

"NEVER AGAIN TO DIE"

INTRODUCTION A week ago last Thursday - along with 55,127 other people - I celebrated the return of the Yankees to our city and the beginning of another baseball season. In spite of the rain, it was a splendid afternoon with great excitement and much to celebrate.

A number of years ago, Desmond McCarthy, drama critic of the London Sunday Times remarked after his first glimpse of the lights of Broadway, "Tell me, how do you Americans ever manage to celebrate anything?" He's got a point for we do our share of celebrating. Since Christmas we've celebrated the inauguration of a new President, the return of the hostages, the return of the astronauts...just to highlight a few "celebrations". The emotions are still high.

And if we bring out the band and Howard Cossell to welcome our heroes back for a new season at the Stadium, how do we on Easter welcome Jesus back from the dead? I suppose that in a way...this day is no different from any other. The Gospel "word" always struggles to be heard. It always has. Jerusalem twenty centuries ago was not that different from this city that first Easter morn. We can only try to clarify the deeper meaning of this day, and pray that God will bless our efforts as we celebrate and give this Gospel word of resurrection new birth in many hearts this Easter Sunday.

MEMORY OF A NOBLE LIFE To begin with, there would be cause for joy today had we nothing more to celebrate than the memory of a noble life. At times we suffer from want of compelling and worthy examples. Mediocrity and failure have become the norm. Muckrakers have a way of seeing to it that we do not lionize any hero for long. ~~Every person has his price, we say.~~ Dig into the past and you'll find evidence. It's only a matter of time.

Then comes word of Jesus of Nazareth. "Once upon a time, there was a man who..." And what a life it was! That life graces ours like a welcome benediction! There's no record that He ever made another sad. He never seemed to be in a hurry or under pressure and yet He was never late. He did not bow to the mighty or despise the poor. It was not His way to harm or hurt or humiliate any living thing. And always His gifts and powers were used for good and positive ends.

A friend in a Bible study group recently pointed out to several of us that Jesus never used the gift of miracle regressively, but always progressively. He did not turn wine into water, or bread to stone. It was the other way around. He did not visit a paralysis on Judas or blind Pontius Pilate. He did not wither the limbs of the soldiers who came that night to arrest Him and then take Him to the Cross. He had an eye for the lilies of the field, an ear for God, a hand and a heart for any in need. A noble life to celebrate, indeed! "Of all the armies that ever marched...all the navies ever built....all the kings who ever reigned.."

Yes, there would be cause for joy this day had we nothing more to celebrate than the memory of this noble life. With nothing more to celebrate than this exemplary life, we could pray with John Baillie of Scotland:

"Forbid it, O Father, that the difficulty of living well should ever tempt me to fall into any kind of heedlessness or despair. May I keep it ever in mind that this human life was once divinely lived and this world once nobly overcome and this body of flesh, that now so sorely tries me, once made into Thy perfect dwelling place!"

A NOBLE LIFE THAT SURVIVED DEATH

But that's not all! There's so much more for us to celebrate. In the second place, there would be cause for joy had we nothing more to celebrate than a noble life that survived death.

Often we find ourselves wondering...is death "the end of the road", or is it "merely a bend in the road?" Is death a "part of life?". We say in our optimistic moments that God would not have given birds an instinct for the South had there been no South direction. And...most of us...live with our hunches, our surmises, our intimations. "But if He survived the grave, perhaps....we could...we might...we may...we will!"

Therefore, friends, hear again the good news of this Easter Sunday. Hear the incredible news that this glorious Day brings to us. Jesus, our Lord, did more than just "survive" death. He defeated it! He reversed it. He experienced death, from beginning to end - not somehow, but triumphantly. He was victorious, irreversibly so. As Paul put it in his Letter to the Romans, writing some time after the resurrection:

"We know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again. Death no longer has dominion over Him!"

His resurrection has about it the ring of a grand and a glorious "Amen". God's "yes"...given in answer to all our wonderment and our doubt. Here is finality. Here is inescapability. Faithful unto death and God raised Him up. And what He achieved in His life and in His death and His rising again neither needs repetition or improvement. Karl Barth, the Swiss theologian of our time, wrote something that has helped me to understand better the meaning of this "Amen" pronounced by God that we celebrate:

"It is in the power of the event of the third day that the event of the first day is not something which belongs to the past, which can be present only by recollection, tradition and proclamation....but it is as such a present event - THE EVENT which fills and determines the whole present and provides meaning and hope for the future."

In the last century, there was much noise and celebration when America's first continental railway was completed. Track was laid simultaneously from the West and from the East. The point of meeting was out there in Utah - a place called Promontory Point. A golden spike was driven into the ground to signal the completion of this notable connection. And when that spike was firmly bedded down a telegrapher's key touched off the one-word message that went across the land, "DONE". "D - O - N - E". "Done!"

Said Paul, "We know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again. Death no longer has dominion over Him". In that event, we witness the juncture of goodness and power. The point of meeting was a cross outside of Jerusalem. "Done" was the word that went out like wild-fire to the outside world. Goodness and power came together. And His sacrifice has power, forever for us. For He lives to make intercession for each of us.

An unknown Union soldier lies buried somewhere in Newport News, Virginia. And above his grave is a simple stone and carved in that stone this message, "Mustered Out". And so we are. "Mustered out". But that's not all. Move on with me to the third and final point.

POWERS OF THE PRESENT AGE DESTROYED

We celebrate, too, the fact that this noble life raised from the dead destroyed

the powers of this present age.

At times, we may be guilty of over personalizing the meaning of Christ's resurrection and missing out on its cosmic significance. It's all gathered up for us - that is, the individual and the corporate meaning of His death and resurrection - in these reassuring thoughts of Paul to the early Christians in Colossae,

"And you...who were dead in trespasses...God made alive together with Him...having forgiven us all our trespasses, having cancelled the bond that stood against us with its legal demands; this He set aside, nailing it to the cross".

That's the personal aspect of it, but then Paul goes on to add this thought,

"And He disarmed the principalities and the powers, and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in Him."

This we sometimes fail to hear, to take in, to apply. And it's important that we do!

WHAT AND WHO ARE THEY?

What and who are these "principalities and powers" to which Paul refers. I believe they have to do with the large, vast and impersonal forces that seek to control and to rule our lives. "Principalities and powers" suggest to me that malevolent, negative network which the Bible refers to as "the mystery of iniquity". The Bible has a way of understanding our human striving on a larger board than most of us project.

Who are these "principalities and powers"? The state, the stars, the system; caste, color, class. Prejudice. Poverty. Frozen ideologies - political and theological. Codes of respectability that are without compassion and kindness. Anything - that in a collective, abstract way moves in to "dehumanize" the people of this earth.

The news of Easter is that Jesus made short work of the "principalities and powers" that dehumanize God's children. Against them, he was triumphant and decisively so. Good Friday had flung some serious questions against that Syrian sky, as it appeared that goodness had been brutally ground into the earth. A fragile blossom afloat on a torrent, soon to be dashed - how relevant is goodness if it has no purchase on ultimate reality, no power at its disposal? As the Mennonite John Yoder once put it:

"There at the Cross is THE man who loves His enemies; the man whose righteousness is greater than that of the Pharisees, who being rich became poor, who gives His robe to those who took His cloak and who prays now for those who spitefully use Him"

The question we ask in the presence of all that is whether such values belong to the very essence of our life or form the exception that proves the old rule. Is that the way life is - loving, giving, serving, dying? The resurrection was God's resounding "YES" - that is the way it is. The resurrection reversed the cosmic status in which goodness had been left by the crucifixion on Good Friday. Instead of being pitiful, it was victorious....triumphant over everything, even

death itself. A new history began that Easter morn long ago. It takes the "leap of faith" to step from the old history to the new and I invite you to take that step. For we tire of the old history and we desparately need to hear undergirding of the new.

I came across this epitaph recently. Found in a cemetery in Girard, Pa., it reads as follows:

"In memory of Ellen Shannon,
Aged 26 years.
Who was fatally burned on
March 21st, 1870
By an explosion of a lamp
filled with
'R. E. Danforth's Non-Explosive
Burning Fluid'"

destroy

Like you...I tire of hearing of non-explosive fluids that explode and burn, ~~of fail-proof banks that do fail~~; of those sure-fire programs for everything that go off like duds. I weary of those preventives that do not prevent, of those solutions that do not solve, of remedies that do not cure, of the panaceas that do not pan out.

*NOT
CARRIED
OUT...*

I weary of promises not kept, of reforms that reform so little, of commitments that ~~never are kept~~, of the gods that smile upon us as they siphon out our life, of death that masquerades through this life as hope. The "old" history never seems to work, it has so little in the way of hope and dependability and I rejoice in the "Christ - Event" in whom the old has passed away and the new has come into being.

CLOSING I apologize to you today, because I feel and I believe more about my test than I can say. Its truth overwhelms my thought and it far out-runs my powers of expression. I ask you to make it the subject of your own meditation. Ponder, if you will, the deppetruth of this day. Let it capture your heart and seize your mind. Let it direct your will. Jesus is conqueror. The universe has meaning. It's His. The battle He lost, but the war He won. Goodness has the final say. It has the last word.

And now may God grant you joy and peace, hope and love in taking with you the truth and the message of Easter.

PRAYER Let that life that was in Christ Jesus, be in us and let it be radiated from us to others. Give us the power and the grace now to go out into our world as though Christ were living in each of us, that our world may be raised from death to life. In His spirit, we pray. Amen

DAVID GARNER

BEFORE

"The Scripture Reading for today is taken from the Gospel According to St. Mark. Chapter 16. Verses 1 - 8

It is found on page 886 in the Bible that is in the pews."

After announcing the page number...pause for about 10 to 15 seconds...allowing people time to locate the scripture in the Bible. People do like to follow along with the reader.

Thanks...

AFTER

"Thus ended the reading taken from the Holy Scripture. May God add His blessing to the reading of His Word and to our understanding of it.

Thanks be to God! Amen!

REMEMBER TO:

1. Go slowly...don't rush it...remember it's The Word of God...don't read it casually, and
2. Keep your voice up...smile...and remember that Ada Kinney has to hear you 'way in the back of the Church.

"NEVER AGAIN TO DIE"

INTRODUCTION A number of years ago, Howard Lowery, one time President of Wooster College, had the pleasure of entertaining Desmond McCarthy, drama critic of the "London Sunday Times" on his first to this country. His first night here they went to a play on Broadway. And coming out after the performance, the critic saw for the first time the dazzling lights of Broadway. He blinked at them for a while, then turned to his host and said, "Tell me, how do you Americans ever manage to celebrate anything?"

If we hail the arrival of a new detergent with a full-page ad in "The New York Times" and an hour-long, prime-time television spectacular, how then do we celebrate resurrection? Or, if we bring on the band and pull out all the stops to welcome an 18 year old guru from the East as he steps out of his limousine, how do we welcome Jesus back from the dead?

In a way, this day is no different from any other. The "word" always struggles to be heard. We can only try to clarify its meaning, and pray that God will give the Gospel birth in many hearts this Easter Day.

MEMORY OF A NOBLE LIFE To begin with, there would be cause for joy today had we nothing more to celebrate than the memory of a noble life. At times, I think we suffer from want of compelling and worthy examples. Failure has become the norm. Muckrakers make sure that we do not lionize any hero for long. Every person has his price, we say - it's only a matter of time.

Then comes word of Jesus. "Once upon a time, there was a man who...." And what a life it was. It graces ours like a welcome benediction. There's no record that he ever made another sad. He never seemed to hurry and yet He was never late. He did not bow to the mighty or despise the poor. It was not His way to humiliate or hurt or harm a living thing. Always His gifts and powers were used for good, positive ends.

A friend recently pointed out to me that Jesus never used the gift of miracle regressively, but always progressively. He did not turn wine to water, or bread to stone. He did not visit a paralysis on Judas or blind Pontius Pilate. He did not wither the limbs of the soldiers who came that night to arrest Him and take Him to trial. He had an eye for the lilies of the field, an ear for God, a hand and a heart for any in need. An example of a noble life to celebrate!

We can take heart that Jesus was once among us on these premises, in this human flesh. You know how it is that often in our travels we see the sign, "George Washington Slept Here". It does something for the American spirit to know that a man of Washington's political and military stature actually walked on the ground that we walk on. Thus, I contend that there would be cause for joy this day had we nothing more to celebrate than the memory of a noble life. With nothing more to celebrate than this exemplary life, we could pray with John Baillie: devotionally

"Forbid it, O Father, that the difficulty of living well should ever tempt me to fall into any kind of heedlessness or despair. May I keep it ever in mind that this human life was once divinely lived and this world once nobly overcome and this body of flesh, that now so sorely tries me, once made into thy perfect dwelling place!"

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But that's not all! There's much more for us to celebrate. There would be cause, in the second place, for joy had we nothing more to celebrate than a noble life that survived death.

Often we wonder....is death "the end of the road", or is it "merely a bend in the road?" Is "death a part of life"....an ongoing life? We say in our more optimistic moments that God would not have given birds an instinct for the south had there been no south dimension. Right? And so, most of us live with our hunches, our surmises, our intimations....But if He survived the grave, perhaps...perhaps we could...might...may...will!

Therefore, friends, hear the good news of Easter. Hear the incredible news of this Day. Jesus did more than "survive" death. He defeated it. He reversed it. He experienced death - not somehow, but triumphantly. He was victorious, irreversibly so. As Paul put it in his Letter to the Romans:

"We know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again. Death no longer had dominion over Him!".....

His resurrection has about it the ring of a grand and a glorious AMEN. God's "yes" given in answer to all our wonderment and doubt. Here is finality. Here is inescapability. Faithful unto death, and God raised Him Up! What He achieved in His life and death and rising again neither needs repetition nor improvement. | Karl Barth, the Swiss theologian, explained it this way:

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In the last century, there was much noise and celebration when America's first transcontinental railway was completed. Track was laid simultaneously from the West and the East. The point of meeting turned out to be Promontory Point in Utah. A golden spike was driven into the ground to signal the completion of this notable endeavor. And when that spike was firmly bedded down a telegrapher's key touched off the one-word message, "DONE".

D - O - N - E. Done! Done!

Said Paul, "We know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again. Death no longer has dominion over Him". He lives to make intercession for us. In that event, we see the juncture, the meeting of goodness and power. The point of meeting turned out to be a cross. "Done" was the word that went out like wild-fire to the world. His sacrifice has power - forever.

An unknown Union soldier lies buried somewhere in Newport News, Virginia. Above his grave is a simple stone. Carved in that stone is the message, "Mustered Out". And so we are.

But that's not all. Move on to the final point.

POWERS OF PRESENT AGE DESTROYED

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We celebrate this day the fact that this noble life raised from the dead destroyed

At times, I think we have overly personalized the meaning of Christ's resurrection, and largely missed its cosmic significance. It's all gathered up for us - that is the individual and the corporate meaning of His death and resurrection in these reassuring thoughts of Paul to the early Christians in Colossae,

"And you who were dead in trespasses....God made alive together with Him....having forgiven us all our trespasses, having cancelled the bond that stood against us with its legal demands; this He set aside, nailing it to the cross"

That's the personal aspect, but then Paul continues to say,

"He disarmed the principalities and the powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in Him"

This, I feel, is the part we often fail to hear, to comprehend, the part that we desperately need to hear and take home with us.

What are these "principalities and powers" that Paul mentions. I believe that they have to do with the large, vast, impersonal forces that would control our lives. "Principalities and powers" suggest to me that malevolent network which the Bible refers to as "the mystery of iniquity". The Bible has a way of understanding our human striving on a larger board than most of us project.

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The question that we ask in the presence of all that is whether such values belong to the very essence of our life or form the exception that proves the old rule. Is that the way life is - loving, giving, serving, dying? The resurrection was God's/resounding "yes" - that IS the way it is. The resurrection completely reversed the cosmic status in which goodness had been left by the crucifixion. Instead of being pitiful, it was victorious...triumphant over everything, even the end of all ends - death itself.

Huston Smith puts it in words that speak to me,

"Thus the resurrection faith did not deal merely with the fate of a good man. Its full referent was the character of God and the nature of ultimate reality.

For, if Christ's life and death had convinced the disciples of God's love, His resurrection convinced them of His power, demonstrating conclusively that neither the worst men can do (crucify the one who loves them most) nor even the seemingly inexorable laws of nature (death) can block God's work and purpose."

A new history began that Easter Day long ago. It takes "the leap of faith" to step from the old history to the new. We tire of the old history and we desperately need to hear undergirding of the new.

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I weary of the promises not kept, of reforms that reform so little, of the gods that smile upon us as they siphon out our life, of death that masquerades through this life as hope. I weary of the "old" history...with so little in the way of hope, of dependability, but just as surely I rejoice and live my life on, in the "Christ Event - in whom the old has passed away and the new has come into being. (Pause.....)

CLOSING One of the reasons we are not as joyful as we ought to be is because we have been over-exposed to the world and under-exposed to the claims of the Gospel and the new history Christ represents. Ponder, if you will, the truth of this day. Let it capture your heart. Seize your mind. Direct your will. Jesus is conqueror. The universe is His. It was not the battle He won, but it was the war. Goodness has the final say, the last word.

I apologize to you today because I feel and believe more about my text than I can say. Its truth overwhelms my thought and far outruns my powers of expression. And I can only ask you to make it the subject of your own meditation. And may God grant you joy and peace, hope and love in believing the abiding truth message of Easter.

PRAYER: Let the life that was in Christ Jesus, O God, be in us, and let it be radiated from us and through us to others. Give us the power and the grace to go out into our world as though Christ were living in us, that our world may be raised from death to life. Amen