

"A STORY ALMOST TOO BIG TO TELL"

A Sermon By

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Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
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INTRODUCTION

Sportswriter, Red Smith, once told a story about novelist-film writer, Laurence Stallings. Though he was not a sportswriter, Stallings was invited to cover a football game between the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Illinois.

The year was 1925 and the brilliant halfback, Red Grange, was on the field that Saturday afternoon and he was dazzling. He broke loose for three touchdowns and set up another...all of this on a muddy field. The old hands up in the press box were pounding away at their typewriters.

Not Stallings, however. He was in something of a tizzy and pacing up and down the press box with his hands up in the air and over his head, he wailed:

"I can't...I can't write it! It's just too big, too big!"

DEVELOPMENT

Now the chances are that the writers of the Four Gospels felt something of the same emotion as they came to put quill to parchment to tell future generations about the last chapter of the story of Jesus on earth. "It's too big...how do you tell it?" How do you describe something on earth as shaking as this Easter story? Christ has been raised from the dead!

Each of the Four Gospels tells this story in a slightly different way and at one time that bothered me....but now it doesn't for it adds authenticity to the story. This is no carefully crafted neat little tale. This is reality - chaotic, complex and confusing.

Bruce Larson in his book, Living Beyond Our Fears, tells a wonderful story about a judge in Yugoslavia who had an unfortunate accident. He was standing in his bathtub and reached over to turn on a light. You don't do that...standing in water. Yes, he was electrocuted and his wife found his body sprawled on the bathroom floor. He was pronounced dead and, as is the custom in that small town, he was taken to a small room under a crypt in the town cemetery for 24 hours before burial. However, in the middle of the night, the judge came to, realized where he was and rushed over to alert the guard who promptly ran off - terrified.

Fortunately, some time later that night he returned with a friend and they released the newly-revived judge. The judge's first thought was to phone his wife and reassure her. He got no farther than, "Darling...it's me" when she screamed and fainted. Next he went to the houses of several friends who were sure he was a ghost. Finally, in a last desperate measure, the judge called a friend in a distant city who had not heard about the accident and his apparent death, and who interceded for him with his family and friends.

The writers of the Gospels were writing at least a generation after the fact of Christ's victory over death and the grave. The reports handed down to them of the resurrection were piece-meal, fragmented. Different witnesses recalled different events. Only one thing was certain. On Friday, Jesus of Nazareth was dead. And on Sunday, He was very much alive.

That great Scots preacher, scholar and teacher, James S. Stewart, wrote of the Resurrection:

"Not one line of the New Testament was written...not one sentence, whether of Gospels, Epistles, Acts or Aposalypse, was penned apart from the conviction that He of whom these things were being written had conquered death and was alive for evermore."

The word that flashed across the Mediterranean world and gave impetus to the Apostolic Church and the Christology that supported it was not the admonition of Jesus to "love your neighbor", but rather the news that Christ had risen, and with it the implication that those who believed in Him could, like Him and with Him, triumph over sin and death to new life. That message was irresistible and so we gather here this morning...centuries after that Event...in joyful anticipation to celebrate the most exciting news ever received on earth. The spirit of Christ is alive in our world and present where we are to have dealings with us...

Let's consider for a few moments while we're here together WHY Easter is so important for the followers of Jesus and WHY we wish for the whole world to embrace an Easter faith.

WE LOVE AND HAVE BEEN LOVED

Easter is important, first of all, because we have loved and we have been loved.

Here's one from the Reader's Digest that you'll enjoy. A Christine Fodera of Louisville recently shared an amusing experience that she and her husband had. It seems that their priest asked her husband, Sam, to do some re-wiring in the confessionals, and the only way to reach the wiring was to enter a small attic above the altar area and crawl over the ceiling by balancing on the rafters. Concerned for her husband, Christine waited down below in a pew near the front.

Unknown to Christine, some other parishioners were gathered in the rear of the sanctuary. They paid little attention to her, probably assuming that she was praying. Worried about her husband up in the small attic area over the altar and balancing himself on some old rafters, she looked up and yelled, "Sam, Sam...are you up there?"

There was quite an outburst from the rear of the church when Sam's hearty voice echoed down and filled the Church,

"Yes...I made it up here just fine. Everything's OK".

For those of us who have lost someone we love to death, it is most comforting to know they made it up there OK...that everything's "fine".

When C. S. Lewis lost his dear friend, Charles Williams, he wrote something which he said he thought he would never write. It sounded like so much sentimental claptrap. He wrote that since Charles Williams died, heaven was no longer a "strange and far-off place". Why? Because his friend, Charles, was there and when his beloved wife, Joy, died, he said the same thing. Heaven was closer still, for Joy was there!

They say that when Humphrey Bogart died on January 14th, 1957 that his wife, Lauren Bacall, placed a gold whistle inside his coffin. The inscription on the whistle read, "If you need anything, just whistle...." It was a line from their first film together, "To Have and To Have Not". Separation is difficult for people who have truly loved. Easter is important to us for what it says to us about our continuing relationship with them. A very comforting thought.

LIFE IS SO PRECIOUS

Easter is important also because life is so precious.
None of us is eager to die!

A rancher out west left an unusual request with the funeral director when he made arrangements for his burial. He said,

"I want to be burried in my trusty old pick-up
truck!"

The undertaker tried to talk him out of this unusual request, but to no avail.
Said the rancher,

"It's like this....I ain't ever seen a hole that
ol' truck couldn't get me out of..."

We appreciate the farmer's sentiment. There is such a thing as putting too much faith in a truck, but life is so beautiful and so rich and wonderful. Only a deeply troubled person wants to die. We all want to live. Still death is one reality in life that confronts us all.

Not too long ago the papers carried a story about a small town hospital that received a bomb threat. Officials decided that they had to take the threat seriously and so they quickly evacuated the hospital. Some patients were taken to the local rescue squad building and some, due to the shortage of space, were taken to a local funeral home.

One woman who had been in surgery when the bomb threat first came through came out from under her anesthesia and realized that she was staring at the surroundings of a local funeral home. She was naturally quite concerned until she saw other patients and had the situation explained to her.

Although the awakened woman initially misunderstood her situation, she was only premature - not wrong - in her conclusion. Each of us will one day face a day when our life on earth is over and realizing the certainty of that fact gives us a proper perspective on the years that we do have here and hopefully to do something good and lasting with them.

Is Easter important? It is if you have ever loved and been loved. And it is if you value the gift of life and want to hold on to it for as long as possible.

TO MAKE SENSE OUT OF LIVING

But hold on...for there's one more thing to lift up and place on your hearts and that is that Easter is important if we want to make sense out of living. Easter is important not only in what it says about life beyond the grave, but what it says about life on this side of the grave.

If Christ lives, then life has meaning. There is hope even in the most difficult of circumstances. Even at the very end of my rope, there is a knot I can hang on to. If Christ did defeat death, if my life goes on forever, if the Gospel is true, I can live courageously and victoriously. By His grace, I can overcome those crippling fears and be all that He intends for me to be. I need never entertain the possibility of absolute futility and failure - not if Christ be risen from the grave. It is that knowledge that has given the followers of Jesus power over their circumstances in every area for nearly 2000 years.

It was Easter Sunday, 1973 and Uganda was under the absolute dictatorship of Idi Amin. Kefa Sempangi was a pastor in that tortured land. Under the growing shadow of Amin, Uganda was becoming a land of terror. Still fresh in Sempangi's memory was a face burned beyond recognition, the sight of soldiers cruelly beating a man, and the horrible sound of boots crushing bones. Sempangi was exhausted and wondered what difference his Easter sermon that day could possibly make. He prayed for wisdom and strength and then delivered his sermon to 7,000 people.

After it was over and he was making his way back to his study, tired but joyful, he suddenly became aware of five men following him into the small building and they closed the door behind him. Sempangi turned around to find 5 rifles pointed at his face. He had never seen any of them before, but immediately recognized them as the secret police of the State Research Bureau - Idi Amin's assassins. Their faces were full of pure hate and revenge. Their leader spoke, saying:

"We are going to kill you. If you have something to say, say it now...before you die."

Sempangi stood there feeling himself loose control. He thought of his wife and child and began to shake. Somehow he managed to speak and he said to them,

"I do not plead my own cause. I am a dead man already. My life is dead and hidden in Christ. It is your lives that are in danger. You are dead in your sins. I will pray to God that after you have killed me, He will spare you from eternal destruction."

The leader looked at him with curiosity. Then he lowered his gun and ordered the others to do the same. "Will you pray for us now?" the leader of the five assassins asked. Though fearing it was a trick, Sempangi asked them to kneel and bow their heads and close their eyes. They did and he prayed...

"Father in heaven, You who have forgiven men in the past, forgive these men also. Do not let them perish in their sins, but bring them unto Yourself."

Sempangi lifted his head, waiting for the men to pull the triggers. But then he noticed their faces. Gone was the hate and the rage, and when the leader spoke again, it was without contempt. Said he,

"You have helped us and we will help you. We will speak to the rest of our company and they will leave you alone. Do not fear for your life. It is in our hands and you will be protected."

Relief and joy flooded through the heart of Sempangi. God's love had given him the strength to say a simple prayer - one that changed the lives of those five men forever.

CLOSING

What was it that gave him the courage to face the guns of the enemy in those moments. It was his Easter faith. For if Christ be raised from the dead (as Paul put it), we need fear nothing in this world.

We can love and be loved. We can enjoy the wonder of life and escape from that fear that one day it will be taken from us. We can face our gravest fears in the knowledge that there is One who has faced it all before and conquered it! And by His grace, we can be conquerors as well.

Yes, it's a story almost too big to tell. But it ~~must be~~ told and can be easily by simply reducing it down to two simple words that forever changed man's thinking about life and death: Christ lives! Amen.

PRAYER O Risen Lord of all life, we pause here at the end of our Easter service...in moments of prayer and wonder. The Good News of the Risen Christ once again overwhelms us. And we ask that somehow we may comprehend more of this great mystery of this day as we stand before You cradling our newborn hopes.

Come close to each of us and touch what is dead with us and bring us into newness of life.

Transform our timid caution into joyful confidence and strong assurance that we may depart that believing "in Christ" we shall be made alive, that someday God will wipe away every tear, that someday death shall be no more, and neither shall there be mourning or crying.

Let Your word of hope and resurrection bid once again for the hearts of all people everywhere until in the light that streams from Joseph's Garden, we see our world, our neighbor, ourselves....only through Jesus Christ, the risen Lord. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER: March 31, 1991

O GOD, OUR FATHER...FATHER OF OUR SPIRITS and FATHER OF ALL MANKIND -

We thank YOU that we may gather here this hour,

Not for a MEMORIAL SERVICE to a dead prophet,
But for a FESTIVAL OF THANKSGIVING for a conquering Christ!

Remind us, once again, of the empty Cross,
of the empty Tomb, and
of that truth of all truths,

That the Spirit of Jesus is ever alive in our world, present where
we are to have dealing with our trials and troubles, our lust and
our loneliness, our sin and our sorrow...and to have ULTIMATE
DEALINGS with our death.

In all we do this EASTER DAY, make real to us HIS SHINING PRESENCE,
and HIS RESURRECTION'S quiet joy.

WHEN days of discouragement come to us, give us the Easter assurance that
Your eternal purposes are at work.

WHEN we struggle with the difficulties of life and do not know which way
to turn, turn us again to the Easter Faith that sees Your Presence
quietly removing heavy stones that block a path to life and greater
meaning.

WHEN days of sorrow come to us...and when our loss seems unbearable...like
Mary let us hear You call us by name. Assure us that all is not
lost, that the grave is not the goal of life, and that we are not
alone!

WE NOW OFFER to YOU our thanks for this Easter Day in ~~and~~ and for all that
it means to us.

WE PRAY for the hungry and hurting, the homeless of our society.

WE PRAY for peace among the nations of the world and our prayers
this hour reach out to include the leaders of our land,
and for all in positions of authority and responsibility.

WE PRAY for loved ones, no longer with us, but now "gone home" to
be with You - a part of Easter past ... in the great Kingdom
of light.

TOUCH OUR restless, doubting minds with the profound message of this Day,
that we may depart from here RELIEVING that with YOU there is no
death, that with YOU "all things are possible...that all things
work together for good to those who love and serve You". In
the strong name and lifting spirit of the Risen Christ, we offer
You our prayers.

INTRODUCTION As we now prepare to celebrate the Easter Faith and its glorious message of new life, let us begin our worship by coming together in a 'time of silent meditation.

In quietness, let each pray as the heart may prompt.

MEDITATION We rest our hearts in the Promise of Jesus who said:

"I am the resurrection and the life. He that believeth in Me, though he were dead - yet shall he live; and whosoever liveth and believeth me In shall never die."

Said Paul:

"For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."

"For I am persuaded that neither death nor life - nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers - nor things present, nor things to come - nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature - shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus, our Lord."

"For this day of days, O God, we bless Thy name. With angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, we rejoice that death is finished, that love prevails, That Christ is alive and here."

PRAYERS / LORD'S PRAYER

Touch with healing those whom we mention in our prayers this Easter Day: 1. Bobbie Heron. 2. Karen Oldham. 3. Ada Kinney. 4. Daisy Herrick. 5. Doris Klein (sister in law of Gary. 6. Joe Weddington, father of Lynn Tucker. 7. Harold and Louise Williams, parents of Anne. 8. Doris Moore, mother of John. Lewis Carr, Father of cherished members and friends of this parish. Comfort the bereaved and Amy the broken hearted among us with the lifting message of this hour.

Answers the unspoken prayers now offered to thee on the altars of our hearts, spoken in the name and spirit of Christ who taught us to say when we pray:

"Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen".

ANNOUNCEMENTS: March 31, 1991 / EASTER DAY

GREETING / VISITORS

We greet all of you - young and old alike - on this Easter Day. To each and every one of you go our warmest wishes for a joyous and lifting celebration of the Easter Faith!

If you're a visitor we invite you to take a moment...right now... to fill out a visitor card and drop it in the offering plate, or to sign one of the Guest Books in the narthex as you depart. Join us downstairs for coffee following this service. Be free in the sharing of your name.

The roots of this church are deep in the soil of this city. Founded in the year 1837, we've been doing the "Lord's Work" here for 154 years. We minister in the name of Christ and it is in His loving Spirit that we greet all of you on this Easter Sunday.

PARISH CONCERNS

The parish concerns are listed in the bulletin. Review them on your own in these moments noting the meetings scheduled for this week as well as the study and spiritual growth opportunities - "Hounds of Heaven" on Tuesday. Aldersgate Class on Wednesday. Membership Committee has a supper meeting on Thursday evening at the home of Eric deFreitas, 175 West 12th Street. Hymn Sing - next Sunday.

Two weeks from today we celebrate another of our "Each One Bring One" Sundays...invite a friend to come along with you to church that Sunday. It's also the Sunday of Bake Sale II - for the benefit of the all Church Picnic of June 22nd.

Three weeks from tonight is our Spring "Conversations in Membership" for new friends interested in learning more about this church and the steps that lead to membership in it. Sunday evening, April 21st.

EASTER APPEAL

The Easter offering this year will help us to meet our responsibilities both here at home and in many other places "out there" - in the city, this neighborhood and distant places in our world. We're grateful for your response to the Easter appeal thus far. Your gifts enable us to do many good things. Goal: \$ 2,000. Invite you to be generous in helping us to meet it!

JESUS SAID:

"It is more blessed to give than to receive"
In this spirit, let us worship God with our morning offerings...our Easter appeal.

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