

Mark 16:1–8

James Nestingen · CROSS Talk

Taught for Good Friday and the Resurrection of Our Lord, Year B (Revised Common Lectionary) ·
4 April 2012

The question raised by the texts for Good Friday and for the second service on Easter Sunday is this: who's in charge here? Who is doing the work? Who is doing everything? The Good Friday and Easter texts each pick up the question in order to assert God's ultimate promise. God is acting, acting decisively. God is taking on the world of sin, death, and the devil to bring in a new creation, beginning with the resurrection of Jesus.

The perennial human answer to the question "Who's in charge here?" is, of course, "We are." This is the *opinio legis*, as the Lutheran Confessions call it: the suspicion that if anything is finally going to happen, it depends on us, that we are the driving force in the creation and are therefore the ones to be turned to and looked to in any time of difficulty.

In one way or another, the people involved in the story of the crucifixion of Jesus, and even on Easter morning, are all pretty well convinced of this. But as the stories are told, the action starts to shift. We start seeing things in a new light. Eventually it becomes clear that as much as people think of themselves as acting, they are being acted upon. And in the end there is only one actor: the Lord Jesus, whom the Father has raised from the dead to bring in the new creation.

So we're going to sort through these texts a little at a time. We'll take just one text for Good Friday and then the three texts for the second service on Sunday. Four is a lot for a single day, but we'll try for four. I wasn't going to go any further than that, especially since the text for Good Friday is the Passion narrative in the Gospel of John, John 18:1–19:42. How does that do you for a text? You could preach on that for a couple of hours.

You'd need to be in Africa to preach on the whole thing. Once when I was preaching over there, they told me they expected me to preach for at least an hour, and when I sat down after an hour and five minutes, they asked me if I was taking a break. That's what you'd need to preach on the whole Passion narrative in John's Gospel. From there we come to the texts for

Sunday, which are a little more tractable, but still so incredibly full of power that you can hardly begin to catch up with them, which of course makes it a lot of fun.

I'm retired, you know. I don't have to get up for sunrise services anymore, and I don't really like to anyway. So I figured if you want to get up that early, you're on your own. I'll check in with you for the later service and help you enough so that, if you're doing the early service too, you can get to it.

Good Friday: The Passion according to John

So we begin with the Passion narrative according to the Gospel of John. Is this ever fun! As John tells the story of the crucifixion, the action shifts from one party to the next, each of the other powers losing its grip, while Jesus, suffering in the fullest sense of the term, being acted upon, is in fact acting right to the end.

Both the religious authorities and Pontius Pilate are in effect being pushed along. They think of themselves as in control. They think of themselves as acting. But one damn thing just leads to another, and pretty soon they are caught inextricably, carried beyond any kind of recourse, until the crucifixion becomes one of those events like the one I heard described many years ago by a professor of management at George Washington University. He was from a little town in Texas, and he told the story of a trip to Abilene. He and his wife and two others were sitting around visiting, and for some strange reason they went to Abilene. When they got there, they said, "What are we doing here? Why did we do this?" As it turned out, nobody could understand why they had done it. Each of them had just thought the others wanted to go to Abilene.

The same kind of thing is happening here. The religious authorities have their agenda. Pilate has his agenda. But they are being pushed and shoved by forces bigger than they are, until finally they are simply caught.

The religious authorities, of course, want to claim ultimate authority. That's the habit of religious authorities. They like to look down on politicians, or at best offer them free advice, in the utter conviction that President Obama and the Republican leadership are all tuning in to the ELCA website every morning to get the latest advice and counsel from the bishop. That's how it works. Religious authorities think that because they are religious authorities they are beyond all limits. And so they say, "We have a law." They want Jesus put away. They want him done with. When Pilate asks what accusation they bring, they say that he has made

himself equal with God, and therefore they have no alternative but to put him to death. He has to die.

That's the whole card, of course. In order to enforce their ultimate claims, religious authorities have to resort to death, or to some form of death short of it if they can't get the whole thing. To make their pretenses work, they have to push the limit and claim to be beyond it.

But here they run into an immediate barrier: they have to engage Pilate in their plot. That is a nasty kind of business. Holding such great pretenses, they don't want to get mixed up with such a minor local politician as Pilate. That's a little humiliating, and to have to await his permission is even more so. So they are looking for ways to roll over him and get him engaged in the whole plot, so that he will do their business for them, be prompt about it, and have it done. They are running in circles trying to engage Pilate, and not quite succeeding.

Pilate is being far less than cooperative. He would like to have the last word as well. He is in effect a local governor, and he is moving up the bureaucracy very well, thank you very much. He may have served in some smaller and more obscure territory before coming to Israel, which was known to be challenging. The Jews had a nasty habit of rebelling against powers that tried to rule over them, and there was enough history known that it would take some skill. It would be a little like being posted by the United States government to Pakistan or Afghanistan. Anyway, Pilate is a mover. He is on his way up the bureaucracy, but he is a little reluctant about the situation he is in.

At least three times in the story he comes back and tells the authorities that Jesus is innocent. He really doesn't want to do this. As much pressure as they put on him, both frontally and from behind, Pilate is balky. He doesn't want to move. He doesn't want to do what they say. Finally they push him into it. They say, in effect, "We're going to talk to the emperor." And of course Pilate would rather have this done with than have a delegation of religious authorities going off to Rome to say he hadn't been cooperative. So even though he knows Jesus is innocent and can find no basis for the charges against him, he gets pushed too.

So the authorities push and get pushed, and Pilate pushes and gets pushed, and finally they all find themselves in Abilene. They have gotten to this point, they know not how. The only thing they are sure of is that death is the cure for a rebel. And so they are going to be done with this man and put him to death. Despite extended negotiations, they finally reach agreement on it.

Jesus is the victim, but some victim! He is taking hold of things all along the way. It's really interesting to watch him, comparing this account with the Gospel of Mark. He is going down, all right. He knows that. He knows what the end of the story is going to be, and he knows that whatever authority he has claimed is being taken from him in the only way these people can figure out to take away authority, and that is by killing him, at least to all appearances. He is the victim being carried along helpless. But John wants us to know that he is still in charge.

There are some beautiful scenes here. All of you have been around death. You know how it is when people are dying and making their arrangements. This is so tender and so beautiful, as touching as it can be. Jesus speaks to the beloved disciple, probably John, that's who we think it is, and makes arrangements for his mother. He wants Mary to be cared for. He wants to make sure she will be looked after following his death, and so in effect he hands her over.

There is a wonderful tradition about this; in Turkey there is even a house that John and Mary are said to have lived in. The pope has visited it, for whatever that means. At any rate, this is the place they are supposed to have gone following the crucifixion. Jesus is dying. He is helpless. But he can make arrangements for these two.

And it's as though he has a checklist of prophecies that he is ticking off one by one, so that his death conforms to everything the prophets anticipated: his whole way of death, the cause of his death, the whole business. Even when it comes to the moment of death. I was involved in a death this spring where a man decided that the time was ripe, turned his face to the wall, and was gone, just like that. You sometimes see that. Jesus seems to have decided there was no point in going on with us, and he surrendered himself to death and gave himself up. Death didn't take him; he surrendered. He was in charge of that too.

So the other officials are driven along haplessly, one thing just leading to another, and Jesus, the apparent victim, rather than being driven along, is in fact leading this hapless bunch. He is going toward the fulfillment of his assignment. He is going to his death to give himself, to give himself to you and for you, for each of us, and he is not going to be deterred. That is the incredible gift being given here. This is love stripped bare, laid naked, love bestowing itself completely and withholding nothing. And so here he goes. The one who can take charge even of the course of his own death accepts it as it is required of him, and so goes into his dying.

Easter Morning: Psalm 16 and Isaiah 25

But of course this is the beginning of the story, not the end. This is a story in which the beginning and the end always stand together. We have a cross and a resurrection. The resurrection doesn't annul the cross; it establishes it.

So we get a wonderful selection of texts for Easter morning, beginning with Psalm 16 and Isaiah 25:8–9. I want you to remember Luther's explanation of the First Commandment. What is it to have a god? A god is that to which you turn in a time of trouble. A god is whatever you look to for your value, your significance, or your protection. God is that to which you turn as giving you safety and hope.

Both the psalm and Isaiah 25 proceed in basically this way. Faith turns to its maker. Faith turns to God, and turns to God expecting good. Psalm 16 begins by acknowledging the allure of the other gods, even if negatively. There are other things to which people turn. And of course that's the story: we'll turn to anything that appears safe or convenient, anything that looks good, any port in the storm. The last alternative is the good Lord, because, of course, you're going to die if you turn to him, and we all know it.

So there are other gods out there, but faith turns to its Creator. Faith turns to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Faith calls out to God in the expectation that God will be good. In the midst of exile, in the midst of loss, in the midst of disappointment, in the midst of struggle, in the midst of insignificance, in the midst of all the torture of every day, faith turns to God in the expectation that he will bring us out, that he will do it. And so he will bring us up out of Sheol, Psalm 16:9–10.

I remember a crazy fundamentalist we had when I was in seminary. One of my friends told him once, "Charlie, why don't you just go to hell?" And he said, "Gehenna or Sheol?" He wanted the address. Well, the thing about both of them is that they're portable. I've been there many times, and you have too: Sheol, Gehenna, hell. We go down there in the course of the day, we live there in the course of the week and the month and the years, and we know what it is to despair of all hope and to live there. We are going down to Sheol. And this is God's trademark: he brings us up.

He is never better than in Sheol. He is never better than in hell. This is what I hate about that new translation of the Creed, "he descended to the dead." What do those liturgiologists think they are, that they can fool with a thousand years of history and change it with just a little

footnote? Come on. I've been to hell, you've been to hell, he went to hell, and he is going to hell again for us. He descended into Sheol with us, and descending into Sheol, he came forth on Easter morning, looked back into hell, and said, "Hey, I found a way out. Turn down the heat. Let's go." This is just a fabulous text.

He brings us out of Sheol, and Isaiah 25:8–9 has the same character. We have waited. There have been tears, there have been disappointments, and there have been struggles. That's the reality of life. We have waited and waited and waited, and waited some more, expecting deliverance. And with the waiting there has been disgrace and disappointment. But what do we say? "He has delivered." These are the two realities of the life of faith, one dependent on the other: we have waited, and he has delivered. Our lives are lived in tension between those two realities, between the waiting, with its disgrace and disappointment and loss and sorrow, on the one side, and the reality of his deliverance on the other. We have been delivered; he delivers. There you go. Faith clings to this promise. This is Easter. He goes down into Sheol for us and comes up. He comes into our waiting to deliver once more and to give us hope.

So the rhythm is set by these two texts, Isaiah and the psalm. I call them preliminary, but they're not preliminary to anything; they stand alone. Still, we've got them hooked up now with a couple of powerhouses that are going to hit passing gear just when these slow down a little.

The Kerygma: 1 Corinthians 15

So we have 1 Corinthians 15:1–11. This is the kerygma, as New Testament scholars used to call it, a summary of the very center of the Christian faith. Here we see the identity of the one for whom we are waiting, the one who is coming into Sheol, into the depths. Faith attaches you to him. You are attached to his death and to his resurrection. He has gone down into death and he has come forth.

"Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, ... through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message." This is the word you hold fast to. This is the word that carries you from death into life. This is the word that enables us to wait in the midst of the contradiction, because we are grafted into this one. We are attached to him. Faith clings to him, holding firmly.

And what we are attached to is his death. He died. That's the reality of it. He died. The hope of Israel, the hope of all the nations, the promised Messiah, kicked off. He died. He went into his

death. “For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins.” For our sins: that is, our sins killed him. In our sin we decided that he was a nuisance. In our sin we decided with Israel that we needed to be done with him. And in our sins we put him to death.

And we put him to death, and he was buried. We don’t have his trip to Sheol here, but we know where he went. He was buried, and he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. Here is the very center of the Christian faith. He died, he went down, he was raised. He came forth from death triumphant.

And then what did he do? If I had come back from the grave and seen Cephas, I would have said to him, “You know, Peter, we’re going to have to start over again, you jerk. I know what you did to me. I warned you, and you did it anyway. And now you want to be the first bishop of the church? We’re going to have to change our candidacy procedures so we can find somebody with at least a pretense of faithfulness.” But no. What does he do? He goes and finds Cephas, his betrayer. He appears to Cephas.

Then to the twelve. Well, according to Mark, they all forsook him and fled. Peter wasn’t the only one; the whole blamed bunch of them were gone, disappeared. Yet he appeared to Cephas and to the twelve. Someone points out that there were only eleven by then. That’s right; one is gone now. But “the twelve” is a title, not a count, and there will be another one soon, Matthias.

Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. This is why Karl Barth used to say that the resurrection is the best-attested event in human history. We have this gorgeous story: he appears to Cephas, then to the twelve, then to more than five hundred, and finally to all the apostles, and even to the apostle Paul, who has to get in a little word about how hard he has been working, so the annual report will look good. “But by the grace of God I am what I am.” “Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.” Here is the message of the gospel.

The Empty Tomb: Mark 16:1–8

Now with that, we’re going to hustle along to this gospel, which is one of the most magnificent gospels of all, full of fruitful ambiguity, fearfully and wonderfully made. We’ll go through it slowly.

“When the sabbath was over.” They have fulfilled their obligations; they can move around now. So when the Sabbath was over, these three women, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, brought spices.

You have to know something about traditional culture to understand what is happening here. Tom, after all the time you spent in the Central African Republic, I bet you know exactly what’s going on. Anybody who has lived in a traditional culture knows exactly how this works. These women are not coming in any anticipation of the resurrection. That is the furthest thing from their minds. Jesus has said he is going to be raised from the dead, but death has played its whole card now. It has played its ace, and it is the ace of trump.

Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, these great women, just powerhouses, are on their way to the tomb not because they have faith and are anticipating the resurrection, but in utter resignation. It’s very much like what we hear in the Emmaus story, where the two, Cleopas and his wife, say, “We had hoped that he was the one.” It’s over now. Our hopes are gone. Death has had its day and the whole story has ended. It now appears to be one more dreadful pretense exposed.

So they are on their way to do what women in traditional cultures do, and what women in traditional cultures do is clean up the mess. The men are gone, all twelve, all eleven, however many are left. They are not going to show up at the grave. They are off looking for some other immortality project they can ride, somebody else they can ask, “Can we sit at your right hand in the kingdom?” They are on their way to something different. But these faithful women come, not for any faithful reason, but simply because of their love. They are walking in the darkness toward the grave, and they are wondering what they are going to do when they get there, because they remember the big stone that was rolled in front of it to make sure nobody could steal the body and circulate the word that he is risen.

“They had been saying to one another, ‘Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?’” They are worried they won’t be able to get in, because they have the ointments, the perfumes, and the spices used to mask the stink of death. In warmer climates, in the Middle East and Africa, funerals take place the same day as the death, because preserving the body is nearly impossible. And the first thing you have is an olfactory nightmare, the stink of death. You can smell it sometimes driving through the countryside. When the human body decays, the stench can make you throw up just like that. So they want the stink contained,

because of course this is the ultimate exposure of Jesus. He is just another man. He stinks like a man, he died like a man, and he is decaying like a man.

Good, Tom: nobody expects the resurrection. That's exactly right. Traditional Jewish theology would say that he is dead. At best he would be in some waiting place, but that is a very thin tradition. At any rate, these women are going now to clean up the smell.

And they come, and the stone has been rolled away. "As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed." Now, there are lots of reasons they might be alarmed. Remember, the law of Israel says that a woman who is alone in the countryside has no right to cry rape, because she has exposed herself to the possibility by being there alone. These three have come together, and for good reason: they are protecting one another. They have gone early in the morning, which should be some protection too. But when they open the grave and find a young man there, you can guess that their first concern is self-protection, sexual and personal. It's just part of the game.

Here is a flashy young man sitting in a grave. What do you suppose he wants? What do most men want, and what's going to happen to me? This has all the look of trouble. And then of course there is something luminous about him, something scary about his countenance. I suppose you could say, "Well, he was an angel; he wasn't looking to fool around." But remember the Nephilim in Genesis 6. Sometimes the angels get a little frisky, according to the book of Genesis, and they are not to be trusted either. There are several reasons for these women to be afraid.

So the first thing the angel, or the young man, does is comfort them. "Do not be alarmed." This is the beginning of the gospel word. Don't worry; it's going to be fine. Do not be alarmed; this will work out just fine. "You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth." Yes, we are, as a matter of fact. He was in this grave; now where the heck is he? "Who was crucified." We know that. We don't need any instruction in that. We were there, we saw it, we've heard the story over and over again.

But now come words that are totally unexpected, the greatest words you could possibly hear: "He has been raised; he is not here." He has risen: the present perfect. It has happened already, it is happening, the consequences are unfolding. He has risen, and because he has risen, he is not in this grave. This is the first grave that Christ Jesus ever shoved his fingers down, forcing

it to spit out a corpse. But this was no corpse. This time it was Jesus himself whom the grave spat out, who stood up and came out of the grave, raised to newness of life.

Notice how the two go together: “who was crucified” and “he has been raised; he is not here.” The risen one is always the crucified one. You can’t have the risen one without the crucifixion. “Look, there is the place they laid him.” It’s empty. He’s up now.

So what should you do? “Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” I told you so.

Now, the temptation for a preacher these days is to treat Jesus’ resurrection as the isolated resuscitation of a dead man. That is not the way it is here. It’s as though death were a great membrane stretched over the whole creation, containing all of life, so that there is room enough for movement and enough freedom that we have the idea we can move. But in fact death is always bringing its restraint, always enforcing its limits, always bearing in. And now the good Lord has pierced it. He has cut the membrane, he has broken it open, and Christ Jesus has popped out. He has come forth, and so now he has been “declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead,” as the apostle Paul says. He is now manifest as Lord of all, and so he can say to his disciples, “Say, you guys, we’ll meet in Galilee, and we’ll go on from there.” He is going to take charge of the whole thing. He is going to make it work. He is going to make it go. He is bringing in new life.

This is Easter. Not simply the isolated resuscitation of Jesus, but a frontal attack on the power of death. God the Father has ripped the membrane and pulled it open, and Christ Jesus has come forth. This is the end of death; death has died. This is the beginning of the new creation, in which we participate with joy, even in Galilee. Just think of that. The first person raised from the dead, and the first thing he says is, “I’ll meet you in Galilee,” somewhere west of Fargo. Just like that. It’s fabulous.

So the resurrection begins here. I really think the best thing to do on Easter is just play, and these texts are right there for you to do that, to have some fun. They are alarming. These women, after all: what the heck would you do if you went to visit the graveyard and some young man in a white suit was running around telling you to meet him in Galilee? You’d call the cops and have him arrested, right? They thought he was crazy. “And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” But eventually somebody spilled the beans, because we’ve heard about it, and we’re still telling the story two thousand years later.

Questions and Answers

A question about whether Israel's faith anticipated the resurrection.

This is debated. There is, of course, an industry in biblical scholarship trying to find precedent for the hope of the resurrection, and the natural place to look is the theology of Israel.

Generally, even among Jews still, death is the end of it; there is no resurrection. There are some passages, particularly in the book of Job and in Isaiah, that suggest it in an implicit way, but there is nothing explicit that spells out a theology of the resurrection. If it is there at all, it is a bare hope without any specificity to it.

In fact, the remarkable thing about the resurrection accounts in the Gospels is how conservative they are. They are very careful about what they tell you, and they want to give you witnesses, as Paul does: the five hundred brothers and sisters, and himself last of all. He'd give you names and addresses if you let him, because this is a scandalous hope, and we want to know how we know it.

God bless you all. You know my deep joy in you and my confidence. You are not going to get up and try to prove that the resurrection is possible. You want to say, "Christ has risen for you. He went into your hell, he took on your death, and now he is raised from the dead so that he can take charge of you." That's fun. He's your Lord. Blessings to you all, and happy Easter. I'll be with you next Tuesday, and the text for next week is more fun than a barrel of monkeys, so we'll go at it. God's peace, all the best, and happy Easter.

SOURCE

CROSS Talk, a weekly Gospel text study for preachers led by Dr. James A. Nestingen, St. Paul Lutheran Seminary. Recorded 4 April 2012 (about 46 minutes).

Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-_5AMOtulqE

Edited from the recording for reading.