

Easter's coming

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [March 20, 2013](#) issue



Mosaic, Wolfram Plotzke, World War I memorial in the cemetery of Kreuzweingarten, Germany. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Túrelío](#).

Early in my ministry I heard Bill Laws, an experienced pastor, denominational leader and mentor, say it takes a full five years to learn enough about a congregation to be an effective pastor. After five years, Bill said, your ministry begins and you will be trusted enough to do meaningful work. He was speaking at what was my first pastors' retreat. Like others in the group of young colleagues, all of us in our first full-time positions, I was eager to get on, move up and find something more expansive and promising. We argued with Bill. Our small congregations weren't going anywhere. We were all eager to move. Five years seemed like an eternity.

It took years for me to learn that Bill Laws was right, and so I read Martin Copenhaver's reflection on long pastorates ("[Staying power](#)") with great interest. One year ago I retired from a 26-year ministry with one congregation, and I'm still pondering it and feeling deep gratitude for it. I experience both nostalgia and relief that I don't have to prepare another Easter sermon. Copenhaver notes the challenge of preaching 16 Christmas Eve sermons; I recall preparing my 26th and final Easter sermon. The task seemed newly daunting, almost overwhelming. How could I preach

a text that everybody had heard many times, a story many knew and held in their hearts as well as their minds?

Over the years I've been both comforted and amused by Reinhold Niebuhr's confession that on Easter and Christmas he would attend a "high" church where there would be great music but little if any preaching. No preacher, said Niebuhr, is up to the task on Easter and Christmas.

Yet in a way the years spent preaching Easter prepared me well by bringing me closer to the heart of resurrection news. Easter and Christmas sermon preparation drove me deeper into the gospel and into all the ways that resurrection has been treated theologically, both historically and currently. Others have struggled with this story and tried to find words to express it, and as the years passed I had the companionship of many books on the subject. At the same time I was being driven more deeply into life. Losses accumulated—parents, older friends, contemporaries—and reminded me of my own mortality.

My wife's older brother—a father, husband, grandfather, great-grandfather, educator and athlete—died on the first Sunday of Lent. I was reminded that we were moving toward the celebration of resurrection. I thought of the radical conviction upon which our faith rests—that there is a power loose in the universe that overcomes even death.

My wife's father died several years ago at the same time of year. She sat by his bedside on the last night, holding his hand. "What did you do all night long?" I asked. "What did you say?"

"I ran out of things to say," she explained, "so I sang all the Easter hymns I could remember, and I said, 'Easter's coming, Daddy, Easter's coming.'" I treasure that affirmation of Easter's great unexplainable announcement.

Every year, in the midst of Easter sermon preparation, I made a point of reading John Updike's poem "Seven Stanzas at Easter." One passage is particularly striking: "Let us not mock God with metaphor, / analogy, sidestepping transcendence . . . / let us walk through the door."

Tempting as it is to try, it is a waste of time to attempt to explain the resurrection. Some things cannot be reduced to an explanation and are greatly diminished in the process of trying. The task is proclamation, not explanation—offering an invitation to "walk through the door" into a new world where the ultimate reality is not the death

of all things: the ultimate reality is God and love everlasting.