest presenter in one of the courses he teaches on World Religions. Herb was our district's coordinator of outreach to Muslims and spent a number of years as a missionary in India. He has known this presenter for many years and they have a respectful relationship with one another. After the presentation the

man turned to his friend Herb and asked him. “Herb, what would it take for you to become a Muslim?” Herb was taken aback by the question, he had not really considered it. “If Jesus did not rise from the dead” was his almost gut-level response. It came almost unbidden to his lips, he said.

Today we hear Paul summarize his preaching and clearly the resurrection of Jesus is the heart of his preaching. In his letter to that troubled congregation Paul dealt with lots of issues, immorality, factionalism, pride, law suits, and questions about whether it was OK for married couples to have sex (that’s in one of those sections we don’t usually read on Sunday mornings). Most commentators on the letter to the Corinthians notice that the rhetorical construction of the book places this fifteenth chapter at the end of the letter. That is significant rhetorically because this is Paul’s summation argument, in the ancient style of making arguments, and still today, this is his trump card he has held to the end, the piece of the puzzle that makes sense of everything he has said before. He ties it all up with resurrection.

The reason the Corinthians were so messed up as a congregation was because they had fundamentally misunderstood and misbelieved the resurrection. The key to straightening out their problems was not more rules or better bylaws, it was returning to the font of their faith, the resurrection event. It was in revisiting the resurrection event that the problems would be set aright. It was in light of God’s gracious act on the first Easter and in which we participate in Baptism, that we can see the whole of our human existence this side of the grave and the other as well. Are we troubled like the Corinthians? The answer, says Paul, is Easter.

When we talked about this in the past we wondered what made for a good Easter sermon.

1. We thought Chrysostom did well.
2. Victory – this seems to be a motif that might work here. There was some bench warmer or water boy on the NCAA champion basketball team who will get the same “champion” accolade as the stars. He too was on the team. We are on the Jesus team – he won for us. For folks who rarely get to be winners, this might be their one shot in a year. For the people who are feeling stomped on, this might be really potent. The theology of the Cross does let us find a victory even here.
3. Another good Easter sermon might be something that raised within us an appreciation of just what happened in Jesus’ death and resurrection. The cosmic implications of that.
4. The proclamation of the Resurrection! Death is undone. This is not a moral problem, but a physical problem. Death is no respecter of morality. Everyone dies: the man who attends church every week and the fellow who never goes. They both die. Jesus died and rose again to fix that problem too. We too often feel compelled to make all our sermons about being naughty. This sermon seems to be about being dead.

5. Another metaphor which might work here is that of being lost. Is this a Sunday to proclaim that Jesus has come to find us in our despairing lostness – yes even that lostness of the grave from which I can find no exit?
6. Our preaching needs to remember the transcendent mystery of resurrection. Don't think that we will explain it in a 20 minute sermon. We can stand before the beauty of resurrection for 1000 years and never grow weary of looking at this beautiful thing.
7. Newness – Resurrection sermons could and even should speak to newness of life, a fresh, beautiful, new thing that is taking place right now. Easter is not just an historical past event and a future event, but resurrection is a present reality, something we are watching right now and for which we are hoping in the future. This could be a sinner given a new chance; this could also be a relationship which has been restored. I think of Ephesians 2 – the first ten verses speak of a death in sin transformed into a resurrection by grace, through faith, a gift. But the second part of the chapter is all about Jews and Gentiles living together in peace and harmony, one family which has been restored. Easter gives us a chance to imagine and proclaim what is there in the new life, not only to deny the old life and its dying.
8. Good Easter sermons might also reconnect people to Baptism and Confirmation – Easter can reinvigorate those “old” but continuing realities.
9. We hear a great deal of death on our news feeds. If it is not some disaster that has happened, we fear the one which is predicted to happen. Resurrection proclaims another story to this world.

What are people bringing to church with them this day? Especially the folks we don't see every Sunday? What is the death to which we will proclaim resurrection?

1. Doubts about the veracity of this Christian message. Can we trust this?
2. It doesn't seem to be working? Is Christianity even a good thing to do? What has it done for me lately?
3. Why am I suffering? Why me?
4. Voices are speaking loudly that there is no God and in fact religion is the problem. The God of the Bible is intolerant and narrow, prejudiced against the nice gay couple who live down the street. Are those voices right?
5. It seems like we are in a time of extremely rapid change. When Obama was elected president gays were still not officially sanctioned in the military and no state had legalized marijuana. It feels like the ground we are standing on is slipping away under our feet.
6. This is an obligation. We are here to visit mom and dad and they insist we go to church before we eat the Easter feast.
7. Some people's lives are profoundly broken. They seek a miracle but so often they cannot see the gift which Christ would give.

8. Some are coming because they are pretty sure that they are OK, and are looking for some confirmation. They don't want any preacher to really challenge them. This is just a check-up.

Collects 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 that 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.

God the Father has overcome death, our mortal foe, (pun intended there) and he has opened for us the gate of everlasting life. We often and rightly confess that Jesus has overcome death, but the more biblical way to say that is to confess that the Father has actually done this. There is only one place in the Gospel of John where it says that Jesus rose from the dead, and implies that he did that himself. (I lay my life down and take it up again.) By far the most common way to say it, as it says in Romans 1, that the Father raised Jesus from the dead. In the economy of Salvation, the Father defeats death through the incarnation and death of His Son, the second person of the Trinity. He then effects the universal resurrection of all flesh through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. All three persons of the Trinity are involved. To deposit this all at Jesus' feet may feel really good on Easter, but the Biblical authors seem rather careful not to do that.

What difference does this make? One could argue that for most folks not much, and I would have to agree, but in this we are dealing with the mystery of the Trinity and Christianity has long since discovered that exactitude in language here can be pretty important. I think it has to do with the fact that Jesus is really dead. I don't know if you have noticed this or not, but dead people don't do much. They are rather helpless in the whole "doing things" regard. To suggest that Jesus conquered death by raising himself from the dead borders on a non-sequitur. Yes, he did conquer death, but he did it by dying, as in really dead, helplessly dead, fit-for-little-else-than-the-compost-heap dead.

We pray then that the party spirit we are feeling right now might be but a foretaste of the real party which transpires at the end of time. The prayer does a nice little thing in connecting the past, present, and future which is all latent in the Easter event this way. It is a past reality which we celebrate today, Jesus' tomb was empty, and it was empty not because some scoundrel took the body but because the body laid therein was raised from death to life. This is the explosion moment, along with Pentecost, which is still unfolding as Christianity continues to grow around the world.

But this is also a present reality. Jesus did not rise and then stop being alive. The point of the resurrection is that this Jesus is alive today too. He is interceding for us, he is shepherding us, he

*is with us, he is blessing us, he is right now doing all sorts of stuff. Our Friend, our Master, has risen from the grave. Not only has he risen from the dead, but he is at the right hand of God, all the power of the universe flows through his perforated hands. This is a day to really hit that doxological praise part which concludes these collects. Jesus has risen, lives, and **reigns** to all eternity! That is a present reality.*

But there is also a future dimension to this. As happy as we are for Jesus that he did not stay dead, his resurrection also speaks to us and what is true about us. We also will not stay dead. The joy we have today is an anticipatory joy as well. Just as surely as Jesus has vacated his grave, so too shall we. God has verified his Son and the blessing he brings by raising him from the grave first, a witness to us, and a promise.

The prayer focuses our attention on the present reality. We seek the resurrection from the death of sin in our lives. This is a different, new life, we live today. The resurrection is a present reality in that we are not no longer enslaved, entombed in sin. True liberty has been given us, we have already walked out of a tomb of sorts. The old rebellion which once controlled us and demanded that we serve it has been broken. Our lives reflect another reality in Christ. The service we render, the love we share, the gifts we gift, these are no longer the inadequate restitution of miserable slaves who have no hope of escaping their servitude, but must serve. Now they are the sweet and fragrant offerings of people free, the joyful offerings of God's precious children, secure in the reality of His perpetual love.

OR

O God, for our redemption You gave Your only-begotten Son to the death of 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 prayer, like the one above, carefully notices the Father's role in the Easter event. God gave His Son to death on the cross and through the glorious resurrection he also has delivered us from the power of our enemy. In this sense, these two prayers are virtually identical. It would seem that Easter has a common theme for us today. God has set us free from a powerful enemy. Several European languages, remember, use a version of "Passover" for their word for Easter. This is the Christian Passover when we are liberated from a slavery more thorough than any evil Pharaoh has devised for his thralls.

This prayer, however, does not focus attention upon the paschal joy, but on the reality of the new life, drowning the old Adam, like Pharaoh's chariots, in the Red Sea of baptism. This is a daily reality. We are always pursued by sin and death, but God comes through daily for us with righteousness and purity for every morning, every moment of every day.

How do we make sure that Easter remains the historical reality, the eschatological hope, but also the present reality, the daily drowning of sins? What is Easter to us this year? How do we

gather up the current life in which we live and connect that dying to this resurrecting Jesus? Is this the year of fear? We are afraid of ISIS, terrorists, depressed airline pilots, the economy tanking, and who knows what else, we are afraid of the North Koreans actually getting one of those missiles to work. We are afraid of...lots of things. Jesus' resurrection is a frontal assault on fear. The colon cancer survivor can do this easily. This Easter represents a milestone – the best Easter ever, simply because I am here to worship with my friends and family. But how do we connect that to the person for whom this Easter is not a “special” year or day? How does one connect for the person suffering in tragedy, the person who grieves for the child, brother, parent or friend who is not here with us?

I used to mow the lawn for my father's parish in Missouri. Back in the old part of the cemetery was a whole row of children who died in epidemics which ran through the community before the advent of immunizations and antibiotics. Every spring we did not mow it. We did not mow it because it was always a carpet of flowers, those old kinds, the hyacinths and jonquils and daffodils which their grieving parents had planted in hope of the resurrection and which continued to bear mute witness to their faith after those parents were interred in that same cemetery. They planted flowers on their children's graves, remembering Christ's promise to them that Jesus' cross was for these tears too and the day comes when these little ones shall rise again, to run and play in heavenly fields of eternal blossom and never die.

How many of us don't walk past a picture or an empty bedroom, or a trophy sitting on a mantel, or something else which reminds us of someone who is gone? How many of us don't notice a day out of the year, a birthday, an anniversary, a day when someone died, and we hurt inside because they are gone from us? Easter is the good news for that aching place in your heart. God knows a day when his beloved was laid in a tomb. He did something about it; he did something about all the aching hearts.

Do we hear people asking “Why have you abandoned me, why have you let this happen, God!?” How does Easter address that? Yes, God's answer to our hurt is that God has done something about it, but the cross sometimes feels terribly inadequate to people. Yes, Jesus rose, so what!? Do we take people to the big picture? I am not sure that that really works, although at times the Bible does it (Job).

Perhaps the best way to deal with this is to go back to Jesus weeping at Lazarus' tomb. Jesus starts by weeping with them. They never shed those tears alone, he has embedded himself into this broken world, suffered its brokenness himself, because by breaking himself there, he has worked its final healing. But now it hurts, that hurt is real, just as Jesus' hurt on the cross was real. God never denies that and never says “buck up!” rather he would put his arm around us, through that fellow Christian, and weep with us. He longs for that last day as much as we do.

Does the collect, either of them, today call us to remember that the burden is not on us? Indeed, the onus does not rest on us. We cannot even believe, we are dead, spiritually and ultimately physically. A corpse cannot even ask for help. God comes in us, enervates that heart, pumps that

blood, moves that hand, reaches out to the Father and restores the relationship which sin has severed.

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 *like heat in a dry place.*

*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? 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 is the Second Sunday of Easter this year.

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.

Psalm 16

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.

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, ² 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.

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? We 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.

As we noted in the introductory essay, 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. Every year we get another section of this chapter at Easter and this year we get the first section. I think they do that because the Markan Gospel account of the resurrection is so thin. The preacher may well want to remember that the letter to the Corinthians was written before Mark penned his Gospel account, as indeed all the letters of Paul were written before the Gospels. Here we have an account of the Christian story which predates Mark.

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 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 was the head of the congregation in Jerusalem, author of the letter by that name in Scripture, and the brother of Jesus. 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.

Mark 16:1-8

When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. ² And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³ And they were saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?” ⁴ And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back—it was very large. ⁵ And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed. ⁶ And he said to them, “Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. ⁷ But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.” ⁸ And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

What were these women expecting when they came to the tomb that day? What did they experience? They came looking for a dead body. They came expecting to lovingly care for the corpse of a friend. Instead their world is completely turned upside down. They were afraid and ran away. In some way, Jesus must have chased them down and overcome this fear. The fact that this story is told at all means that sometime they must have opened their mouths. How could Mark tell this story if fear completely and always silenced these women? But what overcame their fear? Was it anything other than the same love of Christ which as John says, “drives out all fear”?

This is a very interesting text. Our best manuscripts of Mark, the ones everyone has to admit are the most important and give us the best witness to the Gospel itself end right here. They do not have any of the longer endings of Mark which we knew from the King James and which Luther quotes in the Catechism. Mark’s Gospel account apparently ended with the women running off, telling no one, because they were afraid. That’s it!

You can see why pious scribes in later generations might have thought they had a defective manuscript on their hands and looked to the other Gospels to fill in the story. At least that is what we think might have happened. But if this is true, then we have a rather difficult problem. What do we do with this oldest Mark?

The best reconstruction we can seemingly arrive at is that Mark did this as part of the overarching theme of the book. It is pretty clear from the rest of the Gospel that Mark was writing to a fearful group of people. If you look at the stories of Mark closely you will notice how often he tells you they were afraid. Just last week we saw Jesus walking to Jerusalem and he slips in there, unlike Matthew and Luke, that the folks following Jesus were “afraid.” This at

first blush seems to be exactly the wrong thing to say to fearful people, but think about it for a moment. People who are afraid cannot be rationalized out of their fear; they need to be exampled out of fear. You can almost imagine the reader reading these last lines and looking up and staring the congregation in the face. “they ran away...but by my reading this text aloud to you, I did not!” The reading of the Gospel itself would have been an act of defiance in the face of a real and fearsome threat. They were crucifying Christians out there. What will you do? Will you like they did, run away and be silent? The reader obviously did not.

If you want a really interesting study in this, Mark most often arranges his material in his book in groupings of three. These are called triplets. Did you notice what Mark called the angel here? He does not name him an angel, but a young man, and he drew attention to the man’s clothes. In two other places in the Gospel he speaks of young men and their clothes. We are probably familiar with the young man who fled from the garden, naked, stripped of his clothes. Look what his fear did to him, it stripped him and made him ashamed. He fled naked.

The other guy, however, is in chapter 5 when Jesus drives the legion of demons from the man into the herd of pigs. There the young man who is freed from the demons is found sitting at Jesus feet, in his right mind and wearing clothes. The people of that region, when they see him sitting there, in his right mind and clothed, all beg Jesus to go away. They are afraid. The man wants to go with Jesus, and you can see why. Demoniacs have very few friends, they don’t make good neighbors. Jesus denies the demoniac’s request and instead sends him into his own family and friends, the people he has hurt the most, the people who have every reason to hate him, so that he can tell them what God has done.

At the end of chapter six of Mark, Jesus again crosses the Sea of Galilee. This time, however, the people do not ask him to leave, instead, as soon as Jesus boat touches land, they stream to him. They bring their sick and demon possessed and place them so that even Jesus shadow might fall on them, or that they might touch his clothes and be healed.

What has effected this change? The only thing that has happened is that a demoniac went and told. If God can use such a miserable vessel to change a whole region, what can he do with us? Here was a man who had nothing, was nothing, less than nothing, worse than nothing, and God has made him something, clothed him with the very righteousness of God, and now he is the instrument for changing the world.

Will our fear keep our mouths closed? Will our fear demand that we run and hide? The women fled from the tomb, the young man did in the garden, but this demoniac, clothed with the righteousness of Christ, went out, alone, to a hostile crowd, and became the instrument of God’s power to them. What will you do?

Law

1. Death. It is not a good thing. It seems odd that we should need to say that, but in today's nihilistic culture of death, we need to say it. Death is the destruction and corruption of God's creation. It is the evil fruit of our own rebellion and we are stuck with it. We cannot get out from under its cloud no matter how much we fund cancer research and the American Heart Association. Our bodies will all eventually fail us, if we don't get run over by a bus before then.
2. Death evokes in us a very natural response of fear. We don't know what is going on there, and our febrile imaginations will create a reality to fill in the gaps and it is rarely a positive picture. In the absence of information our minds start to think the worst.
3. Of course, the worst we can think might not actually be that far from the truth if the descriptions of hell which we find in scripture are any indication. In fact, our images of fiery torment and dark gloom might only be scratching the surface of what the eternal death might look like. (Dante imagined that the deepest and worst parts of heaven were actually cold – he must have had a drafty house in winter when he wrote that.)
4. That fear, natural and normal as it is, has the first tendency to shut us up. Fear tends to close our mouths. We look around and hope to blend into the woodwork and not be noticed. Perhaps we will escape. But that hope is futile, death is nothing if it is not thorough.
5. Christ, our master, has died. Good Friday records the terrible day when the sky turned black and mother and the disciples wept bitter tears. God knows what death is first hand.

Gospel

1. Christ is risen – our tombstones do not have the last word. That last word is a word of God's and it is a word of life.
2. Christ is risen – Through his death and resurrection, God has conquered our foe and now we may triumph over our foe, scorning him. Like schoolyard children who are watching the bully get his just desserts, we can laugh at death.
3. Christ is risen – unimaginably bad things have been averted, and we simply don't have to worry about them. The simple fact of the matter is that the resurrection of Christ affirms the effectiveness of the cross. The debt is paid, the restitution made, the broken is made whole. The fire of God's wrath and the terrors of eternal death are for someone else now, not for us.
4. Christ is risen – our lips are unsealed. We have a joyful message to tell. Alleluia! Our Savior and Friend, our Master and Teacher has risen from the dead!
5. Christ has risen – God himself has conquered death, our terrible foe. Death is really conquered. This is no economic stimulus package or government program that might work, and then again, it might not. This is victory because this is God's victory. He has swallowed up death, in his own Son's death, forever.

Sermon Ideas

1. 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!)
 - a. 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.
 - b. 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.
 - c. 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.

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 consumed by death, he consumed it himself, 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 appetite for death now are invited to a feast of another sort, the celebratory feasting of God's redeemed, resurrected people. Hallelujah!

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!

2. Three men and their clothes – Go and tell. (That the hearer, filled with joy, would go and tell the good news that Jesus has risen from the dead, lives and reigns today and to all eternity!)
 - a. The last young man and his clothes – the young man in today’s Gospel lesson is arrayed in shining white clothes. He has a glorious message to tell, Jesus has risen from the dead. But the women run from him in fear. They do not tell.
 - b. Mark tells a second story about a young man and his clothes. If you were here last week or read the story of Jesus’ betrayal this past week, when they came to arrest Jesus in the garden a young man was seized and in his fear he ran from their grasp but left his clothes in their hands. He fled naked. He fear shamed him. He found himself hiding behind the bushes, looking for someone’s laundry to steal so he could get home and hide. His fear closed his mouth, un-manned him, leaving him little more than an animal skulking, hiding, in fear.
 - c. But Mark has also told us an earlier story, a first story, about a young man and his clothes. In chapter five the demoniac of the Gerasenes was described as “in his right mind and wearing clothes” which he had not done when the demons raged. Jesus freed him from the scourge of demonic possession and then, like these women, sent him back to the very people whom he feared with the message of what God has done for him. Mark later tells us that the next time Jesus crossed the Sea of Galilee, the people of that region, who had feared Jesus’ power and asked him to leave, now flocked to him. All this Jesus did through one very broken man whom he gave the mandate to go and tell.
 - d. Today the young man in shining clothes confronts us as well with the same good news that rang out that first Easter Sunday. Jesus has risen from the dead, he has conquered all our demonic foes, even death itself. That is a message which opens our lips with joy.

Fear will close our mouths faster than any other thing. There is much to fear in this world today. Look at the additional sermon below. The antidote to fear is God’s love (I John) and the joy which flows out of that love opens our lips and our lives to be the living invitations to the people around us. One cannot rationalize someone out of fear. It doesn’t work. God loves them out of fear. Easter is the expression of God’s fear expunging love.

The Easter message in all the Gospels includes this simple injunction to go and tell, tell what God has done for you. The joy and wonder of what God has done is what opens our lips and our mouths to speak those words. Rejoice, then today, tell out the good news, we are the heralds of salvation to this broken generation. Christ has risen from the dead! One might pull a little from John Chrysostom’s sermon. He asks the question of his hearer, “what did you bring today?” We are going to ask the question: “What will you do today?” or “How will you leave today?” The text tells us these women went away afraid.

There is much to be afraid of, that is a reasonable thing. But the angel tells them, not to be afraid. The Bible has 365 instances in which it records: “Don’t be afraid” or some variant of that. one a day. Christ’s resurrection also can and does empower us. The women could not be the end of the story. Someone had to tell, Mark told, the reader of that Gospel that first day when it was read to the fearful Christians of old was not too afraid to read. Likewise today, Christ has risen from the dead, be not afraid, is God’s creative word to us. It literally creates what it calls for in us and sends us through these doors changed for having heard it. Christ has risen, the devils are undone, Christ is risen, the angels rejoice, Christ is risen, his people’s fear has been replaced with hope. Like the demoniac in chapter five, clothed by Jesus, we are sent out into this world, fearlessly proclaiming his love and kingdom, presence and resurrection. This applies to every stage of life, even if we go out this day knowing that this is the last Easter will celebrate this side of heaven. Even that fearsome and loathsome grave holds no terror for us anymore. Christ is risen. Alleluia!

3. We are what we are (Gospel and Epistle – The Holy Spirit will transform the hearer through the proclamation of the Resurrection.)

The women were utterly shocked by what they found. They ran away in fear, it took a while to process this. The resurrection of the dead is shocking to us who go to cemeteries and find that the deceased are assuredly still dead. The resurrection of the dead, beginning with Jesus must change us.

Paul too was changed – he was an unlikely witness to the Gospel. But by the grace of God, which was not in vain, he was what God called him to be. He was what God made him – an apostle.

God has made us his children – we are his beloved. Jesus’ resurrection has transformed our lives into lives of hope and opportunity.

For these women the transformation of the resurrection meant that they overcame that fear that gripped them. Likewise we too find that the resurrection will not let us be compelled and trapped in our fear. They eventually were able to tell this story. We got it. They must have told someone!

But that fear can not only silence us, it saps our hope and it makes us timid and reluctant to live as Christ would have us live today. It keeps us away from God’s grace. These women had come with resignation to what had happened. That evaporated with the news the angel bore.

The muted Christian comes to church today, perhaps only twice a year, perhaps every Sunday, in the world and too much of the world. They are undercover Christians, afraid of what the world will say if they were to boldly live out their faith. Christ’s resurrection is the key to breaking that timid silence.

Jesus raised from the dead has eviscerated every threat of our foe. He may still take our life, our status, our wealth, or anything else, but God gives it back to us and more. He takes this life, God gives eternal life. He takes our wealth, God makes us heirs of heaven. Our foe makes us into objects of ridicule, but God calls us by name and calls us his children, proclaiming our status throughout the world. The devil has simply lost his teeth, at least in the big picture. He rages now, death does it worst, but all the rage and carnage is undone. Jesus is risen.

4. 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. 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.