



March 27, 2016
"Early Easters"
John 4: 46-54

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It's Easter? In March? Really? March isn't for Easter; March is for beware-ing the ides; March is for Madness; for the wearing of the green. March has National Pig Day (1st) and National Alien Abductions Day (20th), and (my personal favorite) National Chocolate Covered Raisins Day. (Last Thursday.)

Easter belongs in April, doesn't it? When we're well into spring and the azaleas are in bloom and the Masters has been played and no more doth the weather channel spread the fear of late frost. In the spring, when everything is coming to life, that's when Easter seems so natural and all creation falls in step with stories of resurrection.

But this year—no. Easter in March; Easter now, just when I need it most. An early Easter is by far the best kind of Easter. John knew that when he wrote his account of Jesus, so John provides lots of early Easter. Of course, we can read about Easter at the end of the story, the grand finale in his twenty-first chapter, when Jesus reveals his wounded hands and side and even Thomas falls to his knees in belief.

Sometimes that's the only kind of Easter that gets talked about. And if you believe it at all, it has to do with the next life, after this one has ended. It comes *after* you are dead and it's about being in heaven, not living on earth. But Easter isn't just about heaven. Easter is a *now* thing, a here and now thing. Resurrection, not in heaven's after-life, but resurrection in this very life.

That kind of Easter takes us totally by surprise, just like it did those first disciples. Believers of Yahweh God, they already believed in resurrection at the end of time. Resurrection *now* took them completely off guard.

So John sprinkles Easter stories throughout the Gospel, giving us resurrection now, but disguising it like a pinch of salt in a recipe. Like salt, the Easter part of these stories doesn't call attention to itself; it simply adds savor to the dish. John doesn't reserve Easter for the very end; he keeps inserting Easter early, sometimes even in March.

Jesus' first miracle at the wedding of Cana, in John, chapter two—it's actually an Easter story, a story of resurrection.

That story begins with the words "On the third day, there was a wedding..." when anybody with fingers can count at least five days contained in chapter one. John is connecting this wedding with something else that will happen "on the third day." We

say it in the Apostles Creed: "...on the *third day* he rose again from the dead..." Jesus turning water into wine is not merely about his power as omnipotent creator; it's about God bringing forth the very best just when all has become empty. It's an early-Easter Easter story.

The fourth chapter connects us to that wedding also. "Jesus came to Cana in Galilee, where he turned the water into wine..." This story also is an early-Easter story. Early-Easter stories are *my* kind of Easter stories. It is about living Easter when all we've been given is the command "Go. Your son will live."

With the desperation of a father for his beloved son, this man came begging Jesus frantically for the only thing in the world that mattered to him. With one thing on his mind, he only asked Jesus for two simple things: 1) come down and 2) heal his son. Things started badly for him: he did not get his first request. Jesus did not come down. Did he get the second request? He got a pronouncement, a promise; and he got a command, "Go away." "Go. Your son will live." And here is the first miracle in this story--"The man believed...and started on his way."

Standing there, looking Jesus in the eye, he *knew*, he just knew. An inexplicable wave of "All is well!" swept through him and he knew. You know what that's like? You've had that experience, haven't you. Sometimes in the darkest tunnel of grief, someone stand beside you, speaks with you, reaches toward you. It isn't that they said just the right thing--you don't even remember what they said. But for then at least, you feel a peace, a confidence even. With no way to explain it, this father knew in that moment that all was well. He believed, and started on his way. .

How long did that confidence last? Two hours? Five minutes? How soon before the questions began? "What did he mean, 'Your son will live'?" Live in heaven, in God's loving arms? Live in the final days, when God will bring all things to himself and time will be no more? Live in our hearts and memories? What did he mean, 'Your son will live?'"

The servants would not appear with the report of his son's recovery until the next day . I'm thinking the father's grief came rushing back almost before he left Jesus' sight. That grief mounting up in him like Donald Trump's momentum. Grief that feels like cold fear. The shortness of breath. The lying awake after an hour and a half of sleep. The wave of fear swept over him, but one thing it could not wash away: that moment of confidence, of deep peace, of trust; that moment he believed and obeyed. Fear had no power to take away the reality of that moment, even if it was only a memory, like the vision of the horizon during a midnight flash of lightning, like the softness of your first kiss. All that sleepless night that moment of faithful belief wrestled with the onslaught of fear.

He had Jesus' word, "Your son will live." But the confirmation of Jesus' word came to this father *the next day*. The Gospel story doesn't tell about the long night between the time the man believed Jesus' word and the report of the miracle. It doesn't

have to--we have already lived that story. We have journeyed into the dark and settled in for the night and laid awake in the dark, fighting back the fear and clinging to the promises. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death..." We already know that part of the story, without the telling of it.

And we know that it is an Easter story! An *early*-Easter story. This story, 17 chapters before the final "Ta-dah!" events of Easter, is *our* Easter story. We have been given Easter. We sing and proclaim in joyous praise, "Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!" And as we leave the church parking lot, we realize that what we have been given is the word, "Go. You will live." "You, your sons and daughters, your beloved, you...will live." But we have not yet heard the report from the servants: "It has already happened! The fever left yesterday! It's a miracle!"

We await eagerly that time when the trumpet shall sound, and Christ shall return in triumph, and the dead shall be raised, and all God's children will shout "Grave, where is your victory? Death, where is your sting?" But for now, we travel on our way, our belief held only by a word, and sometimes the wrestling between that word and the chaos around us is fierce. This is our Easter, and it is always an early Easter.

Easter always comes early, and for those of us desperate for resurrection, for some sign of life, that's the Easter we need—Easter here in this place, during this life. And when we no longer wait for Easter to occur only in heaven after we die, we find early Easters all around us. And these Easters have the touch of a life-giving, un-tamed God.

--He shared her life and her bed and her children for as long as she cared to remember, and when his life ended, her life pretty much ended as well. Easter resurrection is her feeling one spring morning, "It's good to be alive!" Early Easter.

--The heat was hellacious and the smoke as thick as syrup. The firefighter had three minutes of oxygen left, but how could he leave? He thought he'd heard a child's cry—only once and only faintly, but how could he leave? In the same moment he felt a tiny hand against his glove and saw the light from the doorway. He wasn't out yet, but he wasn't wandering lost—he knew where he was heading and he held life in his arms. Early Easter.

--The community clubhouse smelled of cigarette smoke and spilled beer, and she had to get up for work in less than six hours, but the two groups who had been fighting over the tennis courts for over a year had shaken hands and left telling jokes. "Resurrection", she thought as she turned out the lights.

--He rose to speak, his voice trembling as he spoke of death—losing relationships, losing jobs, losing grades, losing health—all the while denying how deadly it all was. "My name is Larry. Thanks to all of you for coming to my 1st birthday party, to celebrate that today, I have been sober for one year." Early Easter.

--The woman used to tend a garden—before her divorce took the life out of her.

this spring she feels the urge to buy seed. After a day of playing in the dirt, she bathes—a luxurious, hot bath. The next day she shops for new clothes, and Wednesday for choir rehearsal, she dresses like it was Sunday. She gets a manicure.

Grandpa, grieved by retirement, staring blankly at daytime TV, notices all by himself that the sink faucet leaks. On Monday, he fixes it. Easter.¹

Easter, with its final glorious victory over death will come. We will have it, for God has promised it. But Easter comes early this year, like Easter always does. This year, Easter comes with the *hint* of spring. This year we will resist the hype and fly close to the ground, where certainty runs out and trusting begins.

That happy-ending, victorious Easter will come, for God has not only promised it but also shown it in Christ Jesus, risen from the dead. Not long, friends, not long.

John gives us early-Easter stories for us to remember this March Easter morning. It is Easter. But for us it is early Easter. What we have for now are words spoken to the desperate father: “Go. There is life ahead.”

1. These illustrations were adapted from (or lifted from) material written by Barbara Brown Taylor which I found in an edition of *Journal for Preacher* many years ago. I’m sorry I cannot locate the original source document.