

"MORE THAN JUST A MEMORY"

terrible

INTRODUCTION

After the weather of recent days none of us really need:the reminder found in Haydn's Seasons....(how does it go?)...

"As yet the year is unconfirmed, and oft-returning Winter-blast the bud and bloom destroy..."

But never mind, April is on its way. The calendar was about ten days off. Soon the robins will join the pigeons, the branches will bud, the park will come alive, the sky will be filled with the thunder of the sun. Soon overhead, and underfoot and all around we shall feel, hear and see the joy and the juice of Spring. Believe me,

I'm ready.

But suppose for a moment we knew that April would never arrive. For one terrible moment, pretend that somehow the earth had swung out of orbit and was headed toward the immensities of space, there to be gripped forever in the cold dreariness of Winter. That, I submit, would be not only a terrible prospect, but a proper analogy of the human world without Easter - at least according to St. Paul. Paul was never one to hedge his bets and he put all his Christian eggs in one Easter basket when he wrote to the Corinthians, "For if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile". (I Corinthians 15: 16)

DEVELOPMENT

There is no question about it: Christianity stands or falls by the Resurrection, and we shall have to consider the actual event of the empty tomb. But later - not now - for it's a common and a bad mistake to view Easter in too individualistic a light.

Easter is concerned essentially not with one man's escape from death, but with the much larger victory of seemingly powerless love over loveless power. The Easter lantern swings not over some narrow, empty grave, but over the thick darkness overing the whole wide earth. It has cosmic implications.

On Good Friday, the darkness was all but complete. The message was clear - fear and hatred kill. And let us not be sentimental. Ours is still a Good Friday world. Goodness incarnate stretched out on a cross, bequeathing its spirit to the oncoming night, is all too apt a symbol for a century that has planted more senseless crosses than any other in history. In the twenty-five years following World War II there were 97 wars in the world - civil and international - with losses greater than the 52 million killed in World War II. And we can imagine the carnage by century's end if this insane arms race is not somehow slowed, stopped and reversed. "Those who live by the bomb shall perish by the bomb"

But by the light of Easter morn we can read a "Yes, but..." kind of message. Yes, fear and hatred kill, but love never dies - not with God, not even with us. The Easter message says love is stronger than death. The Easter message says God is never driven out of human life. It says that all the strength and tenderness that on Good Friday was scourged, buffeted and stretched out on a cross, all that goodness incarnate is once again alive...at work in the world.

"And lo, I am with you always until the close of the age". Until all eternity Christ will be alive, in the form of the Holy Spirit, trying to bring about our own spiritual resurrection - "the glory of God is a human being fully alive" - and through us to bring to naught all the principalities and powers that spell distress unending to our fellow human beings and ruin to our beautiful earth!

This is why Easter was so decisive an event to St. Paul. "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile". If it's only a Good Friday world, then truth will forever be on the scaffold and wrong forever on the throne. College students, go ahead, take your law boards and play it safe. Christians, retreat from the giant issues of our day into the smaller world of private piety.

But, says St. Paul, Christ has been raised from the dead. Some of you will say, "But...can you prove it". To which I am happy to respond, God will never supply evidence to help us make intelligently selfish decisions. In this case, it's proof or freedom; the choice for Christ is a free, not a selfish one.

But if the resurrection cannot be proved, it can be known, experienced and it can be trusted. Faith anyhow is not believing without proof; it's trusting without reservation. The resurrection faith is a willingness on the basis of all that we have heard, all that we have observed, all that we have thought deeply about and experienced at a level far deeper than the mind ever comprehends - faith is a willingness to risk our lives on the conviction that while we human beings kill God's love we can never keep it dead and buried. Jesus Christ is risen - today, tomorrow, every day!

RESURRECTION IS DEMAND

There is nothing sentimental about Easter. Resurrection is a demand as well as a promise. Picture, if you will, the disciples shortly after Good Friday. Surely they were grief stricken. But doubtlessly, too, they were experiencing that sense of relief that comes with resignation from the struggle. "Well, we tried hard, but the Establishment was too powerful. He wasn't elected King. So it's back to fishing...to business as usual". And then comes the word, "He's back". "Our man lost out"

"Oh no - not again....back in business with Jesus - again?"

Easter is a demand not for sympathy with the crucified Christ, but a demand for renewed loyalty to the resurrected One. It is a travesty that so often Christians show sympathy for their crucified Christ and at the same time show continued loyalty to the very institutions that crucified Him. There's sentimentality at its worst. And that's what keeps us in a Good Friday world. If truly we believe that Christ is risen, that He is loose in a world where neither Roman nor Jew, Soviet nor American, can stop His truth, then ours today would be the loyalty of St. Peter that made him after Christ's death ten times the person he was before.

Ours would be the loyalty of St. Stephen, who, under the rain of death-dealing stones cried out, Christlike, "Father...forgive". Ours would be the loyalty of the early martyrs who with their blood watered the seed of the Church until it became the acorn that broke the mighty boulder of the Roman Empire.

There use to be an annual Sunrise Service on the rim of the Grand Canyon. As the scripture line was read from Matthew, "And an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone" a giant boulder was heaved over the rim. As it went crashing down the side of the Canyon, thousands of feet below into the Colorado River, a 2,000 voice choir burst into the Hallelujah Chorus. Too dramatic? Not if St. Paul is correct. We live in an Easter world, not a Good Friday world!

A SECOND CONSEQUENCE

But let's move on. The second consequence Paul draws from the resurrection is that we are no longer tied to

our sin. He writes the Corinthians that had Christ not been raised, not only would their faith be futile, they would still be "in their sins". What does he mean? Paul knew perfectly well that we're all sinners, and the more so the more we try to deny it. But that's not the issue. The question is whether there's more mercy in God than sin in us. And, according to Paul, just as love is stronger than death, so forgiveness is stronger than sin. The resurrection proves it. Peter denied Christ as surely as did Judas betrayed Him. The difference is that Peter came back to receive His forgiveness; the tragedy of Judas is that he never did.

Easter proclaims we are all forgiven. And that's a comforting thought. Brezhnev is forgiven, Arafat is forgiven, Begin and Reagan, Thatcher and Koch, too. ~~All those who plot Marxist takeovers in Central America are forgiven, as are those who can't wait to start another war.~~ White, black, yellow and red, smart and stupid, starved and stuffed - all are forgiven. Even the members of this Church, who have God in their mouths but not always in their hearts - like the minister who preaches to them - all of us too are forgiven. And what does that mean?

It does not mean that God relieves us of the consequences of our sin. It does mean that God relieves us of the consequences of being sinners. We are not sinners - we are forgiven sinners. And oh, how quickly a Good Friday world could become an Easter world if we accepted our forgiveness. For then we would be less concerned with what we can do for ourselves and more concerned with expressing ourselves as "trophyes of God's grace" as followers of our beloved Lord, who became what we are to make us what He is!

THE EMPTY TOMB

And now perhaps we can deal with the empty tomb, the resurrection event. St. Paul was the earliest New Testament writer, and it is clear that his resurrection faith, like the faith of the disciples, was not based on the negative argument of an empty tomb, but on the positive conviction that the Lord had appeared to him. It is also clear that Christ's appearances were not those of a resurrected corpse, but more akin to intense visionary experiences.

Not only Peter...all of the apostles after Jesus' death were ten times the people they were before; that's irrefutable. It was in response to their enthusiasm that the opposition organized, and it was in response to the opposition, as many scholars believe, that the doctrine of the empty tomb arose - as a consequence not a cause of the Easter faith, as an expression of it, rather than a basis for it.

Convinced by his appearances that Jesus was a living Lord, the disciples had really only one category in which to articulate this conviction; the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead. To Paul, the events of the last days had been anticipated and God - by a mighty act - had raised Jesus from the dead. To Paul, the living Christ and the Holy Spirit are never differentiated, so that when he says, "Not I, but Christ who dwells within me" he is talking about the same Holy Spirit that you and I can experience. I myself believe passionately in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, because in my own life I have experienced Christ as a warming presence - not as a memory. So today on Easter we gather not to close a show with Bob Hope's "thanks for the memory", but rather to reopen the show - because "Jesus Christ is risen today".

THIRD CONSEQUENCE

There remains only to say a word about the final consequence Paul draws from the Resurrection.

"If Christ has not been raised then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If only in this life have we hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied".

What then are we to say to those who "rest from their labor". How are we to anticipate our own death?

The Bible is at pains to point out that all life ends: "All mortal flesh is as the grass". But St. Paul insists that "neither death nor life...can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." If death, then, is no threat to our relationship to God it should be no threat to anything. If we don't know what is beyond the grave, we do know who is beyond the grave. And Christ resurrected links the two worlds, telling us that we really live only in one. If, spiritually speaking, we die to ourselves and are resurrected in Christ, before us lies only the physical counterpart of this spiritual death. And physical death need not terrorize us, if fear of the unknown and fear of final condemnation lie behind - not before us.

Then we can proclaim with St. Paul's marvelous freedom:

"Whether we live, or whether we die, we are the Lord's! Death, where is thy sting? Grave, where is thy victory. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord, Jesus Christ."

He is risen. He is risen, indeed. And so hopefully are we, for did we not sing, "Made like Him, like Him we rise. Ours the cross, the grave, the skies?"

CLOSING

So, sisters and brothers, what's it going to be - a Good Friday or an Easter world?

God has done God's part. Resurrection has overcome crucifixion. Forgiveness, sin. And if love is immortal then life is eternal and death is a horizon, and a horizon is nothing save the limit of our sight. ~~Now~~ let us do our part to make this an Easter World. human

It has been written, "If there should arise one utterly believing person, the history of the world would be changed!" So go forth - "bloom, frozen Christian - April stands before thy door".

PRAYER

"We thank You, O God, for the life and death of Jesus...His presence with us now. Help us to see him more clearly, to love Him more dearly, and to follow Him more nearly, that His risen life may be in us. Take our natural impulses on this day of resurrection, O God, and stretch them. Confirm them and reassure them, all in the name of Him who though His body was destroyed yet is now present and alive among us.

We ask this in the name of Him who told us, 'Because I live, Ye shall live also!'. Amen