

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

Easter Punctuation

John 20.15

April 17, 2022 Easter

There were too many Sundays when 4 or 5 of us met up here alone and sang and preached just into a little camera. You were on our minds; we pictured you there, in your jammies on your sofa. But you weren't here. It was worship, but we always left with the hunger still within us because it wasn't worship with the people. It's so good to have you here.

It has been a glorious morning. For many of us, beginning before the sunrise under the St. Francis Oak and gathering here, participating in DaySpring's traditions on Easter, and this is all enough. It is to me to add just a few words to our proclamation and our communal celebration of this day.

You may have noticed that wherever you look, Easter is punctuated with an exclamation point! Easter's exclamation points. The line up and down standing tall on top of a little dot, like a little stone rolled to its resting place. Exclamation points punctuate the grammar of Easter faith, even in our music.

Christ the Lord is risen today! Exclamation point.

He is not here; he is risen! Exclamation point.

Alleluia, Alleluia!

Christ is Risen! Shout Hosanna!

I do love some easter exclamation points. Exclamation points are the touchdown spike of syntax. It's over; its finished. It communicates enthusiasm, joy, eagerness to convey the message. We love exclamation points, especially some people.

Apparently, when texting, listen up older people, if you don't put an exclamation point at the end of your text when writing a younger person, they think you're mad.

You write, "I'm here." That's no good. You have to say, "I'm here!"

Or "I'm on the way!" Or "Dinner's at 6!"

Texts generally sound pretty cold so you have to overcompensate by using exclamation points and even better if it is multiples. "Did you put out the trash?"

"Yes!!!"

When Christians over the last two hundred years write prayers or litanies or songs about Easter, they use exclamation points like a 14-year-old with their first iPhone.

Up from the grave he arose!

Christ is risen!

Shout Hosanna!

And why not? Truly, we have much to exclaim—the good news of the resurrection. Christ is victorious over the power of death and evil. He has brought us salvation. These are things worth shouting about. Yet even so, I wonder if we're overcompensating: so many exclamation points mask the reality that there are a lot of question marks, too, in the Easter morning story.

That day in Jerusalem was full of uncertainty and discovery and questions that didn't all have answers, especially at first, in the pre-dawn hours of that Sunday morning. How was the stone moved? Who did that? Where's the body? Who took it? Where is he? What's happening? Where is Jesus? What's going on? What does this mean?

So many questions on Easter morning. You may have questions, too. Do you? Well, if you do, they are at home on Easter morning, even in a geography of exclamation points, even if your faith these days is more question than exclamation, you've found a home on Easter.

Questions on Easter are not just questions about a missing Jesus from an empty tomb or the mystery of the resurrection from death. There are questions from Jesus to us on Easter morning:

Why are you weeping?

Who is it you are looking for?

Those are questions for us today. They were first from Jesus to Mary Magdalene. In John's gospel, Mary Magdalene is walking around the garden tombs alone, groping for answers to questions she hardly knows how to ask. In the darkness she hears a voice:

Why are you weeping?

Who is it you are looking for?

Tears soak the pages of the Easter story. Tears fall from our cheeks for all kinds of reasons, and Mary carries most of them: fear, frustration, grief, shock. Having witnessed the death and burial of Jesus, she carries in her soul the immense sadness that death leaves behind its wake, especially the trauma of the death of Jesus for those who saw the horrible violence that ended his life. Now an empty tomb amplifies the trauma. Her tears fall heavy.

There's weeping on Easter and unanswered questions. So many tears; so many questions. Even on the day of all days for exclamation, and that says something important about life and about the Gospel.

I think it's important to remember that, as we navigate the landscape of exclamation points and shouts of glory. Questions and tears—those are for Easter, too. Actually, they are most at home at the empty tomb. This is a day of celebration and of joy, the end of a long Lent, the beginning of new life. But if we treat Easter like a day that requires exclamation point faith and nothing else, we create a 24-hour alternative reality from what Monday is going to bring. And Tuesday after it.

I don't at all mean to throw a wet blanket on the loveliness of Easter celebrations. I just want us to remember that Christ's death on Friday and his resurrection on Sunday still matter on Monday and Tuesday and beyond.

So, what I have in mind, isn't to turn Christ the Lord is risen today (exclamation point) into Christ the Lord is risen today (question mark), but rather Christ the Lord is risen today, (comma). Commas are a pause, a place for a breath. And we need that! We need feast days. We need this day as a feast day, and we need Easter hats and little girls in pastel ribbons, baskets with eggs... And what's the deal with plastic green grass anyway? We don't have enough grass to fill the baskets already? Isn't that the most American thing ever? Plastic grass? But I guess we need that, too. We need getting up early for sunrise service and all of those things. We need time and place to eat freely and drink deeply. And today is that day. Thanks be to God!

Thanks be to God, comma. The comma means it's not over. At the comma we're now open to what's to come, to sing alleluia, to bring our questions, and let our lives be changed in the light of the resurrection. Christ's resurrection is as much about all that is transformed in the days following for those who follow as it is about what happens at the garden tomb.

Thomas Merton wrote about Christ in our midst. (From *He is Risen*, 1967):

*Christ is the Lord
of a history that moves.
He not only holds
The beginning and the end
In his hands
But he is history with us,
Walking ahead of us
To where we are going.
He is not always
in the same place....
We are called to
experience the Resurrection
in our own lives
by entering into this dynamic movement
by following Christ
who lives in us.*

I've been thinking this year that if Easter proclamations of the resurrected Christ living in us are to be real in the world for today and not just inhabit an alternative, pastel, short-term universe, then they must also be real on Monday. If Christ is risen is our faith at sunrise under the Francis oak, then Christ is risen must also be true tomorrow morning in Kyiv when the sirens blare. But how?

I think pastors must proclaim sermons that could be preached in a church in Kyiv, to preach them in Ukraine on this Easter of War. I do not presume to understand what those poor folks are going through or how to begin to imagine pastoring in that situation, but I think it would have to be something like this:

Our tears still will fall. They will wet the pages of our lives, but they fall feet of the risen Jesus, even when we cannot see him clearly in this present darkness. He is with us.

The resurrection did not end the power of darkness in the world, but the light has come into the darkness and the darkness will not overcome it. The darkness is still dark, but Christ walks in the dark.

The resurrection did not end suffering. The wounds in his hands and his feet show us that. The Prince of Peace will reign, even if men still practice violence, but Christ always walks with the suffering.

Easter does not end sickness or poverty or hunger. The church's calling is to walk with those who suffer and to walk together. We need one another.

And finally, no matter how awful and powerful it seems now, Death is swallowed up in Christ's victory. We cannot see far ahead in life, but Christ is Lord of heaven and earth. Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, so how can we keep from singing?

On Easter, if we are listening, we hear him say: "I weep with you. I'm here with you, and remember, not persecution nor your sin nor your questions nor doubts nor anything else in all creation will separate me from you. I love you. I know your name. And I have won the victory. Let us walk together now; let our tears and love flow mingled down and water the soil of this new creation."

So, Easter deserves our exclamation points. Easter also has many question marks. But in the shouts and the tears, Easter should be written with a comma. Christ the Lord is risen today, and the rest of this redemption story is still being written in the pages our lives.

Who is it are you looking for? The one we've always been looking for with wide eyes and wet ones, too. The one in whom we stand when all else fails. Our hope, our Lord, our Savior, our King: Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, He is risen. He is with you. You are beautiful in his eyes.