

"PASSAGE TO NEW LIFE"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
Easter Day, April 3, 1994

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INTRODUCTION

In his book, Turning Point, Jimmy Carter shares a story that helps to lead us into this Easter Day message. About thirty years ago, down in Georgia, a State Senator brought the following motion on to the floor of the State Assembly. "Mr. President", Senator Rowan began,

"I rise to move that the proposed Georgia election code be amended as follows: 'No person may vote, either in the Democratic primary or in the general election in the state of Georgia, who has been deceased more than 3 years'".

The amendment was completely serious and it sparked a lively debate. The state legislators argued over the exact time between death and the loss of voting privileges. Apparently they debated just how long the spirit and the political orientation of dead citizens might still be remembered when applied to current issues, but the big issue was how they might have voted if they had lived to election day. For instance, could relatives vote according to a dead person's wishes?

Now this might seem absurd to us today, but apparently it was a serious issue back then in 1964 down in Georgia. You never know what's on the books!

DEVELOPMENT

When the first Easter rolled around, those scattered and defeated disciples must have been wondering if the influence of Jesus would live on. They had dedicated the better part of three years to following Him. They had left their jobs and some of them had even left their families to follow this Galilean. As it all came to an end on Good Friday, I'm sure they were asking themselves if they had made a colossal mistake. Even though Jesus had told them He would die, I'm sure they never thought for one moment that He would die on a cross like a common criminal. Their dreams were shattered. Could the movement that He had begun go on without Him. It seemed unlikely...why... His small band of followers were even now in hiding and fearing for their lives.

Jesus had made such a difference to each of them. Tradition tells us that one of the women who followed Him, Mary Magdalene, had been something of a notorious sinner. Jesus had convinced her, however, that God still loved her and she followed Him. She loved Him and then the unthinkable happened. Jesus died on a cross. Yes,

She had been there on Good Friday and witnessed His death on the cross. She was there Friday evening when His lifeless body was taken down from the cross and placed in a borrowed tomb. She knew He was dead and all of her dreams died with Him. Maybe this is where we should pause and put down the first of three points in our Easter basket. Easter does confront us with the reality of death.

EASTER CONFRONTS US WITH THE REALITY OF DEATH

That's not a very happy thought, is it? We don't like to think about our own death or the death of a loved one. Yet, as Scott Peck brings out in his book, Further Along the Road Less Traveled, the very willingness to confront and consider our own mortality is a sign of emotional and spiritual maturity. But it's tough to do.

It is death that makes us realize just how precious life is. Let me share a story with you that comes to mind...that ties in with this observation.

There was once a young man named Fyodor Dostoyevski who was dragged before a firing squad for being a political subversive. He was blindfolded, ordered to make his confession, say one last prayer and then to wait for the bullets. Literally, he had only minutes to live. Dostoyevski heard the officer in charge tell the soldiers to "ready their guns". Then he heard the order to fire. He heard the shots ring out in the air, but he felt nothing! Miraculously, he was still alive.

The guns had been loaded with blanks. The Czar had brought this young revolutionary to the brink of death only to let him know, through this emotionally devastating experience, that his life had been spared. And in those last few moments before the gunfire rang out - in those moments that he thought were his last - his senses were intensely receptive to the thousands of sounds and smells all around him. And for the first time he was really alive to God's world.

Upon reflection in later years, Fyodor Dostoyevski considered that experience one of the most blessed things that ever happened to him. He had gone through the whole process of dying without having died, and this allowed him to appreciate life all the more. He understood then that all of life comes from God. And this is part of the message of Easter. Fit it in and remember always that life is a gift from God. Use it well. How true it is for each of us that we appreciate life most when we are faced with the reality of death.

PETER, JESUS AND MARY

But back to our story of Easter and what was taking place.

Mary Magdalene, while it was still dark, made her way to the tomb where Jesus had been placed late on Good Friday. She went there out of respect for this man who had changed her life. Maybe she thought that in the "stone-cold" silence of that cemetery that she would be able to somehow sort through her feelings. But when she arrived, she noticed first-off that the stone covering His tomb had been rolled away. Not only was this upsetting for Mary, but even more so was the fact that someone had stolen the body of Jesus. And who would do such a cruel thing? I'm sure that she must have been devastated.

She ran from that place of death to find Peter and when she found him, she told him,

"They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him."

What did Peter do? He did what you and I would have done. Along with another disciple he rushed to the tomb to confirm this report that Mary had brought. "Yes...the body of Jesus was missing." With troubled hearts, and yet somehow hopeful, the two disciples went back to their homes and left Mary there alone in front of the garden tomb. She stood there crying. Again she looked into the tomb to see the place where the body of Jesus should have been, but instead of an empty tomb she saw two angels sitting there. They asked her,

"Woman...why are you weeping?" And she replied,
'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him".

Then she sensed Someone else near her. She turned and saw a man whom she assumed to be the gardener. He asked her,

"Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?"

Mary could not see clearly through her tears and failed to recognize that the man to whom she was talking was the Risen Lord. Mary asked this man whom she thought to be the gardener if He had taken the body or if He had seen anyone else take it away. Then that beautiful moment when Jesus speaks her name. "Mary". And Mary feels a sudden pull on her heart and knows beyond any doubt that this man is Jesus. He was alive and standing in front of her. He called her by name. But note that there is something else in this dialogue for Jesus says to Mary,

"Do not hold on to Me, because I have not yet ascended to My Father...." (John 20: 17)

"Do not hold on to Me....." Strange, isn't it. Perhaps this was Jesus' way of telling Mary that her life could never return to what it was. "Do not hold on to Me". In other words, Mary would have to let go of the mortal Jesus if she wanted to claim the immortal Christ. For as we let go of the Jesus of history, we come to claim for ourselves the Christ of Faith. A chapter ends and a new chapter is now beginning. Turn the page. "Do not hold on...."

EASTER IS A TIME OF LETTING GO

This brings us to something else that we need to reflect upon here this hour. Easter

is a time of "letting go".

Are you familiar with the name of Leo Buscaglia? Some of you are. There was an article in Guideposts last October by Leo Buscaglia that was entitled, "What Are You Holding On To?"

Buscaglia's mother was a great inspiration to him and a great influence on his life as he was growing up. He remembers a difficult time when he was seven years old and his pet cat was run over by a car. "Little Yellow" was his cat's name and he remembers to this day how a friend came running up to him saying, "Leo...Leo...Little Yellow has been hit by a car!"

Leo rushed out into the street and found his cat silent and limp. He was devastated. He couldn't speak. And then he did what any seven year old boy would do in such a circumstance. He ran to his mother, threw himself into her arms and cried...and cried.... His mother whispered,

"There, there...my little Felice...." trying to comfort him. "There...there...."

Stroking his head, she tried to explain that these things do happen and that she was sure the mother cat "next door" would bless them with another kitten.

But this was little consolation for Leo. Burying his face, he shook convulsively and his tears soaked her apron. It was then that she looked into his eyes and said, "Felice...what are you holding on to?" He swallowed and looked at her. And his mother went on to explain that we can't hold on to some things, like broken toys. We also can't hold on to people who have died...like Grand-papa. And he could not hold on to "Little Yellow". "Little Yellow" she said, "had gone to a better place...."

And that's a good thought for us to remember, too...and to put into our Easter basket... "gone to a better place".

There are something things we just cannot hold on to. We have to let them go. Many of us have lost loved ones in recent years and it hurts. Our Easter faith does not minimize our sense of loss, but it does say,

"Thank God that that which has been lost shall one day be returned to us. We can trust God with those we love...."

And yes, we can let go. Yes, "let go and let God" as someone will say. And there may be some person present here in this Easter congregation who is "clinging" to something that may be preventing him or her from experiencing a "new life in Christ". I'm sure that Mary Magdalene may have been clinging to a memory of how things used to be. But now she had to "let go" of the physical Jesus to claim the new reality of the Christ of Faith. And that would carry her forward on her passage to new life.

Easter confronts us, first, with the reality of death so that you and I might appreciate more than we do the very gift of life and the lives of those we love and the friends we have. Easter also tells us that there is a time to let go, so that one day that which has been lost might be restored. And one more thought for your Easter basket.

EASTER CALLS US OUT OF THE TOMBS OF LIFE

It calls us out of the tombs of life and into the light of God's love. The great news of Easter is that death no longer has a grip on us, nor does it have the final word. I believe it with all my heart. Christ is alive and at work in our world. New life is available to all who call on His name. And with tears of joy now streaming down Mary's face, Jesus says to her:

"Mary....go to My brothers (and sisters) and say to them, 'I am ascending to My Father...and your Father, to My God and to your God.'"

Mary then left the graveyard to return with the "Good News" that "I have seen the Lord". I hope and pray that you may depart and return with something of the the same assurance. Because Mary had seen the Lord, she had new hope and found new meaning for her life. It happened then and it still happens, even today.

Remember that heartwarming story of the ten year old boy who was playing left field in a Little League Game. As the boy was standing out there all by himself, a man called over to him, "Hey, kid...who's winning?" The boy replied, "We are!" "What's the score?" asked the man. The boy replied, "It's 23 - 0 - their favor". "They're beating you...23-0? But I thought you said you were winning!" "We are" called the ten year old. "We haven't come up to bat yet!" Who was it who said, "The game's not over 'till it's over?"

That's the kind of assurance that I would wish for each of you on this Easter Day. Like Mary, after we've "seen the Lord" and perhaps heard Him call us by name, we, too, are "winners"....in the greater game of life...no matter what...no matter how "lop-sides" the score may be at the moment.

CLOSING LINES

A number of years ago, a young lady said something to me at the door which I have never forgotten...and I treasure it and keep it in my Easter basket. "When I walk out of here on a Sunday after the service, I feel like I'm a winner". When you come right down to it, that's what it's all about. Easter calls us out of the tombs of life in this city and

and into the light of God's love. That's the Easter Faith - and yes, that's what we're about, here...Sunday after Sunday, and week after week. If YOU are alive, God is not yet finished. Remember that. He gives us passage to new life. Put these Christian Easter eggs into your Easter basket and don't be afraid to take them out and look at them across the days of the weeks ahead. Happy Easter to all of you.

PRAYER O Risen Lord, Lord of all life....we would pause at the end of this Easter service...in quiet moments of prayer and wonder.

Help us to comprehend as never before the great mystery of this Day as we kneel before You cradling new born hopes and passage into new life. Come close to each of us and TOUCH what is dead within. Transform our timid caution into joyful confidence and strong assurance. Strengthen in us the belief that "in Christ" shall all be made alive, that You will wipe away every tear...and that death shall be no more and neither shall there be mourning or crying.

Let this word of hope go forth with each of us until "in the light of Joseph's lovely garden", we see our world, we see our city and our neighbors, our friends and even our enemies and ourselves....ONLY through Christ, our Risen Lord. Amen.

PAT RILEY.....NO.

JIMMY JOHNSON....NO

YOGI BERRA gets credit
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text"....

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CLOSING LINES

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and into the light of God's love. That's the Easter Faith and yes, that's what we're about....Sunday after Sunday, week after week. If you are alive, God is not yet finished. He gives us passage to new life.

PRAYER Oh Risen Lord, Lord of all life....we pause at the end of this Easter Service....in quiet moments of prayer and wonder. We ask that somehow we might comprehend as we never have before the great mystery of this Day as we stand before you cradling new born hopes and passage into new life.

Come close to each of us and touch what is dead within us. Transform our timid caution into joyful confidence and strong assurance. Strengthen in each of us that "In Christ" shall all be made alive...that You will wipe away every tear, that death shall be no more and neither shall there be mourning or crying.

Let this word of Hope go forth with us until in the light that streams from Joseph's lovely garden, we see our world, our city, our neighbors, our friends and our enemies and even ourselves - ONLY through Christ, Our Lord, in whose name we pray and who makes us all "winners". Amen.