



Texts in Context

Fifty Days of Resurrection

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THE CHURCH'S EASTER MESSAGE OF CHRIST'S RESURRECTION TENDS TO RESTRICT the meaning of the resurrection to life after death. This restriction leads to the church's self-understanding of a community locked away from the world waiting for its ultimate reward. However, the early Christian communities understood the meaning of Christ's resurrection in a much fuller sense. One of the gifts found in the liturgy of the Easter Vigil is the expanded meaning of the resurrection offered to the community of believers. In the song of the *Exsultet*, ancient words of the church are used to introduce us to the full mystery of the resurrection. We praise

the invisible God, the Father Almighty, and his only son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who paid for us the debt of Adam to the eternal Father, and who by his precious blood redeemed us from bondage to the ancient sin....by whose blood the doorposts of the faithful are made holy....This is the night in which all who believe in Christ are rescued from evil and the gloom of sin, are renewed in grace and holiness....in which, breaking the chains of death, Christ arises from hell in triumph....in which heaven and earth are joined—things human and things divine.¹

The words of the *Exsultet* reveal the breadth and depth of meanings to the resurrection, including redemption, sanctification, salvation, renewal, and victory over the powers of evil. One can see from this summary of the paschal mysteries that a one-day celebration cannot begin to proclaim the breadth of its effects upon believers. In order for the full effect of the resurrection to have a chance to be expe-

¹*Lutheran Book of Worship: Minister's Desk Edition* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978) 146. The text of the Easter proclamation is ancient, drawing its thought from Ambrose and Augustine, who made use of still older texts. The *LBW* text is from the Roman rite and may be the oldest complete form of this proclamation, found for the first time in the seventh century *Missale Gothicum*. See also Philip Pfatteicher, *Commentary on the Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990) 264.

rienced and understood by the church and world, time for reflection is required. Philip Pfatteicher writes that “the mystery of the risen Christ is so radically different from all human expectations that the church takes weeks liturgically to ponder it. The Sundays move from mystery to mystery as the wonder of the new life deepens.”² Therefore, the church set apart fifty days as a time to contemplate the resurrection of Jesus and to comprehend the myriad of meanings this astounding and staggering event has for the lives of Christians.

One way for worship leaders, and particularly preachers, to approach the fifty days of Easter is found in the recovery of the catechumenate process from the early centuries of the church. The fifty days of Easter can still be used as a time for mystagogy.³ The RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults), which first introduced the modern form of the catechumenate, states:

This is a time for the community and the neophytes together to grow in deepening their grasp of the paschal mystery and in making it part of their lives through meditation on the Gospel, sharing the Eucharist, and doing works of charity.⁴

Although mystagogy is, technically speaking, for the newly baptized members, during the Easter season all members celebrate what God has done for them in Jesus’ dying and rising. Since there is little doubt that many church members today have grown up with no Christian memory, it behooves preachers to make opportunities to preach intentionally on the central mystery of Christian faith, the *pasch* of Christ. What does it mean that Christ has been raised from the dead? How do we live in response to such a happening? These are just two mystagogical questions that need to be considered. The lectionary texts from Series A are helpful for this task of mysta-

²Pfatteicher, *Commentary*, 292. Patrick Regan points out that it was only in the last twenty years of the fourth century that the Christian feasts of Pentecost and Ascension became part of the Easter season. “Unfortunately the rise of these two feasts quickly altered a more fundamental unit of symbolic time which had already been firmly implanted nearly two centuries earlier, namely, the Great Fifty Days.” Patrick Regan, “The Fifty Days and the Fiftieth Day,” *Worship* 55/3 (1981) 194.

³Mystagogy’s goal is not only the systematic exposition of doctrine but the formation of believers to a new life in Christ. *Inter Oecumenici*, the guide to implement Vatican II’s liturgical reforms, states: “A homily on the sacred texts means an explanation, pertinent to the mystery celebrated and the special needs of the listeners, of some point in either the reading from sacred scripture or in another text from the Ordinary or Proper of the day’s Mass” (IO 54). Mystagogy’s concern is to keep the exposition of the Christian faith grounded in the mystery of redemption, especially as that mystery is accomplished today through the sacraments. For more information see Enrico Mazzo’s historical work, *Mystagogy* (New York: Pueblo, 1989). Mazzo notes that mystagogy’s Greek meaning refers to the teaching of doctrine, to “initiate into the mysterious” (1). See also James B. Dunning, *Echoing God’s Word* (Arlington, VA: The North American Forum on the Catechumenate, 1993).

⁴*The Rites of the Catholic Church*, vol. 1 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1990) 168. The RCIA includes mystagogy as the final step to Christian initiation. It describes this step as the time for the community and newly baptized to grow in their understanding of the paschal mystery and making it a part of their lives. The main setting for this is the Sunday mass during the Easter season. Mystagogy includes four aspects: shared prayer and faith stories, exercises to deepen sacramental awareness in life and ritual, examination of ministry, and liturgical celebrations. See “Eastertime: Studying the Scriptures,” *Liturgy* 10/2 (1992) 81. A Lutheran catechumenal resource is the three-volume work *Welcome to Christ* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997). These volumes include: *A Lutheran Introduction to the Catechumenate*, *Lutheran Rites for the Catechumenate*, *A Lutheran Catechetical Guide*. See also Frank Senn’s explanation of mystagogy and his attempt at mystagogical preaching in his text *A Stewardship of the Mysteries* (New York: Paulist, 1999).

gogy. They will assist the preacher in helping the church come to a faithful understanding of the resurrection and its meaning for our lives today.⁵

In looking at each lection of the Easter season we see that the readings follow the trajectory of meanings begun during the triduum (three days) and summarized in the *Exsultet*. However, the resurrection narrative of John 20 can be considered the centerpiece of all of the Easter season readings.⁶ A careful reading of the lectionary texts for the Easter season reveals this to be true, and preachers should understand John 20 as the thematic paradigm for the fifty days. In the upper room, Jesus, standing in the midst of the disciples and displaying the marks in his hands and feet, reveals the great reversal of Easter. The crucified Jesus is now the risen Christ. The end is not death; the end is life. This great reversal transforms the disciples from a fearful group huddled behind closed doors to a community filled with hope and empowered with Christ's peace and the Holy Spirit. They are then called to continue the work of Christ which includes spreading the news that sins are forgiven through Christ. As we turn our attention to the Sunday lections for the great fifty days we will keep three aspects found in this passage of the resurrection in mind: *reversal*, *new community*, and *mission*. As in any categorizing, not everything will fit neatly, nor will there always be clear distinctions. Each category is interrelated and in fact moves in a somewhat linear fashion: reversal > community > mission.

The readings for Series A come from four New Testament books. Though it is the year of Matthew, the Gospel of Matthew is not read during these fifty days. Easter season is historically John's season, and so it is here, with Luke selected for the Third Sunday of Easter. The first readings are from the book of Acts and the second readings come from 1 Peter. The following is an example of how this thematic paradigm could develop across the Easter season.

I. REVERSAL

The resurrection brought an entirely new situation to the followers of Jesus. Words such as "born anew," "repentance," "redemption," "a living hope," were employed by the first Christians as an attempt to describe this new life. God's work of life in Christ is set against the power of death. It is important to remember, however, that the resurrection was not a complete break with the past. God's work in the past continues and reverses our present situation. John 14:15-21 focuses on the

⁵"If readers, exegetes, and preachers fail to take into account the liturgical context of the passages selected, we run the risk of developing an understanding of this pericope system as providing nothing more than a serialized history of nascent Christianity. In fact the whole series provides the biblical basis for the church's mystagogia....Having been buried and raised again as participants in the death and resurrection of Jesus, our lives are radically and permanently altered and our relationships with one another are qualitatively changed. People who have died and who live now in the new life of Jesus Christ, in this end of all the ages, continue to be confronted by the implications of this transformation through the mystagogical teaching and preaching of the community. Easter is the season most especially devoted to the renewal of our inquiry into the meaning and implications of the resurrection of the Lord for our life together as the church, the risen body of Christ, the sacrament of God's abiding presence in the world." Cheryl Dieter and Brian Helge, "The Lectionary for Easter," *Liturgy* 3/1 (1982) 43.

⁶*Ibid.*, 43.

continuity of God's love and faithfulness (as does Stephen's sermon). Even Jesus' departure does not disrupt God's attention to the church.⁷ The idea of being born from above (or anew) in this world brings the resurrection event into the present for Christians. Especially in John 14 and 17 eternal life is not life beyond or after physical death, but a dimension or quality of life that is already present for persons who believe in Jesus.⁸ John seeks to assure his readers/hearers of the continuing living presence of Jesus. "Jesus' death is not the end of his ministry, but rather the beginning of a broader and more effective one, and the resurrection marks its beginning point."⁹ The following Easter readings also illustrate the ways in which the resurrection has caused a present reversal in the lives of Jesus' followers:

- John 20:19-31: The one who was slain now lives and reigns
- 1 Pet 1:3-9, 17-23: God's act of redemption brings about new life for believers
- 1 Pet 2:19-25: Christ's wounds provide healing
- 1 Pet 3:13-22: Resurrection means victory over demonic forces
- John 20:19-31; Acts 2:36-47: Resurrection evokes repentance and confession; life must be reoriented

II. A NEW COMMUNITY

The resurrected community reminds us that salvation is more than an individual event. Resurrection has social aspects. "Salvation was [a] new social order, forgiven and free, in the midst of a worn out world."¹⁰ This community also reveals that God's will extends beyond Jesus to the church. The characteristics of the new community are manifold. Most evident is that the church is not a casual gathering of like-minded folks, it is a called community rooted in a different reality and summoned to different conduct. First Peter is an intriguing text for Christians today because in many respects this Christian community's struggles in a pre-Christian world relate well to our post-Christian context. Because of the many references to distinctions between Christianity and pagan culture, it appears that the newly born Christians were from a pagan background. The resurrection, which they now share in through baptism, transformed them into a new people, a "priesthood." Yet the resurrection has not changed the world in which they live; sufferings still persist. Despite the condition of the world, God's grace is proclaimed in rebirth through Christ's resurrection, through the life-giving gospel, and in membership in God's holy nation. Obedience to the gospel and conformity to Christ are the responses to God's gracious acts. Conformity comes in the shape of suffering love for Christ and for the world. This is the Christian's new identity. We learn that the church lives

⁷Walter Brueggemann, *Easter*, in *Proclamation Four*, Series A (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 43.

⁸D. Moody Smith, *John* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 79.

⁹*Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁰David Buttrick, *The Mystery and the Passion: A Homiletic Reading of the Gospel Traditions* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992) 2.

not *after* Christ but *under* him. The texts throughout the fifty days emphasize the following communal aspects:

- John 20:19-31; 14:15-21; Acts 1:6-14: Christ abides with this community through the Spirit, granting authority, comfort, and peace
- Luke 23:13-49, the sermons in Acts: Christ abides with this community through the interpretation of Scripture
- Luke 23; Acts 2:42-47; the passages from 1 Peter:¹¹ Christ abides with this community through the bath and meal
- Acts 2:42-47: The community is an inclusive fellowship of giving
- Acts 2:36-41; John 20:19-31; 1 Pet 2:2-10; John 14:15-21; 1 Pet 2:19-25: The community is the place for maturing in faith and commitment through repentance, learning, and obedience to Christ
- John 14:1-14: The community is commanded to love

III. MISSION TO THE WORLD

The new community and individual Christians are called to be the continuing presence of resurrection to the world. John focuses mission in one word: love. The church is sent, as Jesus was sent, by and through God's love. "The early church clearly is not a withdrawn sect which immunized itself from public reality. Rather it was a force which participated in the public world at great risk, but with great power."¹² The risen Christ authorizes the church for its work. We hear the call to mission, to a journey, to the passage (*pasch*) with Christ from death to a new life.

- Acts 2:42-47; Acts 17:22-31: The community is engaged with the world through evangelistic growth
- 1 Pet 2:19-25; Acts 7:55-60; 1 Pet 4:12-14; 5:6-11: The community is engaged with the world and suffering results; therefore, endurance is needed
- John 17:1-11; 1 Pet 1:17-23; John 14:1-14; Acts 17:22-31: The community is engaged with the world but is not of the world
- Acts 7:55-60; 1 Pet 2:1-10: The community has the power to heal the world
- John 20:19-31; Luke 23:13-49; Acts 17:22-31: Those who hear the word and receive the Spirit, who are washed and fed, are sent out with authority to proclaim the good news

¹¹First Peter has so much baptismal imagery in the first half of the letter that most scholars consider it to be either part of a homily preached at the occasion of baptism or an exhortation to newly baptized exiles who live in a hostile world. See Gerhard Krodel, *Hebrews; James; 1 and 2 Peter; Jude; Revelation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 64. In either case, baptism is understood in this passage as death of the old self, death to sin, a renunciation of one's former life, and rebirth into the life of Christ.

¹²Brueggemann, *Easter*, 27.

- John 14:1-14; Acts 2:14a, 22-32: The mission is to follow the way of Christ and continue his work

The season of Easter was created to be a time of mystagogy for neophytes and all the faithful, a time to plumb the meanings of God's redemption through the *pasch* of Christ. This year's lectionary helps preachers to do just that. It will provide the good news that the resurrection of Christ was not the end of Christ in this world; instead, the resurrection appearances initiate and point toward a deeper and more comprehensive presence of Christ in the world through the church.¹³ The promise is fulfilled: God is with us, Christ is with us, the Spirit is with us. This world of sorrow, pain, and death is passing away; a new world has been inaugurated. All the faithful are part of this new world that has come and is to come. This is what the church celebrates and teaches during the great fifty days. Thomas Talley recognizes this:

Until his coming again the Church rejoices at his presence, his parousia, in the sacraments—and not just baptism and Eucharist, but the whole liturgical complex by which the richness of our salvation is articulated, the all-embracing mystery of worship. Yet, there lies deep within that mystery of faith the certainty that such paschal joy is not its own end. Almost from the beginning, it would see that rejoicing has issued and issues still into hope for the day of his triumphal advent, and watching for his parousia, until his coming again.¹⁴ ⊕

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¹³Raymond Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1984) 646.

¹⁴Thomas Talley, *Origins of the Liturgical Year* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1986) 70.