

This we ask in the spirit of the risen Christ.

"MISTAKEN SUPPOSITIONS"

First rays of dawn were breaking across the sky

INTRODUCTION

One of the women who bravely watched the crucifixion of Jesus went to the garden where he was buried. It was a Sunday morning before daylight. When she got there, she was surprised and shocked to find the tomb open. She didn't go in; she didn't even look in. She immediately jumped to the conclusion that the body had been stolen.

She did what most women would do. She went looking for help. She found two men - Peter and John. They both went to the garden and first one and then the other ventured into the tomb. They saw that the body was not there, but they also noticed that the linen which had wrapped the body was lying exactly as it had been, not disturbed in any way. They, therefore, came to a different conclusion from that of the women; they concluded that the body had not been stolen, but that the material body of Jesus had been transformed, so to speak, into a spiritual body. Then they went home without saying a word to the woman who was standing there puzzled, bewildered, stricken with grief. With hearts pulsating with joy....

She stood there crying. Her name was Mary - Mary Magdalene. Jesus, you will recall, had saved her life - saved it from sin, and shame, and sickness. He had given her a completely new life. Finally, she got up her courage, stooped down and looked into the tomb. Through the mist of her tears she saw two figures whom she assumed to be angels. They asked her, "Why are you crying?" She answered, "Because they have taken away my Teacher, my Master, and I don't know where they have put him". Then, when she came out, she saw a man standing there and he asked her, "Why are you crying? Who are you looking for?"

which comes to us from John's Gospel

At that point in the story comes one of those revealing phrases, not more than a clause in the narrative, "She - supposing him to be the gardener - said to him, 'If you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him, so I can go and get him'". He said, "Mary!", and she answered, "Master!"

She supposed him to be the gardener, and she had every reason to make that supposition. Who else would be in the garden at that time of day? And why would she have any reason to expect to see Jesus? But her supposition was a mistaken one. The man was not the gardener. The man was Jesus. Pause

MISTAKEN SUPPOSITIONS

Mary was neither the first nor the last to be mistaken in her suppositions. Pause....For instance

For centuries men supposed that the earth was flat, and it's easy to see why they did. It certainly looked flat; it still looks flat. Occasionally, however, something made them wonder. They would watch a ship leave the harbor, and as they watched it move off into the distance, they could see that it appeared to be going down over the horizon, not just off into the distance; they could see the top of the mast after the ship itself had disappeared from sight. But they didn't do anything about it, not until Christopher Columbus had sailed west to find the east. In 1519 Magellan left Spain with five small ships. He sailed west and kept sailing west, on and on, through one disaster after another. In 1521 he was killed, but in 1522, three years after the five ships had left, one ship got back to Spain. It had completely circumnavigated the globe, and laid low once and for all one of man's most mistaken, most stubbornly mistaken suppositions. Man - supposing the earth to be flat - kept sailing until he found that it was round.

For centuries men supposed that they were grounded to the earth by something they called gravity. In December of 1903, the Wright Brothers stayed in the air for fifty-nine seconds. Imagine it. And then in February, 1962, John Hershel Glenn, Jr.

went around the earth three times in four hours. After he got safely back he said, "I don't know what you say about a day in which you see four sunsets!" Neither does anyone else know what you say, except once again one of man's suppositions was laid low. Gravity had no dominion over him.

Though you perhaps see the point I am leading to about our mistaken suppositions, I cannot resist giving you one more example of how our suppositions of common sense are so likely to be mistaken. Listen to this account of a boy's early years:

"He was so slow to learn to talk that his parents thought him abnormal. Teachers considered him a misfit. He had few friends and avoided games. His diversion was to compose little religious hymns on the piano and hum them while walking alone".

If you read that about a boy, what would you suppose the possibilities of his future would be? Not good - almost hopeless - I would venture to say. Once again our suppositions made on the basis of common sense and experience would be mistaken. The boy whom the teachers thought to be a misfit was Albert Einstein.

So we could go on to see how our suppositions based on good, sane, common sense turn out to be mistaken over and over again, and if Easter does nothing else than to make us less cocksure of what we suppose, it will have done well by us. Suppositions will still be made, but made with more reservations and with more play in the line of logic to allow for the unexpected and the unpredictable. Pause

BUT EASTER.... But Easter turns the spotlight on one particular supposition that we mistakenly make over and over again. It is the supposition about death, about the death of Jesus and about our own death.

Our natural supposition is that when Jesus died, that was the end of him. In our own experience of death in the family, that is what happens. If a man dies, he dies. We don't expect to see him again, and we never do. After a tragedy in the theater when all the leading characters are dead on the stage, the final curtain goes down and you are left in the gloom that encircles the death of a noble man. Then the curtain rises, and the dead men come out as large as life, and you say to yourself, They didn't die at all. It was all a part of the play, and we knew that no one was killed.

But that isn't the way it happens in real life, and that is not what happened to Jesus. He really died. He really died and people saw him again after the final curtain had fallen. This is hard for people to understand. You can see that his influence continued to spread because you know people like that whose influence after death is as great, if not greater, than when they were alive. This we can understand. But anything like the Resurrection is hard for most of us to see. It is not difficult for us to understand how he died. This we can see as plain as day because sin, suffering, death, hatred, forgiveness, failure - all of these things are in the orbit of our experience. There is no "credibility gap" there. But when you begin to talk about the Resurrection, it's a different story because that is something apart from us and apart from our human experience. We have never seen anything quite like it. Nothing has happened to any of our friends that we can compare it with or relate it to.

TWO SUGGESTIONS Let me offer two suggestions to you at this point. ~~I have made them before on other occasions, and I suppose that I shall continue to make them as long as I preach from a pulpit.~~

First, don't be too literal about the Resurrection stories; don't try to make them fit a pattern of consistency. Any event will be recorded in different ways by different people according to the person's point of view and the greater the event, the greater the discrepancies will be. Don't look for consistency in the Resurrection narratives. The stories of the Cross and the Tomb are not consistent, they are not all alike; they are blurred by their very brightness. And if those stories are blurred, how much more will these stories be blurred by their dazzling brightness.

The second suggestion may seem strange coming from me to you who are inside, not outside, the church. It is about God. Don't forget God. Whether you call him God or not, don't leave God completely out of your calculations because you will be sure to come out wrong if you do. You may want to call him "the unknown factor in life", or "the ground of all existence" - but whatever you call him, he does things that you don't expect and are not counting on. He does not conform to your neat little patterns and theories. You wish he would; it would make it so much easier; so very much easier.

We cannot fit God into the patterns that we make, and we need not be surprised that in this case he reversed the judgment that men made on Jesus. They nailed him to a tree; he raised him from the dead. Jesus did not rise from the dead of his own accord; God raised him from the dead. God is capable of doing the unexpected and the unpredictable.

Easter goes on to challenge the supposition that we make about death in general, our own and other people's. Sometimes we are tempted to suppose that what we see and hear is all there is. I, for one, can sympathize with that because I am tempted to do that very thing myself. I have been brought up in that climate. I have been influenced by science without having a great deal of scientific knowledge, and I am always tempted to think that anything that I cannot see or hear is not real.

Living in such a climate as that, when we see someone stop breathing, and life leaves him motionless and cold, we assume that he has stopped being. It is perfectly natural reasoning - the first supposition that you would make.

EASTER MAKES YOU WONDER

But Easter makes you wonder. There may be something beyond that common sense. The universe we live in may be larger than that small, comprehensible universe in which we can see and hear all there is to be seen and heard.

om: For instance, I look at you. I am looking now right into your faces and I can see you. I can see your features - the features which distinguish you from every other living human being. But I cannot see you. I cannot see what you are really thinking. ~~I can tell sometimes what you are thinking by the way you look, but you and I both have ways of hiding what we think - if we want to.~~ I cannot see what you are really, what your real fears are down underneath what I see, or what your hopes are. I cannot see the "you" that is making your body radiate with life. There is something about you that is tied up inextricably with that body. We cannot deny that; but there is also something beyond it, there is something more than that; there is something about you that cannot be completely stated in bodily measurements or in the most minute physical description of you.

Easter makes us wonder whether we haven't cut our universe down to match our most superficial awareness. It makes us think twice when we read what Hugh Walpole once wrote: "I affirm that I have become aware, not by my own wish, almost against

my will, of an existence of another life of far, far greater importance than this physical one"

It makes us think twice about the epitaph Benjamin Franklin wrote for himself. We remember him most for his common sense, but when he came to write his epitaph, this is what he wrote:

"The Body of B. Franklin, printer,
(Like the Cover of an old Book, its contents torn out,
And striped of its Lettering and Gilding)
Lies here, Food for worms.
But the Work shall not be lost;
For it will (as he believed) appear once more,
In a new and more elegant Edition - Revised and corrected
by the author."

I should like to be in the company with those who dare to look beyond the things that they can see and hear, even though they take risks in doing it, even though they think they may make fools of themselves. I had rather be like that than live in a little closed up universe, with every door and window shut tight, so that nothing could exist save what my ten fingers could make and nothing could come to me save what my five sense could take in. I had far rather be with those ~~fools~~ out in the larger universe making assumptions and affirmations about a life that is so vast and so full of overtones that I never could begin to grasp them at all.

Easter shakes us out of our little, closed universe of mistaken suppositions into the greater universe of high and daring intimations. Today we stand in eternal gratitude to that woman weeping outside the tomb, and thank her for the very fact that she supposed him to be the gardener. Her mistake shows us our mistakes, more plainly than we ever saw them before, and her experience of the risen Christ leads us toward the same experience. Therefore, that is why we

PRAYER O God, Our Father, we thank thee for every intimation of things that are beyond our sight and hearing. Give us the courage to reach out to the highest that we know. Let us never be satisfied with the things that are so near that we stumble over them. As we climb the ladder to the stars, help us to set aside all our pride, our pride of intellect and reason; and give us the courage to follow those who dared to believe the highest that they knew. Amen

" Sing with all the sons of glory, Sing the
resurrectio song!
Death and sorrow, earth's dark story, To the former days belong.
All around the clouds are breaking, Soon the storms of time
shall cease.
In God's likeness, man awaking - Knows the everlasting peace"

"MAN'S MISTAKEN SUPPOSITIONS"

INTRODUCTION

One of the women who bravely watched the crucifixion of Jesus went to the garden where he was buried on the next Sunday morning before daylight. When she got there, she was surprised and shocked to find the tomb open. She didn't go in; she didn't even look in. She jumped to the conclusion that the body had been stolen.

She did what most women would do; she went to get a man. She found two - Peter and John. They both went to the garden and first one and then the other ventured into the tomb. They saw that the body was not there, but they also noticed that the linen which had wrapped the body was lying exactly as it had been, not disturbed in any way. They, therefore, come to a different conclusion from that of the women; they concluded that the body had not been stolen, but that the material body of Jesus had been transformed, so to speak, into a spiritual body. Then, they went home without saying a word to the woman who was standing there puzzled, bewildered, stricken with grief.

She stood there crying. Her name was Mary - Mary Magdalene. Jesus had saved her life - from sin, from sickness. He had given her a completely new life. From that time on she was one of the small group of women who helped to finance his preaching missions. No wonder that she was grief stricken.

Finally, she got up her courage, stooped down, and looked in the tomb. Through the mist of her tears she saw two figures whom she assumed to be angels. They asked her, "Why are you crying?" She answered, "Because they have taken away my Teacher, my Master, and I don't know where they have put him". Then, when she came out, she saw a man standing there, and he asked her, "Why are you crying? Who are you looking for?"

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MISTAKEN SUPPOSITIONS: Mary was neither the first nor the last to be mistaken in her suppositions. For centuries men supposed that the earth was flat, and it's easy to see why they did. It certainly looked flat; it still looks flat. Occasionally, something made them wonder. They would watch a ship leave harbor, and as they watched it move off into the distance, they could see that it appeared to be going down over the horizon, not just off into the distance; they could see the top of the mast after the ship itself had disappeared from sight. But they didn't do anything about it, not until Christopher Columbus had sailed west to find the east. In 1519 Magellan left Spain with five small ships. He sailed west; and kept sailing west, on and on, through one disaster after another. In 1521 he was killed, but in 1522, three years after the five ships had left, one ship got back to Spain. It had completely circumnavigated the globe, and laid low once and for all one of man's most mistaken, most stubbornly mistaken suppositions; man, supposing the earth to be flat, kept sailing until he found that it was round.

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But that isn't the way it happens in real life, and that is not what happened to Jesus. He really died; he really died, and people saw him again after the final curtain had fallen. This is hard for people like you to understand. You can see that his influence continued to spread because you know people like that. You know how people in your own time die, and yet their influence spreads, wider and wider, and that is not difficult for you to see. But anything like the Resurrection is hard for most of you to see. I thought of it particularly this year on Good Friday when it came over me that I didn't have to say a word to convince people that Jesus died. They could see it as plain as day, because sin, suffering and death, forgiveness, failure, all these things are in the orbit of their own experience. There is no 'credibility gap" there. But when you begin to talk about the Resurrection, it's a different story, because that is something apart from us; we have never seen anything quite like it. Nothing has happened to any of our friends that we can compare it with or relate it to.

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It reminds us that we cannot fit God into the patterns that we make, and we need not be surprised that in this case he reversed the judgment that men made on Jesus. They nailed him to a tree; he raised him from the dead. Jesus did not rise from the dead of his own accord; God raised him from the dead. God does surprising things.

Easter goes on to challenge the supposition that we make about death in general, our own and other people's. Sometimes we are tempted to suppose that what we see and hear is all there is. I, for one, can sympathize with that because I am tempted to do that very thing myself. I have been brought up in that climate. I have been influenced by science without having any knowledge of science at all, and I am always tempted to think that anything that I cannot see or hear is not real.

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It makes us think twice about the epitaph Benjamin Franklin wrote for himself. Remember that he was a Yankee to begin with. He went southward to Philadelphia; but he began here, and he had more common sense than most Americans have had since. But when he came to write his epigraph, this is what he wrote:

"The Body of
B. Franklin, printer,
(Like the Cover of an old Book
its contents torn out
And stripte of its Lettering and Gilding)
Lies here, Food for worms.
But the Work shall not be lost;
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