

Say what needs to be said

By [Kenneth H. Carter Jr.](#)

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I remember a man at a congregation I once served who was an accomplished house painter and a member of the choir. He was also a man of few words, but when he spoke I listened. One day he said in passing, "You know, Ken, on big services like Christmas and Easter, you don't need to try so hard. Just say what needs to be said." This year I have taken that advice to heart, trusting that the word of life, death and resurrection is sufficient to speak in, through and beyond me. If God can raise the dead, God can surely accomplish something through the Easter sermon. With that confession, a few thoughts:

I'm trying to resist the urge to find a compelling illustration. I am all for illustrations, and like most preachers I have my own collection of them. But at times they can overwhelm and even distract from the text. The Easter narrative is compelling and provides a superb structure for a sermon filled with suspense, surprise and discovery. Mark, this year's Gospel, offers the briefest and most unsettling of the resurrection accounts, inviting the preacher to struggle with the mystery, fear and astonishment that seemed to overwhelm the first disciples. The epistle stands as a distinct counterpoint to the Gospel, for it narrates Paul's confidence in the resurrection as a tradition passed to him and as a vivid personal experience.

It's true that most people who come to church on Easter will know the story's basic outline. But people's contexts change, and this Easter some may hear the story in a new way. Many have seen their retirement funds flatline; others have experienced the loss of a dream or the death of a vocational pursuit. Some will welcome the good news as a timely reminder of assurance; others will have intellectual doubts. They will bring with them a range of emotions, from fear to discouragement. These different perspectives can be found in the day's texts if we mine them deeply and faithfully.

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I am also thinking of poetry this Easter, and in particular, of Wendell Berry's "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front," from *The Country of Marriage*. Berry admonishes the reader to "practice resurrection," a needed word in the midst of our anxiety and turmoil. I also have the late John Updike's "Seven Stanzas for Easter" in mind (from *Telephone Poles and Other Poems*). These writers of deep faith, one situated in rural Kentucky and the other in suburbia, capture the meaning and even necessity of the resurrection in the midst of everyday life—and the compelling power of the Easter gospel that goes against the grain of our cultural ethos. Both Updike and Berry explore the physicality and embodiment of the resurrection. Updike's poem is starkly incarnational, while Berry presses the Easter story forward toward its implications, especially in the habits and practices of everyday life: what if we actually practiced resurrection?

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Easter Sunday also reminds me that the sermon doesn't need to carry the full burden of the day's meaning. The strong hymns of faith—I am thinking of Charles Wesley's "Christ The Lord Is Risen Today" from my own tradition, among others—proclaim the gospel, as do the creeds. There is a wealth of material, within and beyond the scripture, in the liturgy of the church and in gifted poets whose words are means of grace. My simple task is to make the connections, to say what needs to be said and to stand on the promises of a God who continues to make all things new.