

# *Preaching Easter Faith at the Beginning of the New Millennium*

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It is deeply providential that the lectionary points us to Mark's resurrection narrative on the first Easter of the new millennium. Easter is the culmination and fruition of Jesus' mission, and according to Mark 3:27, Jesus made it clear that his mission was to "bind" the "strong man" (Satan), and to "plunder" his "house." This Easter, preachers will look out across congregations moving primarily to the rhythms of ancient spring rites of fertility and renewal. These rhythms will run deeper this year, because the god Chronos has served up another millennial cycle to augment nature's rhythms. Coupled with the palpable joy of nature's renewal is the ongoing relief of having made it safely into the year 2000 and the new millennium. Preachers, therefore, will face the task of transporting listeners who are joyfully celebrating the cyclical renewal of the world after a contrived millennial apocalypse, into an anamnesis of the actual apocalyptic culmination of Mark's gospel. The scene that awaits our hearers is not a festival of seasonal delight, but a frightening, disconcerting, and challenging scene in a graveyard where a huge stone has been lifted from its moorings in a final plundering of Satan's house of sin, evil, and death.

In order for our hearers to understand what is happening in this graveyard, it is helpful to provide minimal background concerning Mark's frame of reference, and what makes this graveyard scene so important. Satan, the "prince of the demons" is a symbolic representative of the "principalities and powers" identified throughout the New Testament (e.g. 1 Cor. 2:6, Eph. 2:2). At the foundation of the earth, these powers were originally ordered for creative purposes by God and God's helpmate Wisdom (Prov. 8:22ff.). These powers can achieve a malignant force and personality of their own, however, apart from God's purposes. At the temptation of Jesus, it was these powers that Satan offered to Jesus in return for his allegiance. In the apocalyptic theological imagination of the Hebrew people, Satan was the cultural, social, political, and spiritual arch-demon whose history of unjust and abusive power had invaded every crevice of human life. The Way of Jesus throughout Mark's gospel, from the healing of Jairus' daughter, to the casting out of Legion, to the rebuke of Peter, is a way of resisting ("binding") and confronting ("plundering") this "strong man's" house — of finding and plundering his "powers."

It is fitting, therefore, that the final scene of Mark's gospel is in a graveyard. Graveyards are counter-spaces. Like the wilderness of Jesus' temptation by Satan, the graveyard reminds us of another reading of our lives — apart from the myths and rituals of orientation-disorientation-reorientation that we tell ourselves — apart from the metanarratives of millennialism and "eternal return" that we conjure to illumine our personal and social chronologies. What do we find in graveyards? Bodies: bodies that have fallen victim to time's destructive powers.

Do we want to steer our sermonic vehicles onto this graveyard scene, into this counter-space, on Easter Sunday? Better, perhaps, to stay on the high road amidst the finery and flowers. Better to be the purveyor of a friendlier, less disruptive hope than

to drive through the gates of the cemetery and have to overhear the unraveled stories of so many bodies. But this would be to avoid the scene on which Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James, and Salome are found on Easter Sunday. “Very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, *they went to the tomb*” (v.2). This too, is where we have to go on Easter Sunday. And the reason that we go there is precisely to attend deeply and profoundly to the bodies that lie buried there. The women “bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him” (v.1).

This simple ritual of care for Jesus’ dead body, as ordinary as it was, exemplifies a powerful form of counter-memory that the church must re-learn in each generation. The church remembers all victims of the principalities and powers. We do not forget bodies that have borne, and continue to bear, the painful burden of all of our human errors at ordering and interpreting human life. We do not forget bodies that once may have known the delight-filled ordering of the powers in the creativity of childhood and youth, but that eventually fell victim to the malignant turning of those powers from God’s purposes through disease, violence, depression, or disintegration. We also remember all who are shut up inside dark tombs of despair and hopelessness, in marginal spaces, so that societies can stay focused on the stories we tell to reconcile ourselves *to* time and *in* time. On Easter, we go to the tomb, and we bring spices so that we will remember what our hope is really all about — the actual plundering of death’s house itself — in all of its horrible guises.

### *Life Over Death, Life in Spite of Death, or Life Against Death*

The common mistake that preachers make with the text of Mark’s resurrection narrative is to focus on verses five and six as the crux of the story. A young man sits dressed in a white robe — a calm, ethereal, angelic vision. Instead of seeing him as *Mark’s* messenger, hinting to us about how we *should* feel, (i.e. alarmed), we like to assume that this young man is a kind of cosmic therapist, trying to calm our fears when he says “Do not be alarmed” (v. 6). When he announces that Jesus is raised, that “he is not here”(v. 6) we may move too quickly to a spirit of anticipation and hope, instead of lingering on the terror in that acclamation. When he focuses our attention on Jesus’ disappearance: “Look, there is the place they laid him” (v.6), it is tempting to begin rummaging about in our bag of theological tricks in order to interpret to our hearers the “contemporary meaning” of this disappearance.

These interpretations tend to run in two different directions. Preachers with more transcendent premises tend to latch onto the angelic presence and the declaration of Jesus as “raised” (v.6). They assert that this is clearly a vertical, supra-historical victory of life *over* death. Time and the ravaging of human bodies by the principalities and powers no longer matter, for we are promised that in Christ, we shall be raised. We will escape these horrors, ultimately. Hallelujah!

Those who harbor more existentialist premises, tend to draw their listeners’ attention to the presence of this angelic messenger *in the very tomb itself*. This, they assert, is clearly a picture of the presence of God’s grace in our lives *in spite of* all of the bad stuff that happens to us. In spite of the fact that the principalities and powers are bending time and history to their own evil advantage, there continues to be some (albeit minimal and epiphanic) manifestation of grace to see us through. Hallelujah! The transcendent interpretation addresses the fear of mortality that nags at us when we visit graveyards, and the existentialist interpretation addresses the fear of meaning-

lessness and despair that haunts us as we move from stone to stone. Neither interpretation, however, deals with the growing *alarm* that Mark intends to pervade this text, an alarm that eventually turns into “terror and amazement” in verse eight. This is the palpable alarm that Jesus the Christ is *still active*. It is verse seven that turns alarm into terror at the words: “But 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.”

The women are confronted with the fact that Jesus’ body, marked with the brutality of human sin and evil, is still an active, purposive, *missional* body, that refuses to be anointed as another victim of the principalities and powers. Even after crucifixion and death, Jesus continues his mission! Consistent with the Jesus who healed Jairus’ daughter and cast out Legion is the Jesus of Mark’s Easter who continues to move in huge and dramatic strides *against* the powers of sin, evil, and death in the world.

This same Christ “goes ahead of” the churches into the new millennium, inviting us to go ever more deeply into the marginal, counter-spaces of life, where bodies are ravaged by the powers. Once there, we are challenged to turn counter-memory into hope, to turn a ritual of anointing into a terrifying and “amazing” mission of resistance (binding Satan) and confrontation (plundering Satan’s house) with those whose lives are being destroyed by the principalities and powers.

### *Stories of Resistance and Confrontation*

Christ’s mission of resistance and confrontation can be found in every generation. It is especially important in the new millennium, however, because the principalities and powers have achieved new types and levels of subtlety. Two recent examples of this mission come to mind, one from last Easter (the old millennium), and one from this first Easter of the new millennial year.

Bridges have a special place in the heart of the Slavic people. In Slavic folklore the devil scratched the surface of the earth with long fingernails in order to keep people apart and to disrupt unity. Slavic people see bridges as a link between heaven and earth, and a link between those who would otherwise be separated by ethnicity, religion, or race. To build a bridge is a great blessing. To destroy a bridge, the greatest sin.

One year ago in Yugoslavia, motivated by Easter faith, Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Christians gathered every Sunday on the remaining bridges throughout the countryside of Yugoslavia to pray for peace. They also asked people of faith in the United States and around the world to do the same. They continued those dangerous weekly vigils until violence—NATO, Serb, and KLA—was stopped. These Christians were living Easter faith in a military graveyard, pitting life *against* death, turning a ritual of death into an amazing and terrifying mission of resistance and confrontation on behalf of all those whose lives were being overrun by the principalities and powers.

This Easter season, in Louisville, Kentucky, a seminary student works long hours in a men’s prison, confronting perpetrators of domestic abuse and other forms of violence with the reality of their transgression against God and others, and offering a pathway toward a reordering of their lives according to God’s purposes. No matter that she herself was abused as a child. No matter that the demons that plague these men have also left indelible marks on her body. She is living out Easter faith. Following Christ, whose body was marked with the brutality of human sin and evil, hers is still an active, purposive, *missional* body, refusing to be anointed as another of the powers’ victims.

Easter in the new millennium is in direct continuity with Easter over the past two thousand years. Easter, in every generation, is the proclamation of life *against* death. It is God's claiming of the church — alarmed, terrified, and amazed as we might be — as a missional body whose purpose is to finish plundering the strong man's house in Christ's name. There is joy in this, but it is not a cheap and easy joy. It is the joy that overtakes us as we glimpse something of the re-creation by God of those bodies that the principalities and powers have de-created. This joy is akin to the delight that Wisdom must have felt as the principalities and powers were first ordered with majesty and beauty at the foundation of the world. This joy emerges wherever we see the chaos of violence, injustice, disease, depression, and suffering re-ordered as God intends. Whenever we see these things in our churches, in our neighborhoods, in our cities and towns, then it is time to shout with joy instead of terror: "Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!"



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