

"EASTER IS..."

A Sermon By

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106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
April 12, 1998

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INTRODUCTION

In his book, Just As Long As I'm Riding Up Front, Ray McIver tells of belonging to the Kiwanis Club back in the nineteen fifties in the small Texas town of San Marcos. They were a pretty lively bunch all except for one man whose name was Roger Shelton. Roger Shelton use to arrive at the Kiwanis meetings a little late...sat by himself...and rarely ever said a word. Their luncheon meetings usually had a bit of entertainment before they got down to club business. At one particular meeting, the entertainment consisted of a barbershop quartet of local college professors. They were a popular bunch in San Marcos, often singing for both weddings and funerals.

Because they sang at more funerals than weddings, they came to be known as the "Funeral Quartet" and whenever a grieving family couldn't decide on the music for the funeral service, the funeral director would suggest these singing college professors. And since the funeral home was just down the hill from the university, it all seemed to work out well...however,

For this particular service, the quartet had been asked to sing, "Fairest Lord Jesus", an old favorite that was sure to be a "crowd-pleaser". The only trouble was that they started off on the wrong note and everything seemed to fall apart. And what was heard was one of the most discordant, out-of-key renditions of "Fairest Lord Jesus" that's ever been sung. People began to squirm in their seats and looked at each other. It really was bad...horrible. When it was over, the quartet sat down...somewhat embarrassed. No one could think of anything to say, but the silence was eventually broken by Roger Shelton, the quiet one, the man of few words. He drawled in his Texas accent,

"You know...that's what I dread about dying!"

DEVELOPMENT

Have you ever noticed that most people dread dying...that most people have a fear of death. Nobody wants to face the "Grim Reaper"...unless, of course, you believe...really believe...the Easter story.

Simon Peter believed the Easter story. He certainly did...after all, he was there. He went through this whole "nerve-wracking" experience. His closest friend, Jesus...his teacher, his master...had been crucified and placed in a borrowed tomb. His friend, Jesus, was dead, deceased, departed, passed away. It was all over, but then, on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and what she found there changed the world forever. She found that the stone had been rolled away, that His body was gone! And so she came running to Simon Peter and the other Disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and breathlessly said,

"They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put Him!"

Peter and the other disciple ran to the tomb and saw the burial clothes, but no body. Then they went back to their homes and waited...not really knowing just what to do next. Then something unbelievable happened. We read that on the evening of the first day of the week, when the disciples were together...with the doors locked...Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" And Peter was there and Peter believed. He really believed.

It reminds me of a story that made the papers not too long ago. You may have seen it. It was about a man by the name of Robert J. Oliver. Robert J. Oliver, too, was pronounced dead. His friends and family members gathered at the hospital and cried over his body. Funeral clothes were picked out and all arrangements, including a wake, were planned. Oliver's daughter-in-law felt it best to wait 'til the next morning to break the news to her husband, who was fishing on Cape Cod. And when she finally called the family's cottage on the Cape, the man she had been mourning for twelve hours answered the phone. Says Robert J. Oliver,

"It took me 20 minutes to calm her down. She was saying and kept saying, 'You're dead...'"

Well, it seems that hospital officials had called the family of the wrong Robert Oliver. The man who died, Robert W. Oliver, had a home in Quincy, Massachusetts....just like Robert J. Oliver. The men were about the same age - 62 and 64 and they had similiar builds and brown eyes. Robert W. Oliver, however, had an unlisted phone number while Robert J. Oliver was in the book and so they called the wrong one. A rather bizarre mix-up, but such things do happen...at least there was a logical explanation. At least Robert J. Oliver's family could say, "Well...it was all a mistake...a rather stupid mistake at that!"

But, friend, there was no mix-up that first Easter. Jesus was dead. For three days He was dead, but now He was alive. Simon Peter was there and saw the Risen Christ with the nail prints in His hands and feet, and later he witnessed to that event in one of the first Easter sermons ever preached. Oh, it wasn't on Easter Sunday. There was no "Christ, the Lord Is Risen Today" sung by those present. I doubt if there were any lilies or Easter baskets or hats or eggs. A formalized Easter celebration was not yet on the calendar, but still, Peter's sermon carried the Easter message. It's there in the 10th chapter of Acts.

"You know what has happened....and how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power and how He went around doing good and healing....because God was with Him. We are witnesses of everything He did....." (Peter continued) "They killed Him by hanging Him on a tree, but God raised Him from the dead on the third day and caused Him to be seen...by witnesses...who ate and drank with Him after He rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that He is the One whom God appointed as Judge of the living and the dead."

Peter was a witness...one of many who met the Risen Christ and it was this experience that changed his life dramatically...just as it has changed the lives of everyone who has ever experienced it since that day. His words were among the first Easter sermon ever preached and this brings us then to some things we need to see about Easter and to put into our Easter baskets and take home with us.

EASTER IS...A HISTORICAL EVENT

First of all, we need to see that Easter is an historical event...no fairy tale to make us feel good....no myth. It is a historical fact. Bill Proctor, whose book, The Resurrection Report, some of you have been reading, cites some excellent reasons why we can accept and should accept Easter as an historical event. Let me touch on them briefly here in these moments.

For one thing, Jesus was publicly executed before a pretty large crowd, and the centurion in charge of such executions had much experience in determining if death was complete. The regional Governor, Pilate, also ran a check to make sure that Jesus was dead before He was buried. Jesus was buried in a brand-new tomb, so it would have been quite easy to locate. His friends and also his enemies were equally surprised that the tomb was empty. The enemies of Jesus would not have wanted to encourage the perception that He had risen. And if they had stolen the body, they surely would have produced it as soon as they heard rumors of His resurrection. It doesn't make sense that Jesus' friends stole His body. Why would they suffer persecution, torture and death for something they knew was not true.

After the death of Jesus, many witnesses reported having seen Him alive. There were people from a wide variety of backgrounds, and the various sightings occurred in a wide variety of places...so it seems unlikely that they were mass hallucinations. And finally, there are just too many people whose lives have changed radically after they became believers to doubt that Christ lives. Of course, there will always be those who doubt....you and I know this. It seems to be too good to be true, but the evidence is persuasive and compelling...so put this down as the first egg in your Easter basket. Easter is an historical event. But let's move on to a second point to reflect upon...

EASTER IS....AN UNPARALLELED VICTORY

It was May Day. The year: 1990.
The place: Moscow's Red Square.

"Is it straight, Father?" one Orthodox priest asked another as he shifted a heavy, eight-foot crucifix on his shoulder. "Yes" said the other. "It is straight...."

And together the two priests, along with a gathering of parishioners holding ropes that steadied the beams of the huge cross, walked the parade route. It was May Day in Moscow....the celebration of the communist takeover of the Soviet Union. In front of these priests passed the usual May Day procession of tanks, missiles, troops and salutes to the Communist party elite. Behind the tanks there surged a giant crowd of protestors, shouting up at Mikhail Gorbachev, "Bread....Freedom....Truth"

As this throng passed directly in front of the Soviet Leader standing in his place of honor, the priests hoisted their heavy burden toward the sky, and soon this giant cross emerged from the crowd. As it did, the figure of Jesus Christ obscured the giant poster faces of Marx, Engels and Lenin that provided the backdrop for Gorbachev's reviewing stand. Quite dramatic, but there was more.

"Mikhail Gorbachev!" one of the priests shouted...his deep voice cleaving the clamor of the protestors and piercing straight toward the angry Soviet leader. "Mikhail Gorbachev....Christ is risen!" Those humble priests wanted Mr. Gorbachev to know that dictators come and go, that mighty nations come and go, that atheistic philosophies come and go, but that Jesus Christ is alive - today, tomorrow and even forever.

Yes, Easter is, first, a historical event, but it is more than that. It is, secondly, an unparalleled victory over sin and death. The Son of Man, the Song of God, has a strange way of outlasting politicians and even revolutions. Put that one in your Easter basket, too.

EASTER IS...ABOUT LIVING THE RESURRECTED LIFE

moments. Easter is...about living the resurrected life - here and now. It is not about the future alone, although it is an event that changed the thinking of humankind about the future...about death. It is about today, as well.

But one more thing to lift up and reflect upon in these

In Philip Yancey's book, I Was Just Wondering, he tries to imagine a society in which no one believed in an afterlife. He poses this question: what would the world look like if no one believed that there was a heaven or a hell? Yancey gave his fictitious land the name of Acirema and then offered a few of the characteristics that his imaginary Aciremans would have.

Aciremans would put a great deal of emphasis on youth. The idea of growing old and eventually dying would be so traumatic that they could have no hope for the future. Therefore, preserving their youth would become an obsession. Old age and anything associated with aging would be shunned and devalued. In this way, the rest of society could continue the charade of denying the facts of aging. Every kind of cosmetic and chemical treatment that can possibly slow down the aging process would be necessary.

Appearances would be all that matter. Inner beauty, characterized by such things as integrity, compassion and decorum, would no longer matter. People who do not look attractive...young and healthy...would face discrimination. And the scientists would try to figure out how to eliminate death. People would use all kinds of euphemisms to say that someone has died.

Religion for the Aciremans would consist of philosophies to help them make the most of the here and now. Eternal rewards wouldn't exist in their belief system, so Acireman religion would teach one to "grab all the gusto" they can possibly grab....to build up riches and satisfy their whims and desires as soon as they can. Does it sound familiar to any of you? The fact the word Acirema spelled backwards is America might give you a hint.

CLOSING

Does Easter have anything to say to our lives "here and now"?

Obviously, it does. Because the spirit of Christ is alive, you and I can face life courageously. Because the spirit of Christ is alive in our world, you and I can face death confidently. Because Christ lives, we can live committed and consecrated lives. Because His spirit is alive, we have a hope that never fails.

David Moss played basketball for the University of Tennessee and he played it well even starting as a freshman. But when the season was over, it was discovered that David had cancer and his leg had to be amputated. His short lived basketball career was over and when the press interviewed him after the operation, someone asked David Moss,

"David...if there is anything in life that you could do over, what would it be.....?"

He simply replied,

"Well...if I had known that was my last game, nobody would have been able to stop me!"

Well....we admire his determination and yes, his courage....but,

Easter had the opposite effect on Simon Peter and the other disciples and apostles. Think of it this way. Because they knew that their lives would never be over, they devoted themselves to living in the "here and the now" in a heroic fashion....living some pretty courageous, confident, committed and consecrated lives. And so, too, can we. We may have our "Good Friday" moments and experiences in life when we feel it's over, but also remember, "Sunday's coming". And this is it. Always remember that. "Sunday's coming!"

So many have a fear of dying....but please, put this into your Easter basket....that we have this hope that Easter long ago brought to light. Friends...this is God's Day! Well may the trumpets sound. Well may our hearts rejoice and be lifted and made glad. For God - not man - has had the final word. Amen and AMEN!

PRAYER Take our natural impulses, O God...and stretch them. Confirm them and reassure them on this DAY OF RESURRECTION. Give to each of the gift of an Easter Faith.....with the power and grace to go forth from here, into our world....to always live as though Christ were alive in us.....that our world may be lifted to new levels of life and of love. Thank you for opening to us the larger areas of life. In the spirit of the Risen Christ, we pray. Amen.