

Yankees

Even the ~~Mets~~ have been showing signs of new life in Florida...

"LIFE AFTER DEATH"

INTRODUCTION We have come together here this morning to celebrate an event - something that happened long ago. Not an idea, not a theory or a proposition - but something that happened long ago, that took place - the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead!

The celebration of such an event brings forth a great deal of emotional excitement. The music, the flowers, the beauty and the mood of the day, together with the ancient story of the empty tomb stir the emotions of any normal human being. And, someone might add, the size of the congregation stirs the emotions of the minister. To be sure - it's wonderful to look out and see a full church. For there were Sundays back in the winter when so many were sick with the flu and the weather was so poor that we wondered if the "Almighty" was for us or against us. And the miracle of new life is taking place all around us. And there's a touch of Spring in the air today. I saw my first robin as I came over earlier this morning.....dusting the soot off the eggs in the nest.

Now -

DEVELOPMENT The event that we have come to celebrate introduces us to the question which is in the minds of people not only on Easter Day, but also at other times across the year: "What about life after death?"

News of his death came to us before our service this morning.

Every person, I suppose, must sometimes stop to think about the inevitability of his own death. Occasionally, a person appears upon the horizon whom death seems almost to have forgotten. I think of Bishop Herbert Welch, one of the retired bishops of the Methodist Church, author of the creed that we read earlier in the service, who passed away yesterday in his 104th year, still possessing even at that great age some e amazing strengths of mind and body. Some of you may recall the night 87 years ago when at the age of 99 he preached from the pulpit of this church. When he was celebrating his 104th birthday someone asked him if he expected to see his 105th birthday. And with a twinkle in his eye, he replied, "Probably. Very few people die at the age of 104". This morning we have been confronted with the news that death has come to that grand and gracious gentleman.

Just as one of these days, some corner of the world will pause to ponder the death of each of us, for, from the day of his birth, every person lives under a sentence of death. Whether or not a person talks about it or thinks a great deal about it, there do come those moments in life when he is aware of the fact of death, and he struggles with the question: "What does it mean? Is this the end? Or is there some basis for a faith, a belief, that there's more to life, and more to come...."

When we bring this question about the meaning of life and of death to the light of the New Testament, one finds two very clear concepts that furnish us with a guideline, and with the assurance of a positive answer, and this is why we celebrate with such joy on this Easter Day.

CONQUEST OVER DEATH First, I find revealed there a conquest over death. The Gospel accounts paint a picture of a good man who was God's man.

As this man went about his life of healing and helping and preaching and teaching, he stirred up some opposition. Some there were who did not like his word that God's love was wider than a particular race and region. Some there

were who did not like his word that the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. Some there were who did not like his deed in defying the merchants in the Temple. Some there were who did not like the way he associated with the "wrong" kind of people. So they formed a coalition of his opponents, and they agreed to put him to death. Obviously, he believed in the dominion of death. When a man's dead, he's dead - finished and out of the way. So they became the architects of a crucifixion, and aside from a few minor problems with Pilate, it went off pretty much as planned. And after six hours on the cross, the man was dead. Evidently, there was no one in Jerusalem that Good Friday night who doubted it - friend, foe, Roman soldiers, casual spectators. And if there had been a newspaper in Jerusalem in those days, there might have been an item in the obituary column on Saturday morning that read: "Jesus of Nazareth, crucified as a dangerous revolutionary, and as a disturber of the peace. Expired - 3 pm on Friday afternoon. Private memorial service at the convenience of family and friends". The end!

But all of a sudden, the New Testament is fairly throbbing with quite the opposite word and mood. He is alive. And the last chapters of each of the four Gospels represent a magnificent account of resurrection appearance. He came to a few and he came to many. He came within closed doors and he came on outdoor walks. He came to his well-known disciples and he came to some unknown followers on the road leading to Emmaus. At first, he was greeted with fear and consternation and doubt, but in the end there was only the joyous certainty which Peter declared to the early church: "Death could not hold him".

To be sure, we have questions in our minds concerning the details of the resurrection. What became of the body that was in the tomb? And what was the risen Christ like when he came again to his disciples? We do not know all the answers, but whatever the nature of the resurrection may have been, there is one theme that keeps recurring in the New Testament: they recognized him - he was with them - a reality that they could feel, experience, talk with, stand with, walk with - the Lord of Life and death. Take away the resurrection from the New Testament, and you must stop with the story of a good man who tried nobly and failed miserably, with his deluded followers scattered and defeated.

But it did not end that way, and we are heirs of all kinds of reminders of the reality of that resurrection. Those shaky disciples became the steady saints. The church was launched. The New Testament was written. Time was divided between BC and AD. The Sabbath was moved from Saturday to Sunday. Handel composing the Hallelujah Chorus, Bunyan writing "Pilgrim's Progress", Schweitzer's losing himself in Africa, and many wishing Martin Luther King had done the same - great men, men of heroic stature and touched by the resurrection life - some people building this church, and the cross gleaming there in the heart of the chancel. You in church this morning and your parents and grandparents before you in other churches in other places across this land and around the earth. All of you singing the Doxology and concluding the Lord's Prayer: "For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory". None of these explaining the Resurrection, but all making sense only in the light of its truth.

The New Testament never leaves us in a mood of mourning over what death did to God's man. It leave us in a mood of celebration over what God's man did to death. Cried Peter: "Death could not hold him".

CONFIDENCE CONCERNING DEATH

But then I find a second part of my answer in the New Testament. For there is revealed not

only a conquest over death, but also there is radiated a confidence concerning death. Follow the disciples and then Paul and his companions on their journeys and in their journals, and see how confident they were that one man's triumph over death could be related to the meaning of any man's death. Remember those thrilling choruses that keep breaking out in the strangest places:

"For we know that if the earth tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God - an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."

"For I am persuaded that neither life nor death, nor any other creature can separate us from the love of God...."

"But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead....so also in Christ shall all be made alive".

Here were people who lived under the constant shadow of death, but here were people who were not afraid of death, but greeted it as a gateway to a larger life. There is that authentic Christian confidence about death that has persisted across the centuries. Francis of Assisi, sang the 142nd psalm on his death bed, "Bring my soul out of prison, that I may praise thy name". And says his biographer, "having sung, he died!"

Coming closer to our own day, one thinks of that April day in 1945 when the Nazi soldiers came into the prison room where Dietterich Bonhoeffer had finished leading a worship service. One of them called out, "Prisoner Bonhoeffer, get ready to come with us". All in the crowded prison room knew what it meant - and as Bonhoeffer went with them to the scaffold, he said to one of his fellow prisoners: "This is the end - but for me the beginning of life" which is precisely what Paul was saying in prison in his valley of the shadow of death. From that first Easter Sunday, there has been this singing Christian confidence that in the light of the resurrection no man need fear the power or the presence of death.

ATTITUDE TOWARD LIFE AND DEATH

The more one ponders this New Testament confidence, the more one is impressed with the healthy attitudes toward both life and death which it inspired.

Paul said it so clearly, "Whether we live, or whether we die, we are the Lord's". If he was given more time and more tasks on this earth, he would gladly accept them as a trustee; if, on the other hand, he were to die tomorrow, he would meet that experience in perfect confidence and glad anticipation. To use the modern phrase, Paul could "hang loosely" in the faith that neither life nor death could separate him from the love of God. "Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's".

This is a balance that we do not always keep in our lives. Sometimes people develop a death-wish and spend so much time pining for death that the remaining days of their years are wasted opportunities. And at the opposite extreme, people sometimes develop a death-fear that keeps them running in circles and breathless activity to keep them from thinking of the far future. And even the church has sometimes lost its balance here. There have been times when it has been overly concerned with the rewards and punishments of the here-after; some of our hymns seem to major in somber pre-occupation with heaven and hell. Martin Niemöller, the German pastor, recalls that Hitler kept telling him in a private

interview that he should confine his preaching to the topic of heaven, and "leave this German Reich to me". Then, too, there have been other times when the church has been so busy with the concerns and problems of the moment that it has neglected to sing the resurrection song of the Gospel and relate it to every man's death. You might say that the New Testament furnishes a kind of two beam illumination (like the cars of today): a low beam which lights up the immediate tasks of society, and a high beam which shines on the far horizon and takes away the fear of death - "whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's"

SUPPOSE Suppose that you or I were suddenly confronted with the knowledge that we had but a few months to live. How would we respond? Would we talk about death and dwell upon it so much that we left a morbid sense of gloom wherever we went? Or would we try to escape the thought of it by crowding the days with self-indulgence and frantic activity. Jesus and those who followed him in those early days did neither; they walked toward death with such superb unconcern that some could not believe that they were about to die. They made the most of the days entrusted to the, and then they treated death as "but a covered bridge leading from light to light through a brief darkness".

The question for us is not really a matter of "suppose" for we are all under a sentence of death. A few months - a few years - a few decades. Who knows. Some of you may recall that three years ago last November, one of the finest young theologians of our time was killed in a plane crash at the airport in Cincinnati. He was Carl Michalson - a professor at Drew University. In a subsequent message to friends, Mrs. Michalson and the children spoke of the special comfort which they found in one thought from his writing. It is the closing word of a book that he wrote entitled, "Faith for Personal Crises": Let me share it with you:

"God does not intend our untimely death.....and God will have the last word about death. The Christian doctrine of the resurrection.....is the Christian assurance that death does not put an end to the possibility of life. A man's life is on the pattern of the Broadway player whose role calls for his death in the first act. The curtain falls. His part is finished. All men are actors who are fated to die before the play is finished. As soon as the curtain falls, however, this actor leaps to his feet and dashes across the street to another theater where he takes up another part. So man dies: to rise. Man's destiny is not explained by one stage only. The hope of resurrection simply inspires the confidence in this stage of life, that death is not the end. We may play out our lives upon another stage.

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". And in the light of that deed, a person can look death in the face - his own or another's - and feel a glad and confident answer to the question: "Death where is thy sting? Grave - where is thy victory?"

PRAYER Put the resurrection song in our hearts this Easter Day, O God, as we again celebrate the life, death and resurrection of Him whom men call Lord. Make thyself real to us this day in hearts kindled with love for Thee, and give us the assurance of thy companionship and victory now and evermore. Amen