

Sermon for Easter Sunday

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Happy Easter!

Y'all sure do clean up nice. The days of sugar, long church, sugar, egg hunts, sugar, and hours laying on the couch with a groaning belly, those were the days. Easter was stubborn cowlicks and ironed shirts and baskets full of plastic grass and chocolate bunnies eaten ears first. I love those memories, but, as you might've guessed, Easter's shifted for me. I'll still eat enough sugar to get a bellyache, but all that Easter used to be has taken to singing backup for the headliner. That's Jesus. Coming back from the grave, he's done the impossible. It's the women who find him, or don't. He's not where they laid him, and that doesn't make a lick of sense. The dead stay dead, but Jesus is gone. Was it grave robbers? The chief priest? The Romans?

There's several versions of this story, but Mark's might be my favorite. In all the others, there's the empty tomb, and then the story wraps up as neat as a Faberge egg. Jesus surprises his followers, the story resolves, and they all lived happily ever after. Well, kinda. But in Mark, the original story stops right where we did today. "They went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." I gotta be honest, that feels appropriate. We know the story well enough that we expect the tomb to be empty. But for them, they'd never seen this before. The dead refusing to stay dead's a horrifying thought. No wonder they're seized by terror. I would be. And I actually love that Mark doesn't try to fix that fear. He leaves us there wondering what to do next. We've set aside the sugar, the egg hunts, the well-trod story, and all we're left with is a grave emptied of its dread contents and fear rising in our bellies.

Years after Jesus' death, years after the tomb lay empty the fear didn't go away. In time, they may've begun to understand what happened, but their everyday lives looked mostly the same. Followers of Jesus still had to be careful, and Rome still weighed heavy. By the year 70, tensions grew so hot in the area that the Romans crushed Jerusalem. The people fought back, sometimes admirably, but in the end, they were brutally brought to heel. The ruling Romans then placed a massive statue of an eagle -- the symbol of the empire's conquering legion -- they tore down the temple and stacked a statue of an eagle where the altar used to be. The message was clear: Rome is greater than your God. Now, Rome's pretty much always the bad guy in scripture. Before them, the Greeks were bad. Before them, it was the Babylonians. Before them, the Egyptians. Anytime there's a ruling power, God's people are at odds with them. Why? Well, it's not just about self-governance. It's about justice, freedom, dignity, self-determination, and the ability to worship who you want like you want. But when Rome (and all those others before them) conquered, they went for the religious jugular. Throughout scripture, there's a running theme of resisting the creeping powers that be in exchange for serving the most vulnerable in society, whoever that may be. Lepers, widows, orphans, and the poor get special attention. The ones that are never in the right? Empires. No matter how much they try to wrap themselves in glory or mislead the people, those wolves in sheep's clothing always get exposed and always lose. It'd be great if the world was that straightforward, but most of the time we're like those folks staring at the gaping tomb, terrified of what may come.

Did y'all see the hubbub last week about this new Bible coming out? I don't think it's a coincidence that last week was Holy Week. It was supposed to be the most sacred stretch of days, turning a laser focus onto the last days of Jesus before the empire tortured that peaceful man to death. But smack in the middle of all that, this thing appeared. Called the "God Bless the USA Bible," it contains the King James translation, the Declaration of Independence, the US Constitution, and the lyrics to Lee Greenwood's Christian Nationalist anthem, "God

Bless the USA.” As if that wasn’t bad enough, the cover features an embossed American flag wrapping around the sacred text.

Now, you may be wondering why this is a problem. Oh buddy, I promised the choir I wouldn’t go longer than a couple hours preaching this morning, so I’ll try to keep it brief. Where to start? Well, for one thing, God did not bless the USA, at least, God did not bless this nation anymore than any other. Putting all those distinctly American documents in with the Bible suggests that the Founders wanted this to be a Christian nation; they patently did not. It also elevates secular documents to the level of the sacred. And y’all, much as I like most of those ideals, they ain’t scripture. On the off chance you need the reminder, when our scriptures were written, the USA didn’t exist. The USA doesn’t show up in scripture, but, if it did, it wouldn’t be the Promised Land. It’d be Rome. Or Babylon. Or Egypt. It sure wouldn’t be a tiny backwater struggling to survive. It’d be the boot on that backwater’s neck. I know, our history’s a mixed bag. There are lots of good things we can point to. It’s fine to be patriotic; it’s fine to love where you’re from. But it’s not fine to ignore inconvenient evils in order to feel better about our past or, if we’re honest, our present.

Let me come at this a little differently. Let’s step back and try a somewhat anachronistic thought experiment. Rewind to the year 70. After decades of resisting, Rome’s overcome your defenses. You’ve lost kith and kin to their sword, your place of worship is gone, you’re afraid to leave the house on the decent chance you’d run into a centurion that woke up on the wrong side of the bed. When you finally do work up the courage to take a walk and see what remains, a massive, shining eagle stands proud where your God once did. And then the emperor steps out of the shadows, hands you a Bible with his toga wrapped around it, and says, “It’s ok. We’re on the same side here.” Just ‘cause it’s a Bible doesn’t make it right. It makes it a mockery.

That’s what we’re talking about here. It may be an America problem, it may be bigger than that. But it’s our problem now. It’s a distraction from what Christianity’s about, and that’s our unwavering dedication to speak truth to power. Not what power wants to hear, but the real truth. And the truth we speak isn’t meant to rule the land, it doesn’t even claim a flag. (I realize, for what it’s worth, that I’m preaching all of this in front of a flag for the country and a flag for the church. Perhaps neither is appropriate.) The truth we speak calls all of us. We seek justice and peace and defend the dignity of every human being. We’re called to the places where those things fail. We feed the hungry. We tend to the sick. We visit the imprisoned. We embrace the foreigner. We love the least lovable neighbors. We house the poor. I’ve even heard it half-jokingly said that Jesus himself offered free healthcare! And in case you think I’m making this stuff up, start looking at stained glass when you go into churches. My seminary has a depiction of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who tried to bring down the Nazi regime. A church I served down South depicts Jesus claiming his peaceful reign in place of Roman Centurions sleeping alongside American Soldiers. Shoot, that window right there, that woman risked the wrath of a king to feed the poor. Wrap your Bible in that! ‘cause if you’re brown or poor or queer, a Bible wrapped in the American Flag probably isn’t meant for you.

I don’t know, the news about that American Bible, at first I rolled my eyes. Then I got mad. I’ve worked my way through most of the stages of grief but I just can’t accept it. I don’t think we should. We’re staring at a new reality that moves so fast we can’t keep up. Y’all, I feel a lot like those women standing before the empty tomb. I want a neat conclusion to this story. I want the good guys to win. I want empires to crumble and the oppressed to breathe free. But instead we’re here, watching our homeland teeter on the edge of self-destruction. There’s a whole swath of Christianity that needs to be reminded of what Christianity’s really about, and they’re growing fast. They’re growing so fast and are so loud that the long-standing teachings of Christianity are starting to sound made up to too many ears. Did you know, for example, that the Bible explicitly prohibits the rich from owning more than one house? Sure does. It also says that, when all things are made right, they’re

gonna be ground to dust while the poor occupy their many homes instead. That's orthodoxy. Whatever's unfolding out there is madness, cherry picked and wrapped in the flag. Do not conflate the two.

Now, in a short moment, we're going to baptize someone dear to this congregation. Genesis, I'm in awe of your decision. I was baptized as a kid. I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't understand the promises made on my behalf. I got to grow into them as I grew into this world. But you? You're choosing the hard path. You're choosing to step into that open tomb and stand before the weight of empires. But you're not alone. There's quite a few of us standing there already, and we need you at our side. It's a brave promise you make today. And for the rest of us, we're not just watching her. We're making promises, too. Promises to support Genesis, sure, but also promises to resist the evils of this world and promises to love those crushed by them. It is no insignificant thing we do today. With one little splash, we change the world. Or at least we hope to. Because we don't know how this ends, not yet. We may be afraid. We may feel like there's nothing but emptiness where faith once lay. But Easter makes a different claim. Today, our faith is risen and with it, stubborn hope blossoms.