

"IN THE MORNING"

TEXT: "And very early in the morning on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb, just as the sun was rising".

(Mark 16: 2)

INTRODUCTION

There in a single verse is the message of Easter - in a cameo, in a nutshell - morning, sunrise, surprise!

Consider it against the background of the passage just preceding it. That was a night scene. Some of the followers of Jesus had worked in the darkness to give Jesus a decent burial in a tomb provided by one who had greatly admired him. The darkness of the night was matched by the darkness of their own souls. Recall some moment in your life when you were at your lowest - "the darkest night of the year when the stars were all gone out" - and you have an inkling of the black despair that gripped the souls of the few faithful followers.

And then the transformation. "Very early in the morning on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb, just as the sun was rising". And suddenly you are in the presence of Easter. To me, one of the simplest ways of describing Easter is to say that Easter is the assurance of the morning.

"I never knew a night so black
Light failed to follow in its track.
I never knew a storm so gray
It failed to have its clearing day.
I never knew such bleak despair
That there was not a rift, somewhere"

This is Easter - the Easter faith we have come to celebrate - the guarantee that you can count upon the dawn. "In the morning". Suppose we think about it in different ways for a few moments here this morning.

MORNING COMES AFTER THE NIGHT

To begin with then, Easter is the simple reminder that morning comes after the darkness of night. In a church paper not so long back a mother wrote these lines in a letter:

"As the mother of two very active and very normal teen-agers, I often find myself awake after most of the other people I know are asleep. Some of my constructive thinking is done in the middle of the night or in the early hours before dawn. Some of the saddest and some of the happiest times of life have come in the dark of the night. But one thing I have learned through the years and have tried to teach my children is simply this: morning always comes."

I suspect that some of us may have something in common here: that sometimes wakened by some disturbance, thinking about some problem facing us, some burden we are carrying, our outlook is about as black as the night outside. And a lot of us have learned that this is not the time to trust our emotions - that the middle of the night is not the time to pronounce judgement, to impose a sentence, to take ourselves too seriously, to make final decisions about anything. I think it's true that things always have a way of looking a little different by the light of a new day. And we do well to remember that mother's lesson to her children: "Morning always comes!"

You know how the New York Times carries on its editorial page from time to time one of those seasonal, nature editorials, which are so vivid in their word pictures. Several weeks ago one caught my attention. It was entitled "Sunrise" and these are the first sentences:

"There is something about a sunrise that is hard to ignore, whether it is a quarter after four on a summer morning or six o'clock in March. It is even more than the beginning of a new day, another span of daylight in which most of this world's work is done, more than the end of another night of darkness. It is another throb in the pulse of time, another undeniable element of truth in a skeptical world. The old saying, 'As sure as sunrise' was not a mere figure of speech".

In a world where so many things have come un-nailed, Easter quietly reminds us that we can still depend upon the dawn.

MORNING COMES AFTER DARKNESS OF DEFEAT

But much more than that, Easter is the reminder to us that morning comes after the darkness of defeat and despair. And this is what those marchers in that first Easter parade discovered: that the spirit of Jesus was not dead and gone from them, but that it was alive and present with them.

I cannot pretend to know just what happened on that first Easter - or just how it all happened. But I do know that we are here to celebrate the great fact that the disciples of Jesus experienced him in ways that changed darkness into light, feeble followers into steady saints, B. C. into A. D.. This is the tremendous truth of Easter - that the corrupt and evil ways of men never got the best of Jesus, that suffering never soured him, and in the end death could not possibly hold him. Just as Christmas celebrates the "arrival" of Jesus, so Easter celebrates the "survival" of Jesus and through Him - the glimpse of a God who can be depended on for the survival of his truth and rightness.

the values of truth, justice, goodness.

It is this Easter confidence that is opposed today by an anti-Easter cynicism. Two philosophies - so different and so distant from one another. Anti-Easter dwells upon the night and the nothingness of mankind - beginning nowhere and coming out nowhere, everything and everybody futile, hopeless, meaningless. That is anti-Easter, and at times all of us are tempted by this dark view as we consider the tragedy and brutality of so much of life, more at home in the shadows of Good Friday than in the sunlight of Easter Sunday morning.

But here we are at Easter, celebrating again its insistence that "morning always comes"....because the power that we call God here abides, carries through, affirming a basic justice, integrity and reverence for life. Asked Dr. Fosdick of Riverside Church in an Easter Sermon in the midst of World War II:

"Do you really think that if Nazism should win now and plunge us into one of the most discouraging epochs in human history, do you really think that a regime founded on such principles has in it the basis of permanence. All history bears witness against that".

Change the word "nazism" to any one of the major threats facing the peace and integrity of the world today - racism, militarism, drug addiction, totalitarianism - "Do you really think that a regime founded on such principles has in it

the basis of permanence? All history bears witness against that." The morning when it comes may not be according to our own specifications and expectations for it is God's morning - not ours - and Easter is the eternal sign and seal that "no darkness is forever", and that "morning always comes".

Christianity is, of course, incurably optimistic, and it has reason to be because its roots are back there in the mystery of the resurrection and it has survived many a dark night, many a dark page in the history of man.

Sometimes when I look up at this church from the outside or when from the inside I look at this beautiful sanctuary, I find myself wishing that the walls could talk and tell the story of the years it has stood here. For close to one hundred and forty years a church has stood here. When people waited for word about the Battle of Gettysburg, and while people wait for the end of the War in Southeast Asia, a church has been standing here. When Kansas was admitted to the Union in 1861 and when man first set foot on the moon in 1969, a church was here. When people mourned the assassinations of Lincoln and Kennedy, or when people cheered the Wright Brothers or Lindberg or John Glenn, a church was here. Through depression and prosperity, through derision without and disputes within, through crowded Sundays and sparsely attended Sundays - this church has stood here on this crowded city street, quietly and steadily affirming to all who pass by or come within its walls the everlastingness and the invincibility of God's power and Christ's way.

One of the stories to come out of the Civil War has to do with the College of William and Mary in Virginia. For nearly seven years during and after the war, that college closed its doors, all its students gone and many of its buildings ruined. But, says one history of the college,

"Every morning during those seven barren years, President Ewell rang the chapel bell. There were no students; the faculty had disappeared; and rain seeped through the leaky roofs of the desolate buildings. But President Ewell still rang the bell".

More than once the church has done that. Times when all that the Gospel stood for seemed lost - men deserted it and opposing forces seemed to be winning - but still the church kept ringing the bell. Maybe in our time we shall have to do that again. But let us not forget that at our best, we are part of a glorious company who have been given the confidence that the morning always comes after the darkness of defeat and despair.

MORNING AFTER NIGHT OF DEATH

One more thing to consider and carry away from here with us. Easter is the assurance of the morning after the night of death.

When I read the Gospel account of the first Easter, I do not get the impression that the disciples began to clap their hands and shout, "This means we're going to live for ever.....Hallelujah". Easter has some prior things to say and to celebrate about the meaning and the quality of life in here and now. But somewhere in the afterglow of Easter, the message got through to them that the resurrection also had something to say about eternal life and it's this glad refrain that keeps running through the writings of St. Paul and sung so beautifully here in our service a few moments ago: "Behold I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed....in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye."

In so many respects, we are so much more sophisticated and knowledgeable than those first Easter paraders. We know how to split the atom and fly to the moon. We know infinitely more about the human body and the human mind than did Mary and John and Peter. But in one respect, we are very much like them in that we all die just as they did. We may have a longer life expectancy, but death is as inevitable for us as it was for them.

When I stop to think about the changes that death has brought in this parish and in the lives of so many of you since last Easter, I understand a little better what that prayer of The Church means when it begins:

"Almighty God, who art leading us through the changes of time to the rest and blessedness of eternal life"....

There is no avoiding that final journey and destination, and it is this Easter faith that we celebrate that furnishes us light for that journey and puts a gleam on the far-off horizon. It dares to suggest that death is not the final conqueror. It puts a future tense into living and equips us to look death in the face with confidence in God's sunrise. It does not draw specific blue-prints for us, or furnish us with detailed drawings and designs of what the future will be like, but quietly and forcefully it confirms the "hope" - "in the morning" - affirms that God carries through what he begins, that He is the one who has given us life, the One in whom we have life - now and forever!

One of my favorite stories about death comes from Bishop Bergraav, the hero of the Norwegian church during World War II. One time when asked his view of death, Bishop Bergraav told this story:

"One day a peasant took his little son on a visit to a village some distance away. On the road, they had to cross a swift stream which was spanned by a rickety, narrow bridge. It was dark when they started home. The boy remembered the shaky bridge and was frightened. His father, noticing his fear, lifted the lad up and carried him in his arms. In a few minutes the little boy was fast asleep on his father's shoulder. When he awoke, he was at home with the morning sun streaming through the window of his bedroom. 'This' said the Bishop, 'is what death means to me'".

When Peter Marshall the beloved Chaplain of the Senate was stricken with a heart attack that was to take his life in a matter of hours, he was carried out of his home to the hospital and his last words to his wife, Catherine, were "See you in the morning" - not in the sense that we might mean them, but in the deeper sense that God meant in Easter. For dying is going home, where loved one and old friends are gathered, where the issues of life and death are resolved, where the peace of God reigns.

"In the morning" - in so many ways then, this is what Easter is all about:

"I never knew a night so black
Light failed to follow in its track.
I never knew a storm so gray
It failed to have its clearing day.
I never knew such bleak despair
That there was not a rift somewhere".

Thank God for Easter, for the song which persists in our hearts, and the joy

in our hopes: "Hallelujah - the Lord God omnipotent reigneth".

AS we gathered earlier this morning at the
Easter Sunrise Service over at Carl Schurz
Park, I couldn't help but feel that there
in a single verse is the message of Easter -
in a nutshell, if you will, -

Morning - Sunrise - Surprise

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