

Preaching resurrection in the middle of Lent

By [Beth Merrill Neel](#)

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I am a big fan of the liturgical calendar.

As someone who plans worship, knowing what season it is helps. It helps us with the colors, the themes, the hymns, the scripture, the tone of worship. That being said, I must also admit that the liturgical season is an entirely human construct. We invented it to help us know God. God did not invent it to help God know us.

Yet I find myself in a seasonal muddle this year. Last week I conducted two memorial services, and they were not particularly Lent-y. The opening hymn at the first was “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee.” The choir sang Beethoven’s “Hallelujah” from *The Mount of Olives* at the second. A few weeks ago, our retired soprano section leader, a helluva woman in her 80s, sang an introit and a benediction response that were full of Alleluias. My own husband, giving the benediction at the Ash Wednesday service, spoke out his usual “Hallelujah, hallelujah, Amen.”

What’s a liturgical-seasoned girl to do?

The funny thing about the liturgical calendar, and holidays/holy days, is that it’s all play-acting. We’re pretending Jesus is born again; we’re pretending the Holy Spirit has lit a flame on the apostles’ heads; we’re pretending Jesus is walking toward his execution as if we have no idea what might happen next. But we do know what happens next. That’s why we’re in this story in the first place.

It’s always with a little guilt over my own pretense that I approach the Good Friday service. *We know what happens next*, so if there is genuine sorrow, it is about the sorrow in life right now, in the world today. Maybe. I suppose we can – and do – feel sorrow for tragedy and suffering, whether it is the suffering we are going through right now or the suffering of innocent victims scattered among the pages of history.

Is my sorrow over Jesus’ death mediated by my belief that he rose? Does the joy at the end of the story erase the pain near the end of the story? What does it mean to utter Alleluias and preach resurrection in the middle of Lent?

The second memorial service last week was for a woman who had been a matriarch of the congregation. She loved butterflies, and so in her memory we hung our Easter butterfly banners, and in my homily, I quoted “Life Lessons From a Butterfly,” which had been among her keepsakes. “Let go of the past. Trust the future. Embrace change. Come out of the cocoon. Unfurl your wings. Dare to get off the ground. Ride on the breezes. Savor all the flowers. Put on your brightest colors. Let your beauty show.” The words might be a little twee for some, but they reflect a sweeter approach to life held by more than one woman I’ve known in her 90s. They are Easter words – “come out of the cocoon, put on your brightest colors.”

But if we take the season of Lent seriously – if we take this time before Easter as a time for reflection, repentance, and change – maybe these are Lent words, too. Let go of the past (and stop doing things that hurt others because of hurt done to you in the past). Embrace change (repent, turn around, choose love instead of hate, trust instead of fear). Unfurl your wings (do not put your light under a bushel). Dare to get off the ground (follow me).

There is no Lent without resurrection; we invented Lent after the Easter event. We might see the three crosses, but we see the tomb and the garden just beyond them. Maybe, then, knowing the life after death that awaits us gives us courage to face the hard pieces of our lives. And maybe an ‘alleluia’ or two in the midst of repentance is not a bad thing.

He is risen! Take up your cross and follow him.

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