



SUNDAYS AND SEASONS  
PREACHING

YEAR C 2016



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## PREFACE

Welcome to the second issue of this aid for preachers, *Sundays and Seasons: Preaching*. For decades, *Proclamation* and then *New Proclamation* have been regular preaching companions issued by this publisher. They were worthy resources, and Augsburg Fortress is pleased to continue to make available some of their past content. But various changes in the landscape made it clear that it was time to take a fresh look at the topic and how to be of help.

Many fine preaching resources are available, so what makes this one worth your attention? A few things might be mentioned. The introduction by Benjamin Stewart that follows lays out the vision for this endeavor, and if you are new to this resource, I encourage you to read it. In brief, *Sundays and Seasons: Preaching* takes a holistic approach to the preaching task. Rather than focusing on a single reading as the entire basis for a sermon, in which case the sermon tends to become a thing apart from the rest of worship, this project imagines the sermon, all the readings, other proper and seasonal texts, the entire liturgy, the whole worshipping assembly, the day, and the world all being interconnected, all in dialogue with each other. That sounds grandiose, and of course no sermon is going to be able to link with all of that. But for the preacher even to think about all those elements can lead to a richer, more vital listening experience for the worshiper.

If that sort of broad-picture thinking sounds familiar, it may be because this resource is part of a well-known family. Over the past twenty years, *Sundays and Seasons* has become a nearly indispensable part of worship planning for many Lutherans. Partly that's because everything is gathered in one place, but I think another reason is that it lifts up just this sort of integrated approach to worship—an approach that also informed the development of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. For worship to be lively, it needs to be more than just one thing after another. Liturgical preaching such as this resource proposes is one of the keys to that.

Such an integrative approach to the preaching task is in harmony with the Reformation principle that “scripture interprets scripture.” It is one example of another feature of this new publication, namely its attention to Lutheran perspectives. We confess and value “one holy catholic and

apostolic church,” yet various theological traditions each lift up their own important insights. Lutheran preaching has, from the beginning, lifted up the importance of speaking both law and gospel, the judgment on our sin that throws us upon God's mercy won by Christ, and the assurance of that forgiveness and new life. To highlight that beneficial dynamic, we are leaning primarily on writers—mostly Lutheran, but also others—who articulate well this foundational dialectic.

As you flip ahead into the days of the church year (and this one publication covers the entire year C), you will see a familiar pattern and some familiar material. These connections with the *Sundays and Seasons: Guide to Worship Planning* are intentional. The page design is similar, and for the preacher's convenience we have excerpted material from the parent book that is of particular use in sermon preparation. But that's only the beginning. For a number of years now, Gail Ramshaw has been producing Lectionary Notes that look at each lectionary day from a variety of perspectives. From this treasury we have extracted the sections most likely to spur creative thought for sermons.

And then there is the new content. Given the commentaries that pastors tend to collect and the many available sources for exegetical analysis, it seemed less important in this resource to unpack each reading in detail. The material from the past several cycles of *New Proclamation* is still available for that purpose, as noted at the end of each day's entry. Rather, we asked those crafting the “From a Scholar” sections to address the following questions: As you head into worship where your pastor will be preaching, what would you want him or her to be aware of in these readings, within this liturgy, on this day? That is, out of all the background that could be laid out for the preacher's preparation, what are the most important insights to convey? And, for that matter, are there land mines to be avoided—common misunderstandings or wrong turnings that divert us from what is truly central? The result, from our writers, are pithy, well-focused essays.

The “From a Preacher” section gathers up all that has come before—material from *Sundays and Seasons*, from Gail Ramshaw, from the scholarly writer—and proposes a

way into a sermon. The writers for this part are all people who preach regularly. We don't expect that their approaches will always find their way directly into your sermon, but we hope that they will at least spur your own imagination in helpful directions. And if the main essay isn't enough, it is followed by some "Making Connections" bullet points that may also prove useful. You will notice that in most cases, one of those points talks about ideas for a time with children, since that is a part of worship for many of us.

At this point, something more should be said about the "From a Preacher" writers, because they turned out to be a remarkable assemblage. They bring a rich diversity of voices from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and beyond. Some are well known, while others are newer to their ministry. They serve in many different contexts. Yet as editor, I was deeply impressed by the gifts they brought to this task. I think you too will be inspired by the ways they can lead us fruitfully into our preaching task.

Finally, we are still in the beginning stages of this publication. We think it is a good beginning, but we recognize that we will be doing some refining, some tinkering, in the coming years. And we covet your help with that. Are there additional features you would like to see? Do you sense an imbalance of some sort that might be addressed? The writers will be changing from year to year—who would you suggest we consider (including, perhaps, yourself!)? Please feel free to contact me at [Robert.Farlee@augzburgfortress.org](mailto:Robert.Farlee@augzburgfortress.org). Thank you for taking an interest in this work of many hands. May it serve us as we serve the gospel of Jesus Christ.

*Robert Farlee*  
*General Editor*





## INTRODUCTION

*Is it time to lift up a new vision of preaching for our assemblies?*

Ever since Luther's time, preaching has been a core of our worship together. It is where the message of God's word—both law and, especially, the life-giving gospel—gets proclaimed, made urgent and alive for its hearers on that day. Today's preachers continue to take that obligation very seriously. And many resources are available to help them in the task.

But maybe there's an aspect that isn't sufficiently supported, one that can help the sermon better become not just an isolated moment completely dependent on the skills of the preacher, but one part of an integrated experience of God in worship. What if the preacher were invited and helped to think not just about one or two texts, but about the broader picture: all the texts the Revised Common Lectionary offers for us on this day? And beyond that, the day itself, not only on the familiar calendar of "what's happening these days," but that calendar in conversation with the church's calendar of grace, the church year. Still more: that which surrounds the sermon in the worshipers' experience—the prayers, the hymns, the liturgy, and of course that partner to the word in whole worship, the meal. And finally, the assembly itself, the body of Christ gathered in this time and place. What if the preacher saw all of these together and were invited to consider, What is God doing with all of this? What is the conversation among all the texts—readings and prophets and liturgy and prayers—and the assembly here today? (Of course, that doesn't mean the sermon needs to include everything, just that it can be informed by the preacher's having considered it all.) That is the promise of liturgical preaching. It may seem daunting at first to those not used to it. But we can help—that is our conviction, and that is what we hope to do with this resource, *Sundays and Seasons: Preaching*.

It draws on the familiar and well-loved pattern of *Sundays and Seasons*. Some material from there that is particularly useful for preachers has been excerpted. To that is added some of the fine work that Gail Ramshaw has been doing in her Lectionary Notes (available at [sundaysandseasons.com](http://sundaysandseasons.com)), work that begins to address this very perspective. And then the heart of the resource is new

contributions. For each Sunday and festival, someone writing from a scholarly perspective (perhaps a professor of exegetical theology, homiletics, or worship) provides, not yet another complete background on the texts, but some key points: what is most important for the preacher to know? And paired with that, a preaching pastor gathers up all the material and suggests some ways this unified perspective could take shape in a real-life sermon.

Our current era may hold special promise for this approach to preaching. People are increasingly interested in the power of multisensory experience and embodiment. This resource will help preachers move beyond abstract or cerebral approaches to engage the immediate, embodied experience of actual worshipers. In this era of connectivity, preachers will find help for sharing connections between the day's biblical texts and the language of the prayers prayed on that same day, between exegetical insights and seasonal hymnody, between the aquifers of baptismal theology hidden in scriptural texts and the contemporary embodiment of baptism practices. Preachers and worshipers alike will be invited to taste and see that the bread in scripture and the bread shared around the table come from a common source. Such preaching draws on the actual experience of worshipers by naming it, honoring it, and calling attention to its mysteries and textures. And at the same time such preaching invites worshipers deeper into participation in the practices and patterns at the heart of worship. Such preaching allows the liturgy itself to participate more fully in proclaiming the word, as the varied elements of worship resonate in dialogue with the sermon and the day's texts.

Many people today are rightly suspicious of monovocal approaches to spiritual or theological insight. Whether we are trying to understand a theological concept or a material object, multiple perspectives give us a more complete account than a single view. So a diversity of voices with different accents and perspectives is usually more trustworthy and compelling to us. The pattern of preaching encouraged by this resource helps the preacher open the assembly's ears and other senses to perceive the proclamation unfolding all around them in worship—hymnody from varied times and places, the wide expanse of voices embodied in the intercessions, the harmonies and dissonances between scriptural

texts, subtler forms of testimony to the gospel in the diverse worship practices that unfold over the course of a single Sunday. While sermons will normally continue to be that incarnational event of one human speaking to others, liturgical preaching helps that single voice honor the experience of others and call attention to the sometimes-unarticulated theological wonders of our assemblies.

Today's cultures tend to exult in "experience" but are seldom given the opportunity to reflect meaningfully and theologically on their experiences. Preachers who draw on this resource will find tools to invite people deeper into reflection on liturgical experience, helping them find words for it, uncovering connections between liturgy and experiences in the wider world, and cultivating literacy in a scripturally informed language of faith and life.

The gospels—almost surely written to be read aloud in the complex environment of worship—hint at such practice for preaching. In the few times when Jesus is portrayed as speaking at an established place of worship, he engages the liturgical context. He calls attention to a widow making an offering at the temple and names this easily overlooked liturgical moment as holding intense and even scandalous theological relevance. In his hometown synagogue, when Jesus is called to preach on Isaiah's account of the fulfillment of God's promises, Jesus tells stories of water-washing (Naaman) and of a bread-meal (the widow at Zarephath)—stories of outsiders who are saved by God in ways that resonate profoundly with the water and bread of the sacraments. Jesus' words critically engage the worship space itself: he criticizes obsession with the walls of the temple and directs his hearers' attention to the temple of his body, now being given to us in worship as food. And Jesus' sermon illustration that involves the tables of the money changers is one of history's most vivid homiletical engagements with liturgical space.

Max Weber famously described a world that in modern times has become disenchanting, drained of a living sense of God's presence. Weber blamed some of this disenchantment on a too-narrow sense of rationality and a too-restrictive and monovocal approach to discourse. Christian preaching, ironically, can sometimes be guilty of such discourse. However, liturgical preaching can widen the biblical vision

of assemblies and fire their theological imagination with images of a world renewed through God's saving work, beginning with the signs and wonders all around the assembly in worship. The words of the preacher can be like the candles and torches we place at the font, beside the word, and on either side of the table. The flames call our attention to the places where God is acting with mysterious power: God speaking an address to us in our own language; God desiring to spread a table that feeds the whole world; God washing us in what has become a flood of mercy. Each week, drawing on the texts of the day, the preacher kindles new fires beside these means of grace. With such attentiveness to the assembly of God's people in worship, the preacher's words become like those tongues of fire dancing above the heads of the worshipers at Pentecost: the ancient words of scripture are heard as a living address to us today, the Spirit of God moves across our landscape like wind, and we see the goodness of God in the land of the living. This resource is help for kindling such fires.

We believe it is time to lift up a new vision for preaching in our assemblies. The vision emerges within the strong tradition of law and gospel preaching. It sees promise in preaching as a liturgical act—as drawing on the experience of worship and inviting worshipers deeper into the mysteries of our common prayer. Liturgical preaching can speak meaningfully and powerfully to the many people in this era who are seeking connections, multisensory experience, and varied perspectives. While this emphasis is being renewed today, the practice is ancient: the gospels themselves appear to be written in intentional dialogue with the experience of already-gathering Christian assemblies, calling them to attend to the mysteries of their own meals, prayers, bodies, baptisms, care for the poor—and to critique the restricting power of their own walls. We believe such liturgical preaching can fire the theological imagination of our assemblies and give them a vision of a world raised to new and abundant life by the power of God in Jesus Christ. Liturgical preaching means that our assemblies see these signs and wonders in worship and come to know them as pro me, and for the life of the world.

*Benjamin Stewart*



## November 29, 2015

First Sunday of Advent

### Introduction to the Day

*Advent is about the “coming days.” God’s people have always lived in great expectation, but that expectation finds specific, repeated enunciation in the texts appointed for these four weeks. The ancients anticipated a “righteous Branch to spring up for David.” The Thessalonians awaited “the coming of our Lord Jesus with all the saints.” Our Lord’s contemporaries hoped for the time “to stand before the Son of Man.” With them we eagerly await the coming days: another Christmas celebration, a second coming, and the advent of our Lord in word and supper.*

### Readings and Responses for the Day

#### Jeremiah 33:14-16

In the Old Testament, “righteousness” often has to do with being faithful in relationship. God acts righteously both in punishing Israel for its sin and in having mercy. In today’s reading, Jerusalem’s future name—“The Lord is our righteousness”—proclaims that the Lord is even now working salvation for Israel.

*Response:* Psalm 25:1-10

#### I Thessalonians 3:9-13

Upon Timothy’s report from the congregation at Thessalonica, Paul is exuberant with gratitude for them. In this passage from his letter, Paul voices overflowing thanks, joy, and blessings for the people of this growing church.

*Gospel Acclamation:* Alleluia. Stand up and raise your heads—your redemption is drawing near. Alleluia. (Luke 21:28)

#### Luke 21:25-36

God will fulfill God’s purposes and, already, hidden signs of that fulfillment abound. On that great day there will be dismay, perplexity, confusion, and terror, but God’s people shall be given strength to stand boldly and receive God’s promised redemption.

### Prayer of the Day

Stir up your power, Lord Christ, and come. By your merciful protection alert us to the threatening dangers of our sins, and redeem us for your life of justice, for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

### This Day and Its Readings

Although the historical record is sketchy, it appears that our Advent arose out of a season of fasting to prepare for baptisms at Epiphany. By the sixth century, an eschatological emphasis was present. Our Advent comprises the four Sundays before Christmas. Each year, the first Sunday deals with our readiness for divine judgment, the second Sunday the ministry of John the Baptist, the third Sunday the Baptist’s call to a repentant life, and only on the fourth Sunday a narrative concerning the birth of Jesus. God comes, in the past in the history of Israel and the incarnation of Jesus, in the present in the word and sacrament of each Sunday and in the sufferings of our time, and in the future at the end of all things. The lectionary appoints readings to fit this pattern, and their tone stands in stark contrast to our society’s weeks of preparation for Christmas. Liturgical advice to keep a meaningful Advent without a December-long celebration of Christmas is meant not to be a killjoy but to awake our longing for the surprising ways God comes to us. We mean to be a people who know what time it is and are willing to wait for what will come—a people who do not sing Easter hymns during Lent nor Christmas hymns in Advent.

#### Luke 21:25-36

The reading calls us to join the Christians of the late first century, wishing for the end of all evil and sorrow and for the coming of the joyous reign of Christ. Christians believe that Christ has already come, is coming this morning in word and sacrament, and will come at the end of all things. Like a tree of life, the fig tree is already full of leaves.

#### Jeremiah 33:14-16

The Jeremiah passage is chosen as a condensed form of the gospel: the LORD will come to restore justice among the people. It came to be that Christians called Jesus their Lord, the divinely sent descendant of King David.

**I Thessalonians 3:9-13**

We pray with Paul that all our waiting for God be characterized by lives of gratitude, love, blamelessness. Such readying contrasts sharply with what our culture expects of us during the weeks of December.

**The Readings in the Bible****Luke 21:25-36**

The Gospel according to Luke, written in the late 80s by an expert storyteller who built upon Mark, depicts Jesus as the forgiving Savior of the world. Many of the New Testament's most beloved passages about Jesus are found only in Luke. Luke's emphases include Jesus as the fulfillment of the Jewish messianic hopes; Jesus welcoming Gentiles into his movement; God's care for especially the poor and the lowly; and the Spirit of God empowering first Jesus and, in Luke's second volume titled the Acts of the Apostles, the church throughout the Mediterranean world. The identification of the author with the beloved physician (Col. 4:14) is now disputed. In 21:34-36, Luke expanded on the apocalypse in Mark by urging believers to watch: the horrific eschaton is indeed coming. Perhaps the evangelist chose to stress watchfulness because the coming of the Son of Man seemed to be so delayed.

**Jeremiah 33:14-16**

The book of Jeremiah, which took shape after Jeremiah's death in 586 BCE, chronicles his adventures and records his message (and that of later prophets) that although God punished the people for their disobedience, God would eventually bring the people back from their exile, rebuild Jerusalem, and restore the Davidic monarchy. Chapter 33 is described as God's word spoken while Jeremiah was imprisoned. Verses 14-16 are a doublet of 22:5-6. It was common in the ancient Near East for monarchies to be depicted as a tree of life that yielded safety and productivity for the people.

**I Thessalonians 3:9-13**

The earliest letter we have from Paul, 1 Thessalonians was written before 50 CE to a church that Paul founded in what is now northern Greece. Thessalonica was a provincial capital city; the local coins named Julius Caesar "God" and the emperor Octavian "the son of God." Paul mentions the good report he received from Timothy's visit to the Thessalonians, and he urges faithfulness both until he returns to visit them and until the eschatological return of Christ. Eschatological expectation, which is especially strong in this letter, included the gathering of all the saints, alive and dead.

**Images in the Readings**

The four gospels repeatedly speak of the Jewish apocalyptic figure called the **Son of Man**, a mysterious humanlike judge who as part of the cosmic upheaval at the end of time will appear in the sky to represent God to the people and the people to God. The figure probably developed from speculation about the vision in Daniel 7. Despite popular misunderstanding that contrasts Son of God with Son of Man, "Son of Man" is not referring to Jesus as the human son of Mary. Today's several readings describe the end of the world with the arrival of the Son of Man in both frightening and comforting language. Luke's description of the apocalypse emphasizes people's terror: the day will be like a trap. Yet the summer promises new life.

There are many biblical references to the **fig tree**. An image in ancient myth and literature for male fertility, the fig tree provided both food and shade for Israelites, and even clothing in the story of the fall. In Luke 21 the fig tree is a positive image for the arrival of God. What is now in bud will see its fruition.

It was common in the ancient Near East to depict a monarchy as a **tree of life**. The idea was that the virility of the king ensured the health and wealth of the nation. Also, the Old Testament includes descriptions of David as the tree, and the future messiah as a **branch**. For Christians, Christ is that branch, and through him we all share the life of God's true tree.

**Connections with the Liturgy**

In the Lord's Prayer, we ask God to "save us from the time of trial." It is precisely the dangers and terrors of the eschatological end to which this petition refers. If your assembly is still praying the historic translation of the prayer using the word "temptation," this Sunday is a good time to begin using the 1988 translation, which more accurately conveys the meaning of the prayer ascribed to Jesus. Most Christians will indeed experience a "time of trial."

## From a Scholar

The Advent season is fraught with traps. Accounts of the end times and the coming of the Son of Man abound with images that amount to a complicated set of oppositions containing both admonitions (“Be on guard” . . . “Be alert”) and comforts (“Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety”). Two aspects of this approaching ominous goodness may give the preacher a desire to either expound too much on the admonitions or comforts or ignore them. Neither is a good idea. Embrace both as God’s word.

1. The fear and fright so vividly named as signs and distresses don’t need too much amplification, although moving them from the eschatological realm to something more immediate would help the assembly acknowledge the truth that we do live in fear. We do not know what’s coming next. We wonder why the world is as it is—why the universe exists at all!—and what will be after death and at the end of time. It is possible to call this reality to mind without belaboring it. A few simple sentences that name the common experiences of fear and wonder will do. Often preachers find it easiest to spend more time on the obvious when what is needed is attention to the truly hardest aspects of the scripture. The hardest is the promise, of course, because we find it more difficult to see than the breakdown.

2. In the face of what is “coming”—when “heaven and earth will pass away”—God’s word intervenes. “My words will not pass away.” The preacher’s verbs need to be in the present tense about this assurance, because the immediacy of the promise is the kernel of the gospel. The prophet Jeremiah speaks the promise made “to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.” We need to hear today that this promise is spoken to our own “houses,” the churches of our own towns and regions. God’s justice and righteousness are constant companions in the midst of our fears. Where do we find them? The second reading tells us that God is making us “abound in love for one another.” We are being strengthened in holiness.

We will not lose our fear, and therefore we must be reassured again and again by the word of God that we already stand before the Son of Man (Luke 21:36) alert and in prayer.

*Melinda A. Quivik*

## From a Preacher

Advent asks something of God’s people for which they have neither interest nor preparation. Advent asks postmoderns to wait in expectant hope. The readings for today turn up the heat on those expectations, with each of the readings in its own way reminding its hearers of promises for which one is called to, well, wait.

But really, why wait? There are thousands of things to celebrate here and now, most of which come gift-wrapped and home-delivered. Point. Click. Buy. Done. Those Christmas carols are so beautiful and nostalgic, giving us a warm feeling deep inside right here, right now. The parties are in full swing; why bring Jesus into it and dampen everyone’s spirits with talk of waiting and expectation? Who needs a faith of delayed gratification in an age when the answer to every question is either “yes” or “now”?

The psalmist sets the tone for the day’s texts to proclaim the truth they are meant to announce: “Show us *your* ways, O LORD, and teach us *your* paths.” It’s not an easy task for the preacher to bring such a living word of scripture to self-reliant women, men, and children. We tend to like our ways better than God’s. Yet the scriptures stand: we are not capable of our own righteousness. The *LORD*, embodied as the Lord, is our righteousness, just as Jeremiah reminds the ancients. Imagine it. Someone is in charge, and it is not us. Someone is in charge whose very being is compassion and love, one with a desire to strengthen our hearts in holiness, the land-lord of the empty tomb, who is the only one who can say with any reassurance at all, “My words will not pass away.” Christ, after all, is unique among the world’s words. For a brief three days there he did pass away; but then he came bursting back to life. No pointing. No clicking. No purchase necessary. But certainly done: once for all. This is *the* Living Word who just might be worth waiting for in expectant, Advent hope.

It is this very one whose advent among us—whose incarnation—we are about to celebrate once again. That momentous celebration is worthy of our patient preparation. It is not our nature to wait, so some reordering is called for, and that does not happen in the simple turn of the calendar from November to December. There is a hollow place to make ready for the awesome event of God slipping into our world in the form of a little immigrant child.

Although I've read the word hundreds of times both aloud and silently, until just now I'd never taken the opportunity to look up *dissipation*. *Squander*, my best sources tell me. Luke is unique among the evangelists to use it. "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with *squandering*. . . ." I can't think of a better, more Advent-1-textually-aligned word of hope to offer the itching ears in our pews than a word of comfort against squandering this season of waiting and preparation. I use *comfort* here as Isaiah uses it in another beloved Advent text, Isaiah 40: "Comfort, O comfort my people." Be strong!

"Lift up your heads!" each of these texts proclaims in one way or another. "Abound in love!" You "will live in safety." The Lord will "strengthen your hearts." It will take lifted heads and love overflowing, strength and an assurance of safety to welcome God, who comes in the incarnate Christ into our weary world. It will take a word of hope passed from pulpit to pew, then from pew to planet. And that kind of reassuring and unrelentingly hopeful word does not happen just because the Christmas lights are turned on brightly and the party spirit is brighter still. It takes some time, some quiet reflection, some waiting in expectant hope to not let this blessed, holy moment be squandered right out from under us.

*Paul E. Hoffman*

### **Making Connections**

- Tell the children and youth of the parish the truth: Waiting is hard. Find ways of assisting them to mark the time between now and the celebration of Christmas each time the assembly gathers. If the increasing number of candles on the Advent wreath is not enough, consider moving the crèche figures of Mary and Joseph ever closer to their Christmas "home" each Sunday of this season. Is it possible in your setting that a children's message on Advent 1 could include taking the children to the storage place where Mary and Joseph have been hiding since last Epiphany and having them help you unpack them and bring them to the back of the nave for this annual journey?
- Emphasize silence and darkness throughout the four Sunday liturgies of Advent. Remove all candles from the worship space except for those of the Advent wreath. Consider beginning the liturgy in a darkened church and in silent preparation; no prelude. Let the first action of the Advent liturgy be the lighting of the Advent candle while a simple chanting of "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" (ELW 257) or "Each Winter as the Year Grows Older" (ELW 252) sets the tone.
- Include testimonies during the Advent Sundays from persons in the congregation who spend a great deal of their lives waiting. Consider inviting a nursing home or assisted living resident, a person who waits in a food line, one who is unemployed and hoping for a new vocation to share their stories. Ask them to speak specifically to the aspects of their waiting that they find to be enriching or challenging.





## April 3, 2016

### Second Sunday of Easter

#### Introduction to the Day

*In spite of all we have heard and all we have seen, it is often hard to believe. Because it is hard to believe, we will invest ourselves in the Easter mystery for fifty days (a week of weeks). Because it is hard to believe, John the evangelist will provide sign after sign celebrating Jesus' victory over death. Because it is hard to believe, the Lord Jesus will return to us again and again in the mystery of the holy communion, inviting us to touch and taste his presence, and offering us his peace.*

#### Readings and Responses for the Day

##### Acts 5:27-32

Peter has been arrested for proclaiming the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection. His response to the charges of the high priest summarizes the early church's proclamation of forgiveness of sin through repentance.

*Response:* Psalm 118:14-29 or Psalm 150

##### Revelation 1:4-8

The book of Revelation recounts a mystical vision of the risen Christ, experienced by a Christian prophet named John. Here he describes Christ as a timeless redeemer, the beginning, present, and end of all time.

*Gospel Acclamation:* Alleluia. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe. Alleluia. (John 20:29)

##### John 20:19-31

The unprecedented events of the day of resurrection continue as the risen Jesus appears to his fearful disciples. A week later, after Thomas worships Jesus, Jesus pronounces that the blessings of the resurrection are also for those who "have not seen and yet believe."

#### Prayer of the Day

O God of life, you reach out to us amid our fears with the wounded hands of your risen Son. By your Spirit's breath revive our faith in your mercy, and strengthen us to be the body of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

#### This Day and Its Readings

The church keeps Easter for eight Sundays. Early Christians referred to Sunday as the eighth day, as if the extraordinary day of the resurrection could not fit within the normal week of seven days. The resurrection begins a new recording of

time. The fifty days culminates at Pentecost. Each Sunday, individually and communally, we meet the risen Christ in word and sacrament.

##### John 20:19-31

The church continues the pattern alluded to in John's gospel, of assembling on the first day of the week to receive the Spirit of the cross and resurrection and to exchange the peace of Christ. As we expect of John, the narrative in chapter 20 testifies to the identity of Christ as Lord and God. For Christians, to touch Christ is to touch God, and we do this in the flesh of our neighbor's hand at the peace and with the bread of Christ in our palm at communion.

##### Acts 5:27-32

Throughout the Sundays of the fifty days of Easter, passages from Acts proclaim the ongoing power of Christ's resurrection, which is not a single day's event but the continuing power of God in the believing community. In this excerpt, the believers continue the ministry of Christ by testifying publicly to his death and resurrection with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

##### Revelation 1:4-8

During the fifty days of Easter in year C, the second readings are exultant passages from the book of Revelation. It is as if in the resurrection of Christ we all are already gathered around the heavenly throne with all the saints and angels to praise the victory of the Lamb. Yet at the same time, we look forward to the end of time, when the agonies described in Revelation will be no more, for believers will follow Christ to be born again from the dead. This creedal excerpt sets the stage for the subsequent six selections.

## The Readings in the Bible

### John 20:19-31

In this reading from the Gospel of John, written in perhaps the late 90s, the Spirit handed over at the death of Christ (19:30) is distributed to the disciples. The narrative indicates that by the time of the writing of the gospel, Christians were regularly assembling on the first day of the week. The chapter moves the Easter proclamation from the disciples, through the unbelievers, to those who encounter this good news. The evangelist claims that the gospel book, proclaimed at the Sunday assembly, manifests Jesus as Christ, the Son of God, who gives life in his name.

### Acts 5:27-32

Writing in perhaps the late 80s, Luke presents in Acts a triumphal picture of the church as the ongoing sign of Christ's resurrection. In this excerpt describing a second persecution of believers, "the apostles" had been carrying on Jesus' ministry by healing the sick and preaching the kingdom. Escaped from prison with the help of an angel, they are now being interrogated by the Sanhedrin and the high priest. Peter, whom Luke describes as the leader of the Jerusalem community, responds with a concise Christian creed. Characteristic Lukan details include Jerusalem as the origin of Christian mission, the message of forgiveness of sins, and the power of the Holy Spirit within believers.

### Revelation 1:4-8

The book of Revelation, written perhaps in the late first century, applied traditional Jewish apocalyptic imagery to the situation of the early Christian church at a time when the Roman Empire commanded that emperors be worshiped as divine. Apocalyptic visions predict a cataclysmic final battle at which God will finally overcome evil. These visions are tied to "John," which means "beloved of God," and may be invoking the authority of the John in the original Jesus movement. The seven spirits are angels who oversee the seven churches to which the Revelation is addressed. After a standard epistolary introduction, the excerpt includes an early creedal description of Jesus Christ, who reigns over the whole earth as ruler of the earth's kings—thus also of the Roman emperor. God is almighty in past, present, and future, a designation later useful in trinitarian theology. The first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, alpha and omega, suggest God as both the beginning and the end of all things.

## Images in the Readings

Usually depictions of the crucified or risen Christ include the marks on his **hands and side**. Our archaeological knowledge that for crucifixions nails were driven through the wrist ought not negate the symbolism of the palm, which is central to a person's hand. Neither need we get fascinated by the accounts of the stigmata, for we all carry the mark of the crucified and risen Christ on our palm each time we receive the body of Christ at communion. Easy talk about healing from one's wounds can be replaced with the Johannine image of the wounds: like Christ, we may scar, rather than heal. In John 19:34, blood and water flow from the wound on Jesus' side, and church tradition has seen in this detail not an erroneous description of human anatomy but rather the proclamation that baptism and eucharist flow from the wounds of Christ.

Each year on the second Sunday of Easter we meet **doubting Thomas**. He is all of us, and we doubters are glad to share with all other doubters the peace of the risen Christ. It is not easy to believe that we too have felt the wounds of Christ. Faith is trust in what is unseen.

According to John, the believing community assembles each **first day** of the week, which was not until the mid-fourth century a holiday. Christians have continued this practice, thus to meet the risen Christ.

No single description of God is sufficient, and today two opposite depictions are superimposed: the **wounded Jesus** comforting his disciples after the resurrection, and the **triumphant Lord** who will judge the earth at the end of time and now rules the world with divine authority ("at God's right hand"). The doctrine of the two natures of Christ is an attempt to hold together these truths of faith.

Today's readings include a wealth of divine titles: Christ is Leader, Savior, God's right-hand man, faithful witness, firstborn of the dead, ruler of kings, Messiah, Son of God; God is Father, Lord, Alpha and Omega, the Almighty.

## Connections with the Liturgy

Each Sunday Christians exchange with one another the peace of the risen Christ. In some assemblies, the peace has become a kind of seventh-inning stretch during which everyone chats with everyone else about the week's news. It is important to remember the liturgical intention of this greeting: we are enacting John 20, receiving from one another the peace that Christ gave to the disciples. We fill the room with the life of the Holy Spirit, breathing to one another the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection.



## From a Scholar

Sometimes we might wonder, what does resurrection mean for us now? We know the classic answer: it is the promise of eternal life. Death does not have the last word. But how is that hope translated into the daily rhythms of our lives?

The disruptive element of the Easter proclamation (as we saw last week: breaking open spaces, bringing down walls) stands front and center again in the gospel reading for this Sunday. Easter touches our daily lives directly. Because they were afraid, the disciples had self-imposed a wall and literally locked the door. But locked doors are not an obstacle for the one “who is and who was and who is to come.” Thomas, so-named the “Twin,” had locked the doors of his own heart. But now Jesus comes and stands, in the body, before him. Thomas sees and touches Jesus. Jesus continually comes and “every eye will see him,” every hand will touch him, those who believe, those who try to believe, and those who pierce and resist him.

Thomas usually receives a lot of attention because his doubt is so realistic: everyone can relate to it. Yet, looking closely at this reading in the context of the entire Gospel of John, we realize something else happening besides Thomas’s doubt. Thomas, a disciple named several times in the gospel, a central figure among the Twelve, isn’t “at church” on Sunday! Thomas’s doubt is also a question of belonging: is this my place, my community? Jesus responds by inviting Thomas fully into his body, to see and touch, and to be present in the body in its most wounded part. Jesus opens up the community for Thomas precisely where the body (community) is most vulnerable.

In the reading from Acts, other barriers fall. Authority is turned on its head. The courts are powerless to shut the door that Peter and the disciples open up through proclamation. The message of forgiveness, of reconciliation, of new beginnings, seemingly insignificant on all counts, is unstoppable. The locked door of the disciples’ room cannot prevent Jesus from entering in, and now an official court and a public trial cannot stop the Easter message from going out. Human power is ineffective. Jesus’ authority both opens so no one can shut, and shuts so no one can open (Isa. 22:22).

Jesus’ power to open what is locked, to create faith where there is only doubt, is a very different power and authority. Jesus shares his authority with all the baptized (“Receive the Holy Spirit”). Jesus does not impose himself. Jesus comes and stands before us, inviting us to see and touch in the places of greatest suffering. Jesus’ power is, in the eyes of the world, no power at all, and yet, in our daily lives, it is continually creating new life, new ways in and through that which is wounded or vulnerable within us and our communities.

*Dirk Lange*

## From a Preacher

Sometimes I wish we had today’s gospel on Easter Sunday. Many folks skeptical about the resurrection—or more specifically about the need for the church—are not in worship on the second Sunday of Easter. Dirk Lange makes the observation that Thomas wasn’t among the Twelve on Easter evening. Perhaps the twin problems of belief and belonging keep many people away from our assemblies. When we listen to some of the religious baggage folks carry from childhood, we begin to understand why they are hungry for things spiritual but cautious toward institutions.

Yet what do we preach on this Sunday when the assembly is made up of many of our most loyal and devoted churchgoers? Maybe they wonder why so few are in church as the festive eight weeks of Easter have barely begun. How will we point to the presence of the risen Christ in scripture and sacrament, in liturgy and hymns? How will today’s gathering strengthen the community’s faith and mission amid doubt and complacency?

Many folks are absent from our assemblies because we have turned belief into head matter—a checklist of doctrines, creeds, and propositions. To believe in God, in Jesus, even in an afterlife, may come naturally, but the presumed requirements of organized religion are where the difficulties begin.

Yet if we move from head to heart, belief takes on a different character. Perhaps our real struggle is to believe—to trust—that after great suffering or heartache, we can go on with life. Sometimes it is what we read in the news and other times it is simply the toll that the hardships of life take on people.

When we address doubt as a spiritual reality rather than an intellectual struggle, locked doors begin to open. Naming the wounds in our context—both individually and collectively—prepares us to experience the resurrection as a living reality, not simply an event from two thousand years ago. It is tempting to preach about struggle and suffering during Lent and Holy Week and make Easter sermons revolve around hope and joy. Yet it is powerful to name the very human experiences of grief, despair, and loss on this second Sunday of Easter.

Clearly we will want to use stories, movies, and examples from everyday life that open the eyes of the assembly to the presence of God in their context. In an era of virtual reality and social media, the sense of touch in today's gospel jumps out at us. As the risen Christ invites Thomas to touch his wounded side, this Sunday liturgy beckons the preacher to name examples of embodiment both in worship and in daily life.

Amid rampant individualism, invite the assembly to see itself as an embodied community that meets in real space and time eight days after Easter, and every eight days for that matter (counting, as the early church did, each Sunday as both first and eighth day). Like Thomas, many are absent for various reasons. Yet however many are present, the risen Christ breathes on the community his spirit of peace and reconciliation.

As barriers fall and doors are unlocked, the risen Christ is present. Though we await a final consummation, each eucharist is an Easter appearance—the second coming of Christ, in some respects. As Revelation will make clear during these weeks of Easter, we are already in heaven as we celebrate the liturgy and gather around the Lamb.

If Easter belief is not head matter, is it about certainty? In an episode of the radio program *On Being* entitled “Restoring the Senses: Gardening and Easter,” Vigen Guroian, an Armenian Orthodox Christian, suggests that Eastern Orthodoxy is less doctrinal and more experiential and earthy than much of Western Christianity. Quoting Fyodor Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Guroian suggests that though an atheist may use these words, they also express Christian belief that arises from the heart:

I want to live and go on living even if it's contrary to the rules of logic, even if I do not believe in the divine order of things. The sticky young leaves emerging from their buds in the spring are dear to my heart, so is the blue sky . . . you don't love those things with reason, with logic. You love them with your innards, with your belly.<sup>1</sup>

Oh, that our experience of the liturgy on this day could open our eyes, that experiencing and touching the gifts of God with our bodies, we might exclaim with Thomas: my Lord and my God!

Craig M. Mueller

## Making Connections

- Keep the festivity of Easter today and throughout the Great Fifty Days. Refresh cut and potted flowers. Include sprinkling during Thanksgiving for Baptism. Use the Easter dialogue (“Alleluia. Christ is risen . . .”) each week.
- Invite the children to name some of their favorite things about last Sunday's Easter service and then list what is similar today: the color white, the paschal candle, the word *alleluia*, flowers, joyful hymns. A little math example could help illustrate that the Great Fifty Days of Easter is a week of weeks ( $7 \times 7$  plus Pentecost).
- With our second readings from Revelation in the Easter season in year C, consider singing the canticle “This is the feast” (based on Revelation texts) in different places in the liturgy: as a gathering song, during the offering, and during communion (in place of “Lamb of God”).

1. <http://www.onbeing.org/program/restoring-senses-gardening-and-orthodox-easter/164>