



Easter

by Donna Schaper

April 12

Acts 10: 34-43, Psalm 118: 1, 2; 5-11;
I Corinthians 15: 1-11, John 20: 1-18,
Mark 16: 1-8

Ira Gershwin and Broadway could give structure to an Easter sermon.

The beginning would be “Let’s call the whole thing off,” and would focus on how overstated the Easter claims often are. The middle would be “I’ve Got Rhythm,” which is to say, “okay, so the claims are overstated but hyperbole and hallelujah do sometimes dance.” The end would be “Who could ask for anything more?” Overstatement meets its rhythm in understatement.

For the more linear among us, consider a strung together structure. The string outline is this: the Easter story makes huge claims based on very little evidence, so “let’s call the whole thing off.” Nevertheless we hang on, by a string, for dear life: “I’ve got Rhythm.” Finally, the Easter claim of resurrection is a string itself, a modest, small, persistent power. Who, I want to begin and end by saying, could ask for anything more?

Listen to the lament: “I am just hanging on by a string.” What response is appropriate? “You poor thing,” as in pathos and sympathy? Or “you idiot,” as in judgment and distancing? There aren’t many good responses, either divine or human. Many of us descend into “Let’s call the whole thing off.”

Note that the Easter stories are only three and that they embody the string theory. Jesus appears to a couple of women, unlikely reporters at best. Jesus appears to a few disciples and eats a fish and they find their hearts strangely warmed. Jesus appears to the doubter Thomas. These

appearances are the most important, and extend to Simon Peter, the ten apostles, then again to eleven gathered, to the apostles at the Sea of Tiberius, then in Galilee, to 500 “brethren”, to all the apostles, then to St. Paul.

Yes, Paul goes on later to declare, particularly in I Corinthians 15: 5-8, the way Paul puts himself last after Cephas, who saw, and 500, who saw. And there are at least 20 other possible resurrections in scripture, besides Jesus.’ The Shunammite’s son, an unnamed man in second Kings, The Widow’s son Jairus’ Daughter, Widow’s only Son, Lazarus of Bethany. A few little strings become a lot of stories. We need not call the whole thing off but actually call it on. We have understood the rhythm of life and death.

April 19

John 20: 19-31, Psalm 13:3,
I Corinthians 5: 66-68, Acts 4: 32-35

The responses to Easter are many. They range from the great and overwhelming sharing of the Acts story to the demand for proof: “Show me the evidence! I want to see the wounds in his hands and side!” We come into the great presence of God and then it disappears. We also disappear from ourselves. We confront a great mystery. Sometimes it warms us into new being, and other times we just can’t believe such good news.

In 1926 that the mystery novelist Agatha Christie disappeared from her home in Berkshire, England. Her abandoned car was found in a chalk pit seven miles from her house. The whole country was fascinated, and the story got lots of

media attention. Police and ordinary citizens alike organized huge search parties.

Then, 11 days later, Christie was found in a luxury hotel. She was staying under a different name, and she claimed that she couldn't remember a thing. It had been a hard year for Christie—her mother had died, and her husband had left her for his young mistress. To this day, no one knows if she had legitimate amnesia, or if it was a publicity stunt to raise book sales, or a way to publicly expose her husband's infidelity. But all the media attention made her even more famous, and she ended up as one of the best-selling authors of all time.

Who knows if what she did was a ruse or a true act, stemming from her heart? Did we ever see the wounds closely enough to know? How do we ever know if a person is wearing a mask or telling us the truth? Don't we confront matters of that nature all day, every day?

One way to distinguish the truth from the lies, the half truths from the half lies, is to look for the fruit. Acts tells us that one of the fruits of the resurrection is powerful sharing. People understand that they are one with another. Another way is to look at the wounds.

How do we respond to the resurrection? We respond to the awful wound. We experience the loss of Jesus as living in a way we can understand. We approach the mystery. Then we share with each other what we know and, even, what we have.

April 26

Acts 3: 12-19. Psalm 4, I John 3: 1-7,
Luke 24: 36-48

Breakfast with a broiled fish is just about everybody's idea of a good time. Think picnic. Think community. Think joy. When we eat with each other, Jesus tells us, we are also eating with him. To comprehend the Easter story, it is important to remember that Jesus is still with us.

In fact, we can argue that his intention in history is to make sure everybody has a fish. We are

a part, not apart. We are gathered together into a community that has the capacity to care for each other and therefore would not think about and could not imagine not feeding each other. And yet, while it takes 5.44 acres to feed one person, the average American takes 22 acres.

Many of us forget—even though we are told to remember—that Jesus is at table with us. Once Jesus is at table with us, we can't imagine using more acres than our brother or sister to feed ourselves. We move from hospice to resurrection as a modality. We stop dying while we feed ourselves and we start living as we feed ourselves. The Resurrection changes our minds and our hearts and then it changes our table.

What do I mean by dying while we feed instead of living as we eat? I mean worrying less about where the next meal will come from. I mean being lit by the possibility—as strange as resurrection—that all will one day eat. Some say they are burnt out. Resurrection people know they aren't even lit yet. They are just strangely warmed.

If you want to find God, look around at the breakfast table. Don't look up. Look around. If you want to find God, think small, not big.

May 3

Acts 4: 5-12, Psalm 23, I John
3: 16-24, John 10: 11-18

I love the idea that John wants to see the power. Show me the power! The Holy Spirit, fear not, is up to the job.

David Mamet speaks of going to an Ingmar Bergman Festival and saying, "It was 10 a.m., I stayed all day. When I left the theater, it was still light, but my soul was dark and I did not sleep for years afterwards." Mamet was changed by the films he saw. When power comes around, in any shape, as disturbance or as joy, it changes things.

Power changes how we wake up in the morning, how we eat, how we think, how we behave. We often, when experiencing transformational power, don't care so much about how we do

things. We just do things. We can't help ourselves. When someone said to Dwight Moody, "I don't much like your way of doing things," Moody is said to have responded, "I don't much like it either but I prefer it to your way of not doing things." Powerless people get confused and disoriented; powerful people do things, with less regard for consequences.

Many of our lives face a nearly daily onslaught of banality. We fear that our poet's heart is stilled. When the power of Easter comes to us, our poet's heart is restored and we know it.

Many of us have allowed power to get a bad reputation. It seems so often to be used against us instead of for us. When the power of the resurrection gets real among us, by way of the Holy Spirit, we find ourselves giving the power away rather than hoarding it. We want others to do things, to be engaged, to be happy. We spread the wealth around.

May 10

Acts 8: 26 – 40, Psalm 22: 25 – 31,
I John 4: 7 – 21, John 15: 1-8

When Jesus is saying he is the true vine, he is implying that sometimes there are phony ones. So many of us have been betrayed by the phony that sometimes we can't open ourselves to the real. The true vine has come at Easter to convert us. But many of us resist.

She was wearing a Mayan dress, the traditional attire of indigenous people in Central America, and the hotel's response was also traditional: they threw her out. Staff at Cancun's five-star Hotel Coral Beach appear to have assumed this was another street vendor or beggar, so without asking questions, they ordered her to leave. Except the woman was Rigoberta Menchú, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, Unesco goodwill ambassador, Guatemalan presidential candidate, and figurehead for indigenous rights.

The attempted eviction, an example of discrimination against indigenous people common in Central and South America, backfired when other

guests recognized Ms. Menchú and interceded on her behalf.

The human rights activist was in the Mexican coastal resort at the request of President Felipe Calderón to participate in a conference on drinking water and sanitation and was due to give interviews at the hotel.

David Romero, a journalist who was due to interview her for state radio Quintana Roo, told local media that hotel security tried to eject Ms. Menchú from the lobby. They relented when told who she was. It was said not to be the first time a hotel has tried to throw her out. Commentators noted the irony of upmarket resorts discriminating against real Maya while trying to attract tourists with fake Mayan architecture and spectacles.

Jesus had the same problem convincing people he was the true vine. He was – but it was very hard for people to accept it. We have prejudices in the way of our seeing God! We are even sometimes afraid of good news.

May 17

Acts 10: 44 – 48, Psalm 98, I John
5: 1 – 6, John 15: 9 – 17

These texts are all working to complete our joy. In this season we have been given extraordinary permission to have joy. Some of us have said yes we accept—and others are still trying.

You may have read Donald Hall's poem, "String too Short to be Saved." He goes to his late grandfather's attic and discovers a box marked in an old man's hand, "string too short to be saved." The box was full of little pieces of string. That is the Easter evidence. That is not so much extravagant belief as it is modest hope. As we complete our joy, we go to look at the little things we have saved. We unpack them.

Some of you may have seen the exhibit "Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting" which has toured the country. It shows the current renaissance of venerable handcraft traditions in work of 27 international artists. Blowtorches, fiber optics, shredded currency knitting needles the

size of telephone poles join a gown with long knitted veins that illuminates a whole body. Two commercial backhoes knit a 35 foot American flag. Niels Van Eijk of the Netherlands knots hundreds of individual optical fingers to create a chandelier that glows with light. These are not your grandmother's crocheted doilies and knitted legwarmers... This is how fiber functions on a tangible, spiritual, and aesthetic level. Elena Herzog begins her installations by attaching a textile, such as a vintage bedspread, to a sheet rock panel using thousands of industrial staples. As she removes the staples from the fabric, surrounding bits of fabric are also removed, and the resulting work becomes a haunting, ghostlike image of what once was a whole cloth. We who once were a whole cloth get torn in pieces. We hang together by a thread. We are still and nonetheless beautiful.

I have come to have great respect for thread, for lace, for the holy threaded intestinal bloody and bloodied Grail of what happens when we keep our claims small and our hope active. It is in the accumulation of very small processes that we complete our joy.

May 24

Acts 1: 1 – 11, Psalm 47, Ephesians 1:
15 – 23, Luke 24: 44 - 53

Katherine Porter White was a strange gardener. She wrote a lot about gardening but, as “the fastest pencil in the East,” she is better known as the very precise editor of a lot of famous people, one of whom she married. She was the strange wife of E.B. White, whose whimsy entertained way more people than Katherine's pencil or her plants did.

They gardened in Maine and lived in New York. As a weekend gardener, she often wore her well-tailored blue suits and modest pumps in the garden because she didn't take time to change. She was the kind of gardener who gardened precise bouquets for the luncheon table. Thus

season after season, E.B. observed her, keeping her pumps from the mud and picking flowers for the luncheon table. When it was clear she was soon to die, they made a last early November trip to Maine. There she picked a few posies that had survived the early frosts and put in some bulbs for the next year. On that day E.B. wrote the first line of her eulogy, which was way too soon to be given.

“There was Katherine, blue suit, pumps, but kneeling, putting bulbs in the soil, CALMLY PLOTTING THE RESURRECTION. “

When I first read Jane Kenyon's poem about immortality, I all but wept. Jane, I needed so much more. God, she says, is Mercy, clothed in light. Come on, how am I going to get through a day with just that? Where is the meat? Kenyon argues that the meat is in the mercy. But mercy is so wimpy, so weak, isn't it? Only when you compare it to the alternative is mercy weak. The alternative hasn't much of a track record. Strength has not made us strong. And no, we do not know what mercy's track record would be, in our own lives or in that of the so called real world. Lace may be beautiful, even short strings may be worthy of salvation, but really: How do you run a world on strings? How do you get through a day on strings? Let's call the whole thing off? Or shall we dance because we have rhythm?



The Rev. Dr. Donna Schaper is Senior Minister of Judson Memorial Church in New York City.