

Thunderous yes: Preaching to the Easter crowds

by [Matt Fitzgerald](#) in the [April 2, 2014](#) issue



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In a few weeks there will be less elbow room in the church pews. Neighbors whom I usually see only in the grocery store will show up in the sanctuary, as will church shoppers who have not church-shopped since Christmas, lapsed members, adult children of lapsed members, and total strangers. The Easter crowd is coming.

The assumption is that my job will be to make sense of scripture, to reduce the mystery, and to make God understandable. No one has ever put it to me that plainly, but for those who want a modern-minded faith the assumption is implicit. You bring your questions to an expert. I have fallen prey to this reasoning; I've preached dozens of sermons that aim to explain, clarify, and demystify.

One of the reasons I love Easter crowds, however, is that their arrival on Easter stands as a direct refutation of such nonsense.

If people came to church to hear reason, Easter would not be the most popular Sunday of the year because *there is nothing sensible about the resurrection*. Easter ought to leave us preachers scratching our heads. We are not able to define or even describe the resurrection. The empty tomb doesn't fit into our understanding.

Moreover, the crowds who come on Easter come to *church*. They don't want to step through the narthex and into my mind in order to settle down comfortably next to a reductionist misunderstanding of the resurrection. The first thing we pastors ought to admit on Easter is that God has done the incomprehensible.

But not the illogical. When our daughter was in kindergarten the church gave her and each of her Sunday school classmates purple plastic Easter eggs to take home. The egg contained a slip of paper. She was right in the midst of learning how to read so she seized on the paper's monosyllabic words as eagerly as if they were jellybeans. She read with confidence. "He is . . ." Then she paused, carefully considering both syllables in the third word. "He is . . . raisins?"

"He is raisins" is illogical. "He is risen" is merely incomprehensible. When preachers speak about God they must distinguish between things that do not make sense and things that we cannot make sense of. Easter falls in the latter category.

We prize the mind's ability to penetrate, grasp, order, and assimilate, but in this case our stupefaction is a very good thing. As Rowan Williams said, "You only get anywhere near the truth when all the easy things to say about God are dismantled, so that your image of God is no longer just a big projection of your own self-centered wish fulfillment fantasies." You only get anywhere near the truth when all the sensible things to say about God are overwhelmed by the fact that Jesus just stepped up out of the grave.

Of course, you can ignore him. But the crowds on Easter Sunday do not want us to ignore him. They may turn a blind eye to coffee hour, committee service, new member classes, Sunday school, and the church and all its trappings. That's too bad. It's their loss and ours as well. But they are wise enough to come to the heart of the matter. Easter gives us the opportunity to name the faith they aspire to: they long for a God who cannot be contained, confined, or even described, a God whose victory over the grave could redefine their lives.

Those of us who have decided to live inside the church can easily forget the limited options that exist outside it. The people in the Easter crowd know these options inside out and backward. And they are fleeing them, or trying to escape them for a day or an hour, hoping to catch a glimpse of that which pulses just beyond the border of their everyday existence. The Easter crowds are dissatisfied, and they come to worship hungry.

More than 15 years ago, when I lived in Minneapolis, my wife and I were invited to our neighbors' home for a dinner party. It was the dead of winter. Our hosts were a middle-aged Finnish couple named Eeva and Nils. The kind of gloomy northern Europeans who only come out of the sauna to drink and make sure the world hasn't become cheerful in their absence.

I was assigned a seat between Nils and another young neighbor, a college student named Steven. This made me the referee in a drinking contest between a depressive Finn and an excitable frat brother.

As the evening wore on and these two got deeper and deeper into their cups it became apparent that they approached life with starkly differing philosophies. Steven was concerned to make it big, earning the maximum amount of pleasure and success in the shortest possible time. Nils simply wanted to crawl into a dark room with heated rocks.

Steven prattled on, "I should write a mystery novel. I could make a mint! Or maybe I could go to law school? What do you think?"

And Nils answered, *"What does it matter?"*

"Or I could get into computers. Maybe in some city with good rock climbing!"

*"Why bother?"*

"Honestly, I think what I should do is first learn how to sail and then become a doctor. I could retire early and live on my boat."

*"Or you could drown."*

It seemed not so much an argument as people from two different planets trying to have a conversation. But behind Nils's and Steven's competing philosophies sat the same dead option. Both men believed in the grave. Perhaps they had never been offered an alternative.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that death forces those who place their faith in the grave to either "frantically affirm" life or to hold life in "indifferent contempt." When death has the final word life is either a cheap gift expiring quickly or our only shot at an eternity's worth of meaning. All or nothing.

I suspect most members of the Easter crowd hold much more in common with Steven than with Nils. They are asked to spend their lifetimes protesting death, asserting their strength against its grip. At work and at home they strive to squeeze an eternity's worth of meaning, pleasure, security, and satisfaction from their diminishing life spans. Regardless of how successful the protest, death still wins. They are all going to the grave. As Karl Barth put it, death still stands over them, still speaks its icy no to each and every one of them.

These strangers come to hear God speak a stronger, thunderous yes. The '50s are over. The crowd may not require extra ushers. The '80s are over. The crowd may be a baker's dozen. Regardless, we are called to proclaim a wonder so large that the combined minds of 10,000 guests could not hope to hold it.

I like to imagine every preacher in every congregation across our country speaking to the Easter crowd on tiptoe: "Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed."

We get to tell the story and our guests know this. They know what they are getting themselves in for. They know that resurrection defies logic. That is why they come sidling through our doors—every one of them comes to worship hoping for the resurrection

Pity the preacher who tries to soft-pedal Easter! The first time in my life that I went to worship on my own volition was on Easter Sunday years ago, when I was in my early twenties. Communion was served by intinction. I walked toward the table suppressing a sudden urge to run headlong toward the elements. I was surprised by my own eagerness, surprised to realize how much I needed Jesus, how badly I had missed his presence. When I reached the preacher I held my hands out expectantly, ready for Christ's body and his blood. He placed the bread in my hands and said calmly, "Sustenance for your faith journey." It was as if he were handing me a bag of trail mix before a hike. Jesus went unmentioned and therefore Jesus went unrecognized. My need for him went unmet.

Easter preachers have the privilege of telling the crowd that the moment mortality tries to pronounce a grim no over their graves, death will be overwhelmed and overmatched by Christ's incomprehensible yes. That's what happens to us when we stop believing in the grave and hold fast to the resurrection instead. We get caught up in it and are lifted up above the measly options that death presents.

Easter preachers do not have to understand this miracle. Bonhoeffer said, "Christ did not come into this world so that we might understand him, but that we might cling to him in order to be caught up in the immense event of resurrection." Our task is simple: proclaim it.

After that we could go on to tell the crowd that Christ's resurrection could change them. They could find it easier to forgive, knowing that eternity is far too long to bear a grudge. They could live confidently, having come to realize they need not earn their way in the world; eternity is already theirs. They could live lives of small generosity, listening to wounded souls tell their stories long after boredom has set in, letting harried young parents and their elders go before them in line at the DMV. For suddenly the crowd has all the time in the world. Only a fool wants to rush through eternity.

They could live in ease, call their loved ones from the office, pull their children out of school for a mid-week day at the zoo, stare at the sky for 45 minutes without moving, just drinking in the wonder, letting something deep within their souls become coordinated with the rhythms of spring breeze, blue sky, early daffodil, as they thrill to the beauty of this earth. Or they could go deeper, let down all their defenses, take off all their armor, because they do not need it anymore. We could tell the Easter crowd this: "God has just won every battle for you. Death has been defeated. Now God wants you to stop fighting. Live easy." In short, we could help the people in the Easter crowd take a step toward heaven. They can do so not by dying, but by realizing that their lives have just begun.

Despite all of this I confess that something in me resists sharing the Good News so freely. What preacher hasn't stared out at the Easter crowd and thought of budgets and buildings that need tuck-pointing? I have looked at needy searching strangers and seen potential pledging units. I've been tempted to look out at all those well-dressed guests and speak this as a benediction, "Do you think it all just happens? Do you think this is all for free? Don't you know how badly the church needs you?"

Of course I don't. We are called to be good hosts. "Some have entertained angels" speaks like a scold into every pious ear.

This year I will strive to be honest. I imagine giving this Easter benediction: "The lilies will start to droop just hours after the last trumpet note fades to brunch. Someday soon you're going to jerk awake and find death behaving as if the game

were not already over, the battle not yet won. We need you. The church needs you. But you need us even more. It may defeat your death, but what are you going to do when Easter Sunday fails to solve your every problem?"

If there is any faith in the members of the crowd, they will know the answer. They will come back to church, hungry for the resurrection. If there is any faith in us, we will meet them with a shout of joy.