

## "MORE THAN JUST A MEMORY"

TEXT: "And their eyes were opened, and they knew Him"  
(Luke 24: 31)

### INTRODUCTION

Over the years a regrettable injustice has been done to one of the most beautiful and appealing stories to be found anywhere in the Scriptures. I refer to the account of the travelers on the Emmaus Road that is recorded in the 24th chapter of Luke's Gospel.

It's Easter material alright, but it belongs more fittingly to Easter evening than Easter morning. And since few churches now-a-days have services on Easter evening, this particular story has suffered from unintentional neglect. I should like to atone for my part in that neglect by speaking from this passage today, on this first Sunday after Easter.

### DEVELOPMENT

The story is not unfamiliar. It was read to you earlier in the service in the King James' Version - the only version that does real justice to its beauty. The outstanding feature of this story is the contrast between how it begins and how it ends. It has a "down-beat" beginning, but a thrilling, open-ended "up-beat" closing!

The story begins some forty-eight hours after the horror that we call Good Friday. Two men are making their way on foot from Jerusalem to the suburb of Emmaus four miles distant - about as far as the distance from Times Square to East 86th Street. One of them was named Cleopas; the other remains anonymous. Neither man was one of the original twelve disciples, but both were utterly cast down that Jesus was now gone. And why not? They had been a part of that growing company of ordinary men and women whose view of reality, whose sense of purpose and whose understanding of God had been radically transformed by Jesus. Life for them had been lifted off its launching pad! But now what?

They found it necessary to get away from the scene of those final, tragic days. As they walked, they talked. Their conversation was heated and animated. Perhaps they were bouncing their dismay, their unbelief, their self-pity off of each other. They had loved and lost and that was it! Only those who had known His supporting Presence could feel so desperately His absence also.

Remember the song which Bob Hope used to close his program? "Thanks for the Memories". Please don't feel I'm being irreverent when I suggest that their mood as they started out could be summed up in that song. Ecclesiastical and political power had taken their leader away, but no power on earth could ever rob them of their precious recollections. They had been with Jesus. They had walked with Him and talked with Him. They had heard Him, seen Him, touched Him. In the early hours of the morning, in the heat of the noon, in the calm of the evening, they were there. And they would hang on to those memories the way a drowning man hangs on to the line of rope that represents life. That's how the story begins.

Recall now how it ends. On that very night, they made a complete turn-about and headed back to Jerusalem. This time their pace is faster...almost running. Their hearts are light and now at peace. A half-eaten meal is left behind. They have something to tell the others...a gladness to share. Jesus was back - alive! He whom they had called Lord was more than just a memory. He was a presence in their lives; they had been repossessed by hope!

BEGINS IN GLOOM AND CLIMAXES IN JOY

This story begins in gloom and it climaxes in joy because on their reverse pilgrimage out of Jerusalem, they were overtaken and encountered by the Living Christ!

Unrecognized by them at first, He comes upon them and listens as they voice their inner grief and disappointment. Then, in effect, He asks, "Is this a personal matter or can anyone get in on it. What is it that you're talking about?" Astounded that anyone could be in those parts and not know what was going on, they gently reprimand Him. "Are you from some distant place....a stranger in these parts...that you do not know what's going on". He feigns ignorance, "What things?" They go on to tell, achieving what psychologists would describe as verbal therapy, articulating the exact nature of their disappointment. "We had hoped" they said to Him, "that it was He who would redeem Israel."

Still unknown to the, Jesus now turns to the Scriptures and addresses Himself to the concern that was on their hearts - how one who is God's Anointed could possibly suffer. It is so difficult to believe that God who has all power could suffer anything. They felt that because He was the Christ He should not have suffered. Jesus showed that because He was the Christ of God, He had to suffer, for that's the way God is!

Following this, there then comes a bit of social gamesmanship. The sedate and moving language of the King James' Version reads, "He made as though He would go further". He wanted an invitation to remain with them, but gestured as though to go on. They responded in a similar manner. Their real interest was in hearing more from this intriguing stranger who had joined them in their walk that afternoon to Emmaus, but they could hardly come out and say that openly. Instead, they appealed to nightfall, "Abide with us: for it is toward evening and the day is far spent."

A few moments later comes that dramatic and moving moment of recognition. "And it came to pass, as He sat at meal with them, He took bread and blessed it, and brake it and gave it to them." And in that simple gesture and action, we read that "their eyes were opened, and they knew Him; and He vanished out of their sight!" We pass from memory to hope, by an Experience of such a Presence.

NOT A MEMORIAL SOCIETY

Friends, the Church is not a "memorial society" that comes together regularly to commemorate a good, saintly and committed life. Memory cannot adequately account for the life of the Church over so long a time. Memory can be good and influential - the memory of a loved one, of a devoted friend, a respected teacher - but memory cannot be sustained with telling force and impact for 2,000 years.

Why, George Washington has been gone less than 200 years and we've already made his birthday a moveable holiday in order to convenience our desire for a long weekend in February. There are limits to the power and influence of memory.

It was the mystical experience of a real Presence that birthed the early Church. Actually, there are two traditions in the Scriptures that deal with the resurrection of Jesus. One is the empty tomb; the other is the tradition of the Presence and appearance of the Risen Christ. The two are not of equal stature, logically or scripturally. There's no question but what the tradition that

appeals to the appearances of Jesus was the tradition that gave the Church its heart and vitality and its power!

Scholars tell us that the oldest written reference to the Resurrection of Jesus is found in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 15. In that passage, there is no reference to an empty tomb. What is mentioned is the fact that the Risen Christ had appeared to Cephas, and the 12 and the 500, and James and all of the Apostles and said Paul, "Last of all, He appeared to me". I think it's always tempting to believe - conditioned as we are by the scientific temper of our time - that if only we could somehow get to that empty tomb with our cameras and calipers thus to certify and verify Christ's resurrection, we could trigger faith and make believers out of a non-believing world.

But those travelers on that Emmaus Road that afternoon had already heard rumors of an empty tomb. They spoke only of what the women had reported - some visions, some angels, the empty tomb - and still they did not believe! All that the empty tomb could do was to imply that perhaps Jesus was still around town somewhere - still limited in time and in place. That lease on life would be but a preparation for a death still to come!

BUT EASTER IS MORE I believe that this Easter faith we have been celebrating in recent days is built on far more than the resuscitation of a corpse. When we speak about resurrection, we mean Christ's entrance into a new form of life.

I have never been that concerned about the preservation of the historical sites of the Holy Land; I saw most of them a number of years ago as a student on a trip to that part of the world. And I suppose that one should be grateful that the Pope and others from time to time express a hope that those shrines and landmarks will continue to remain intact - the alleged place of the birth of Jesus, the place of His death, the place of His burial in the garden tomb. However, that approach does not bring me solid reassurance for preserving His message and the meaning of His life in our world. What is reassuring are His appearances within the framework of our time and our society - in lives of people and solutions to problems.

Malcolm Muggeridge made a statement sometime back that I believe all of His disciples would have said "amen" to:

"I am sure there was a resurrection, but I don't in the least care whether the stone was moved or not moved, what anybody saw or anything like that. I am absolutely indifferent to that. But there must have been a resurrection because Christ's spirit is alive now 2,000 years later! There is no question at all about that."

"And their eyes were opened and they knew Him". We celebrate the Easter faith because the Living Christ has filled our hearts with love and made them "burn" along the way. As someone once put it, "The stone was moved - not so much to let Christ out, as to let the women in!"

FROM MEMORY TO HOPE We pass then - from memory to hope through an experience of Presence. This is the heart of the Easter faith and it prompts us to raise this question: have you experienced that Presence in your

life? [ After all, that's the critical question - isn't it? Easter is more than a tale in a book, something we think of only in the Spring of the year. It speaks to us of a Presence, a Power, a Purpose that is there at all times for our receiving. ]

To put it differently: Easter is an event into which we must enter and an event which we must allow to enter us.

We meet Him - not by remembering or escaping into some "super-world" of the spirit. I believe we meet Him in the common scenes of life - a walk with a friend, the offer of hospitality to one in pressing need, pondering the Scriptures, sitting down to a meal in a spirit of gratitude. I believe that to experience that warming Presence is to see everyone we meet "in Jesus" and Jesus "in everyone" we meet on the road of life.

BEST NEWS OF EASTER      The best news of Easter did not happen at dawn, but in the gathering dusk of that day. Not with the rising of the sun, but with its setting. Not at the empty tomb, but out there on the open road. As they walked with Him, "their eyes were opened and they knew Him". Beautiful lines by T. S. Eliot bring this message to its close with the hope - that renewed hope - that His Presence may be felt by you out there on the road that you walk, always bringing its peace and power.

"Who is the third who walks always beside you?  
When I count, there are only you and I together,  
But when I look ahead up the white road  
There is always another one walking beside you  
Gliding, wrapped in a brown mantel, hooded -  
I do not know whether a man or a woman -  
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PRAYER      Make us sensitive to your nearness and your presence, Lord, in this hour. Remove from our eyes, O God, the scales of doubt and unbelief and indecision. Free us from bondage to our senses that so often do limit our lives.

Help us to open our hearts and our minds to receive the joy of Your presence in our lives - a saving, caring, comforting, living Presence - this day and always. In His spirit, we pray. Amen

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I came across some helpful lines recently, written by a Professor Harry Prosch, and printed in a Journal of Religion and Science. Writing about the various ways in which we know anything in this world, he suggests that different levels of knowledge require different levels of personal "entering in". To quote him directly, he says:

"We must dwell more fully in our religion than we do in our psychology in order to see it meaning, more fully in our psychology than in our biology, more fully in our biology than in our physics, and more fully in our physics than in our mathematics. Yet, this does not mean that religion is 'truer' than mathematics, only that its meanings involve more of ourselves in them, and they may be more intrinsically interesting....or overwhelming, anyway".

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PRAYER Remove from our eyes, O God, the scales of doubt and unbelief and indecision. Free us from bondage to our senses that so often do limit our lives. Deepen our faith.

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