

"EASTER - THE TIME OF TRIUMPH"

INTRODUCTION All over the world on this Easter Day, tens of thousands of worshippers will gather, as we have gathered here this morning, to celebrate - to celebrate a new hope for their lives and for the world.

What is it that brings us out to church on this particular Sunday in such large numbers? The cynic would probably say: "Everybody does it so I, too, will join the parade...the crowd...to see and to be seen".

BUT IS THIS ALL But is this all? Is this all that there is to it? Of course not! I wonder if we are not here because this day stands for something of profound significance though we cannot fathom or understand it completely. Does it not give us a new dimension of hope - a new impulse of faith, that beneath all the tragedy of life and the restlessness and unease of our time, God is still sovereign? - a declaration that goodness and righteousness are loosed upon the earth and can never be ultimately destroyed by the malice of men! No cross can destroy them! No tyranny can erase them!

Does not Easter say to us that the purposes of God are eternal? That God does move in and through the affairs of men, transforming their most fiendish acts into instruments of renewal? The Resurrection is a reminder to us that the ultimate control of the forces in human history rests with God, and not with the machinations of men. The same factors that seem to dominate our contemporary scene: unbridled political power, ecclesiastical bigotry and narrowness, an unreliable friend, the indifference of men to moral issues - these crucified Jesus of Nazareth. Yet He triumphed over them.

Even as God transformed the most devilish instrument of death - the cross - into a towering symbol of victory, so He moves in and through the course of human events - judging, redeeming man's inhumanity to man. If there had been no Resurrection, God would have been defeated and our faith in Him would be an illusion.

MESSAGE OF EASTER The message then of Easter is that God still reigns. The darkness can never overcome the light. In this sense then, Easter is a time of triumph - a day in which we are "born anew into a living Hope". The tomb becomes not a blind alley for our despairs, but a thoroughfare for our hopes.

The oft repeated phrase that where there is life there is hope is transformed into the deeper truth that where there is Hope - there is life!

FIRST EASTER This was so true on that first Easter.

Night came down over Calvary. Those who had known and loved Jesus - this was the chilling end to their hope. It was finished. The dream of what he would do was now at an end. The picture of that ghastly scene on the hill outside the city wall was branded deep on their stricken spirits. The events of Good Friday did to them just what they would do to us. They were bewildered and crushed. Their gloom and sadness was as dark as the night about them. The one who had walked with them, who had lifted their spirits and filled them with a buoyant hope had been rejected and killed by men.

Says Paul Tillich:

"In the picture of the Crucified, we look at the rejection of the Divine by humanity.....whenever the Divine appears in human life, not the lowest, but the highest representations of mankind are judged. Men must repel it. Men must crucify it. Must try to destroy it."

And this they did to Jesus on Good Friday.

The Resurrection is not the inevitable "happy ending" to which we are accustomed in our modern cinemas. There could have been no Resurrection without the agony of the crucifixion.

The morning came. The day went by. Another night and nothing was changed. Men had destroyed Him forever! So it seemed.

Then it was the day following the Sabbath - the first day of the week, and Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to the tomb only to discover the burning truth that He was not there. He was risen!

ONE THING IS CERTAIN      The nature of their certainty remains a mystery, for the Easter story - like the Christmas story - is not recorded after the fashion of men who work in a laboratory, observing the minute reactions of a chemical experiment. These are not the data of science, but the witnesses of faith. One thing is certain. Through that first Easter morning the presence of Jesus moved among them with powerful conviction. What that means to our minds in the 20th century, no words can fully tell.

We can understand some of the difficulties which confront the modern mind in this Resurrection story, for there is both mystery and fact. The mystery is in the way it happened. But in and through it all is the fact that it did happen. Yet it is a fact only to those who believe. It is "fact only in faith". Jesus did not appear to the Sanhedrin or to Pontius Pilate, or to the crowds who gaped at his crucifixion. Today - as in the long ago - He is alive only to those who see and believe.

But simply and powerfully the disciples knew, with that ineffable certainty which only the issues of life can prove, that He was victorious over Death! To them, henceforth, their lives would be different. Men who had been cowardly and despondent now became possessed with power and courage. The darkness which had enveloped their souls became illumined with the Light of His presence. Whatever else is veiled in mystery, their belief in the risen Christ emerges clear. In every experience from then on, they could say to one another: Did not our hearts burn within us on the Way". They went farther, to create a new fellowship of hope and of faith, of which we are the heirs. Life that has made redemptive sacrifice its end is discovered to be endless. The spirit of the Christ who died on Calvary is alive forevermore.

INTO HISTORY      About thirty-five years after the death of Jesus, the Roman historian, Tacitus, cried out in astonishment and indignation because the Christian movement had not been stopped:

"This pestilent superstition though checked for the time being, broke out afresh not only in Judea, where the mischief started, but also in Rome..."

To a scholar like Tacitus, it seemed incredible that the fellowship which sprang

from the person of Christ, should still be vibrantly alive thirty-five years later. Soon Rome itself was but dust - the Neros and the Caesars dead - but the Christian Church went marching on: not thirty-five years later, but 1900 hundred years!

It is one of the marvels of time that out of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection came one of the mightiest movements in human history. That event did not wipe out evil forever. But it does give substance to the poignant cry of modern man, "Is there any hope". We are - in the word of the author of I Peter, "born anew into living hope". As he pointed out, the answer to our query depends on what we're hoping for. We overlook the fact that the same resurrection experience which gave hope to some threw others into despair. Pilate, for instance, hoping that the matter was closed, found no resolution. Judas, hoping that his act of betrayal would mean personal power and financial gain, went out and hanged himself. Only those are born anew whose hopes are rightful and just. That love will outlast hatred; that goodness is stronger than evil; that truth is to be preferred over falsehood; that justice rather than iniquity will prevail among the nations of the earth.

PERSONAL TERMS

William Howard Taf was once asked what he thought of the defunct League of Nations. After a moment's pause, he replied:

"Well, the best things of life get crucified and put in a tomb. But they always have their third day".

Translated into personal terms, this day speaks with special assurance that where God is, no defeat, not even death, is final. Neither death, nor life, nor things present, nor things to come, can separate us from the love of God. The Easter message proclaims that death is an inescapable fact for all of us, but it is not the final fact. Thornton Wilder in very homely words, described this truth in his play Our Town:

"We all know that something is eternal. And it ain't houses and it ain't names and it ain't earth, and it ain't even stars....everybody knows in their bones that something is eternal, and that something has to do with human beings."

Several years ago a school mate of mine, who was minister of a church, lost his young wife who died following a long illness, leaving a young family. The following Sunday he mounted his pulpit and preached a moving and eloquent sermon, freed from the cheap sentimentality that so often surrounds such a tragedy. His words convey, far better than I can portray, the fact that there are qualities of living in this world which are eternal.

"Convinced that there is a love that will not let us go - we can face life's inevitables and emerge victorious over them. Frustrated dreams, riddled plans, even death; and all can be mastered when we know the power that holds the stars in their courses and that can transform life".

The cross shining in the center of our chancel - graced by the beautiful Easter lilies - reminds us of a deed at the center of the New Testament, at the heart of the universe, a deed in which men tried to write "The End" after a good man's life - but God crossed out those words and wrote: "to be continued". Whatever has brought you to this service, it is our hope that something deeper will

go out with you into life. Something of profound significance happened in human history on that first Easter - and because of it - your life and mine are different.

For out of death has come life,  
Out of defeat has come victory,  
Out of despair has come hope!

LET US PRAY God, our Father, we thank thee for the life and the death and the risen Jesus, opening as it does to us the larger areas of life. Help us to make the most of them - not to be satisfied with the shallows of cynical and doubting and skeptical minds.

Take our natural impulses, O God, and stretch them. Confirm them and reassure them on this day of resurrection - in the name of him who though his body was destroyed, yet his spirit is now alive and present among us. Amen