

James P. Scullion, O.F.M.

Exegesis, Imagination, and Preaching in Easter Time

Does critical scientific exegesis open up or stifle the imagination? Since preaching is a creative act, the structured study of a text (exegesis) should aid not hinder this creative task. Structure need not be antithetical to creativity: Ludwig van Beethoven used the structure of the Sonata form and Bob Dylan used the three-chord blues form in very creative ways. These structures seemed to get their creative juices flowing. In this column I would like to examine the creative process, specifically the relationship between critical exegesis and imaginative preaching. Using the Gospel text for the Monday of the Octave of Easter (Matt 28:8-15), I will try to deconstruct my own process of writing a homily for this particular day and examine the bridge between exegesis and the homily.

I. EXEGESIS

The Gospel for this day picks up the story of the women at the tomb. Previously the women have witnessed a great earthquake and the rolling away of the stone (Matt 28:2). An angel announces to them that Jesus has been raised and commands them to announce to the disciples that Jesus will precede them to Galilee. As the Gospel for today begins, Jesus appears to the women as they are hurrying away with this message. Jesus repeats the angel's command and sends them to the "brothers." The Gospel ends with the story of the alleged stealing of Jesus' body and the bribing of the soldiers.

I must admit that my first reading left me unengaged. It is not that the Easter proclamation is not exciting and life giving but what more could I say about it on Easter Monday? I was preaching before my own Franciscan community so it was a community that I knew well, but it was also a community that had often heard me preach on the resurrection and new life. What was new or different in this Gospel story? How had our community story changed between Easter Sunday and Monday? I felt the well had run dry.

Since women were mentioned in the story I decided to begin by using a feminist approach to exegesis. This approach "seeks to rediscover the status and role of women disciples within the life of Jesus . . ." (Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1996:18). This approach uses both historical critical methods (source, form, and redaction criticism) and a narrative

approach (5–7, 910) to recover the lost voices of women in the Scripture. So, at least I had some questions to address to the text: what was the status and role of these women in Matthew's story? As I searched to discover who these women were and how they functioned in this Gospel story I began by studying the limits of this passage and placing the story within the context of the whole of Matthew's Gospel. I found by comparing different translations and commentaries that the limits (28:8-15) set by the Lectionary were somewhat artificial since the story really begins in 28:1. The identity of these women is given in this verse: "After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb." A word search pointed out that Mary Magdalene and another Mary appear three times in Matthew's Gospel (27:56, 61; 28:1):

1. "Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee" (27:55-56).
2. ". . . Joseph [of Arimathea] . . . laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb" (27:60-61).
3. "After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb" (28:1).

Given these three passages the "other Mary" (27:61; 28:1) must be "Mary the mother of James and Joseph" (27:56). I expanded my narrative study of the passage by placing it within the context of Matthew's Gospel as a whole. I noted that these women were there at certain key points in the passion story: (1) Crucifixion (27:55-56), (2) Burial (27:61), (3) Rolling Away of the Stone/Appearance (28:1-10).

I was struck by the occurrence of the word "there" (*ekei*) in two of these three passages (27:55, 61). This led me to ask about the other "disciples"? Where were they? Matthew tells us that "all the disciples deserted him and fled" (26:56). They were not "there" at the crucifixion, they were not "there" at the burial, except for Joseph from Arimathea (27:57). The disciples do not appear again until the women bring them the instruction to meet Jesus in Galilee (28:8, 16). While the women were "there" at key points in the passion story the "disciples" were not. So, who is a true disciple in Matthew's story those who are called disciples or the women? What does it mean to be a disciple?

This structured study of the text and its narrative context brought to light that some of Jesus followers were with him throughout the whole

passion story and some were not. The simple adverb “there” seemed also to leap off the page of the text as it appeared in two of the three texts where the women appear. But how does one move from these exegetical observations to a homily? At least this exegesis had engaged my interest, I had questions about the text, about the role of women in the Gospel, about the meaning of discipleship. Lurking below all of this were questions about my community and myself.

II. HOMILY

The bridge between this exegesis and the homily was formed by the well-known African-American Spiritual, “Were You There?” The reason that the adverb “there” seemed to leap off the page was probably because we had used this hymn for our Good Friday service. This hymn became the creative catalyst with its three questions:

- (1) Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
- (2) Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?
- (3) Were you there when they rolled the stone away?

I noticed that the women followers in the Gospel story could answer yes to these three questions, the other disciples would have to answer no. Now my imagination was engaged. I not only had a key question for the homily but this question, I noted, served as the refrain in this hymn. Might it not also serve as the recurring question or refrain throughout the homily?

The next step was to apply this question to the story of the Christian community throughout the ages and to the story of my own community. This application seemed to flow quite easily and naturally. As a Christian community one could ask were we “there” when they crucified the Lord at Auschwitz? Some Christians were “there,” most Christians were not. Were we “there” when the Lord was crucified by the institution of slavery in the United States? A number of Christians were, many Christians were not. Since I was preaching to a group of Franciscan friars who have a strong presence in Croatia, I asked whether we were “there” when they crucified the Lord in Bosnia-Herzegovina? Some Franciscans were “there” and some were not. But was this application justified since these were not literally crucifixions? Matt 5:11-12, it seemed to me, justified this application: “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account . . . for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

This African-American spiritual became the creative spark for this homily. It provided the structure, theme, and moral challenge. The Good News was the challenge of the cross of Christ and the hope of his death and resurrection.

III. EVALUATION

What were the strengths and weaknesses of this creative process? The strength of this process was that it moved me from disengagement with the text to a creative engagement. The structured or disciplined study of Matthew's Gospel led me to use a powerful hymn that retold that passion story, made it contemporary, challenging and evocative. The structure and question in the hymn correlated very well with the threefold appearance of the woman in the Gospel story. They clearly came off as the faithful disciples.

The weakness of this homily is that while it was very faithful to the Gospel of Matthew as a whole it did not directly engage the reading of the day beyond the reference to the women who are mentioned in the beginning of the gospel passage. I did not preach on the bribery of the soldiers and the story of the stealing of Jesus' body. Some have also suggested that preaching the cross and crucifixion the day after Easter goes against the joy of this season.

What was the bridge or the creative stimulus in this process? A careful or disciplined reading of the text made me more aware of the role of women in this text, a role I might have easily passed over. This reading also made me more aware of words and phrases in the text. Ultimately it was the seemingly inconsequential adverb "there" that awakened my imagination as I connected this gospel passage to the Hymn "Were You There?" The homily became a hymn in three-part harmony. The voices were (1) the gospel text, (2) the hymn "Were You There," and (3) my community.

REFERENCES

- Fitzmyer, Joseph A. *The Biblical Commission's Document "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church" Text and Commentary*. Subsidia Biblica, vol. 18. Rome: Pontifical Biblical Press, 1995.
- Kingsbury, J. D. *Matthew as Story*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988.
- Pontifical Biblical Commission. *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. USCC Publication No. 806-1. Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1996.
- Powell, Mark Allan. *What Is Narrative Criticism? Guides to Biblical Scholarship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg/Fortress, 1990.

James P. Scullion, O.F.M., is an assistant professor of sacred Scripture at Washington Theological Union and a member of the editorial board of New Theology Review.