

"EASTER AND THE UNEXPECTED"

INTRODUCTION

Three women were making their way along the road that led to the garden where Jesus had been buried less than two days before. They were not taking flowers to decorate his grave as people so often do today. Rather they were taking spices to anoint his body. This was a custom of that time and by this affectionate gesture, they were portraying powerfully the love that does not end with death. They loved Jesus beyond the end. They were seeking to pay the last reverence that could be paid.

It was a Sunday, early in the morning. The sun was just coming up. And as they made their way, they had only one thing on their mind - the stone. Who will move the stone for us? For the tomb in which Jesus had been laid had been sealed with a huge stone in order to protect it from intruders. They knew it was a huge stone; they knew that they would not be able to budge it. All the way there, they kept wondering: who is going to move the stone for us? What will we do if no one is there to help us? The more they thought about it, the larger that stone became in their imagination.

THE STONE HAD BEEN MOVED

As they completed their sad journey of faithfulness, they encountered a great surprise. They discovered upon their arrival that the stone had already been moved. We pause momentarily to reflect upon something that this suggests to us as we think of the mountainous stones that we encounter in life. Isn't it true that so often in life nine out of ten difficulties that we anticipate from a distance disappear when we get there, or, if they do not completely disappear, they either shrink in size or we grow in stature, so that they are manageable.

For instance, there is an ordeal ahead of you. You can already see the dim outline of it beginning to form in your mind. Perhaps it will be next month, or maybe it will be three months from now. But sooner or later, you know it will meet you face to face. You dread it. You know it's not going to be easy. You imagine all of the things that could happen to you in connection with it. You say to yourself: how will I ever meet it? How will I ever go through it? Who will pay the bills? And then, as you approach this experience, somehow some of those difficulties you have been anticipating begin to diminish; they begin to melt like wax. You find the strength to hurdle the remaining obstacles.

I think we could say this: that faithfulness has a way of running into surprises. When one faithfully goes on with duty - doing in times of darkness, disappointment or defeat, what is often the little that can be done in devotion to Christ - one meets the unexpected. New strength, the comfort of the fortified heart, the fresh awareness of what friendship can mean, the way opened through seemingly difficult obstacles - all these surprises of God have been encountered along the road of faithfulness. I think that part of our trouble is that when we encounter the great and immovable stones of life, we tend to think only in terms of earthly powers. We say we believe in God, but in spite of our belief we tend to look out on the world, on our own difficult situation, as though only earthly factors were at work.

When the women said, "Who will move this stone for us?" they discovered that God had an answer. And God has an answer to our immovable stones. This is part of the Easter surprise. And there, of course, that great stone we all eventually come to sooner or later in life - the gravestone, as this one was. And we wonder, who will roll it away - the heavy weight of grief, the feeling of loss, the feeling that life is now crushed beyond restoration, that life is no longer worth living? It's a universal question. We need to remember that God has rolled it away by the truth revealed in the first Easter, by the power of a faith to which, in Victor Hugo's words: "The tomb is not a blind alley, but a thoroughfare". The stone was moved. This is the first of the unexpected things that happened to the women on that first Easter morning.

HE WAS NOT THERE

Now when the women went inside the tomb, much to their great amazement, they discovered that the body of Jesus was not there. They knew it had been placed there - lovingly and tenderly - at the invitation of Joseph of Arimathaea. They had seen it with their own eyes on Friday night after it had been taken down from the cross. But the body was not there now. Instead of it, they saw a young man very much alive, dressed in white from head to foot and he said to them: "Don't be frightened. I know you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth. He is not here; he has risen. Come and see the place where they laid him".

Again, we pause in the narrative to consider something this tells us about life. We do not always find things in exactly the same place where we left them. We find that things do not always work out the way we expect them to. For instance, you leave a friend in critical condition in a hospital room. The report concerning his condition is not good. The doctors are worried, not at all encouraged. They even say that he may not last much longer. You leave the hospital - down-hearted, troubled, feeling sad. You remember how active this friend has been in days past. You wonder if he'll ever leave the hospital. ~~You wonder if this is the end. You sense he'll never lead an active life again, that he'll never go back to work again.~~ Time goes by. Your work takes you to another part of the world for six months. You return and one of the first things you do is to make inquiry concerning your friend. You expect the worst. But much to your amazement, he is no longer in the hospital. He's not where you left him. Not at all. He's recovered. He's up and around; he's even going back to work. The doctors are amazed. Nothing short of a miracle, they say. And perhaps you say to yourself - the prayers for healing.....the person's great faith....there must be something to it.

Can we not say this: to be sure, there are patterns in life and thank God for them, but they're not quite so inflexible as we sometimes think they are. Once in a while, nature seems to skip a step or two. Things you thought dead and buried are often up and about and doing. So often mankind has thought he had buried the values of truth and goodness and beauty, only to discover they were not buried at all - but still very much alive. This, we could say, was the second of the unexpected things that caught these women by surprise on that first Easter morn.

HE HAD RISEN

The young man said to them, "He is not here. He has risen" I wonder if the women heard and fully grasped what he said to them. So often in life we fail to hear the things that are said to us, unless we are prepared to hear them. I wonder if they really took it in. They weren't prepared to hear it. It was too much for them.

In a sense, it ought not to be too much for us...not if we have thoughtfully and reverently followed him through this Lenten Season - watching Him and reviewing with eyes of faith His way. As many of you know, over the last six weeks, we have watched him face various life situations - decision, temptation, failure. We have watched him with people - friends, enemies. Perhaps you have felt, as I have felt, this man was so different from us. This man had an incomparable spirit - a unique way - a glorious style to his life that we would do well to try to match.

Cruelty battered at him from every side - mental cruelty as well as physical cruelty. He rose above it. He was not cruel, not even bitter. And when he prayed, he prayed for others, for insight, direction. He even prayed that God would forgive those who were cruel to him. Loneliness touched his life as his followers fled and deserted him, leaving him to face the cruel experience of the cross alone. He rose above it. He made a new friend in the thief on the cross next to his own. Pain gripped him as he died of exposure and exhaustion. He rose above it. He drowned it in a sea of larger concern. He was so preoccupied with other people - the soldiers, the thief, his mother, a friend...he didn't have time to think of his own pain. Is it any wonder then, that even as he rose above

cruelty, loneliness, pain and darkness that he even rose above death. These are the things that kill a person on the inside and these are the things he had risen above. Is it any wonder that he rose above death so that death had absolutely no dominion over him.

"He has risen" - these three words form the greatest watershed of human history. Everything that has flowed from them - the creation of the Christian Church and the great social forces let loose as a result of the new valuation which the resurrection has put upon man himself - they bear witness to the reality and the transforming power of the event itself.

A man, looking for the first time at the stupendous spectacle of the Grand Canyon said, after a long period of silent awe, "Something must have happened here". It was a bit obvious that that deep cut in the earth was not caused by an Indian dragging a stick along the ground. Such a result demanded an adequate cause. And so we can look at this deep cut in time, in the history of mankind, this event that divides time, at the great right about-face of the disciples, at the creation of the church, at the social forces that have flowed into the world from the church - and say: "Something must have happened here". We don't have all the answers we should like to have. But something must have happened. And the only adequate something is the great mystery of the resurrection of Jesus. He went through death from start to finish, but he rose above it. He rose from death into new life. This was the third and the greatest surprise that greeted the women on that first Easter morn.

THEY COULD RISE WITH HIM

But there is still another unexpected element in all of this to consider. Gradually his followers came to realize that as He had risen, so they could rise with Him to this new life. Yes, they discovered that if they were willing to die to certain things within themselves - things like pride, lust, selfishness, cruelty - that they could rise to this new and glorious life with Him. Paul, it was, who spoke of "the new life in Christ". And if they could rise with Him to this new life - so, too, can we!

As I was thinking about all of this this past week, I was reminded of something that happened here in our church on Easter Sunday a number of years ago. It took place in the Sunday before the Easter service. We brought all of the young boys and girls together for half an hour. They sat in a circle. I had opportunity to be with them and to talk informally to them about Easter - its deeper meaning, hoping to help them see that there's more to it than the Easter bunny and Easter eggs. I remember it well; they all looked so bright in their new Easter outfits. I asked how many of them were wearing something new for Easter. So many hands went up around the room. I asked one little boy what he had on that was new and he showed me a necktie and took off his belt. Both were new.

I asked them why they were wearing these new things on Easter. One little girl put up her hand and said something like this: "Everybody was bright and happy when Jesus rose from the dead. We are bright and happy now and that's why we're wearing these new things". I thought to myself - she was quite close to the truth.

And so here this morning I would like to put something of the same question to you with a deeper meaning of course. ~~Have you risen with him? Risen to this new life that Paul spoke of.~~ Think of it this way. Has the resurrection given you anything new to wear. Are you, for instance, wearing a new coat of confidence so that you can walk without fear through the darkness of life? Are you, for instance, wearing a new garment of understanding of your fellow human - less prejudiced, less bigoted? Are you clothed with a new humility, clothed with gentleness, with love and charity and forgiveness. And can you say, like Paul said, that you have better control over yourself - your emotions, your passions, your body. Has the resurrection given you anything new to wear? Have you risen with him to this new life?

LET US PRAY

We thank thee, O God, for the great truths expressed in this account of the first Easter morning: how the women arrived at the tomb and encountered the unexpected - the stone moved, the news of the risen Christ, and that as He had risen, so too they could rise with him. We are thankful for his spirit, alive and at work in the world where we live. Help us to see him more clearly, to love him more dearly, to follow him more nearly. In his spirit, we pray. Amen