

"PETER'S NEAR MISTAKE"

A Sermon By

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"But Peter followed Him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and going inside, he sat with the guards to see the end."

(Matthew 26: 58)

INTRODUCTION

Isn't it true that only those who have nursed great expectations can ever know great disappointment. That only those who have fought hard to win can know the pangs of defeat. Only those who have dared to hope can know the depths of despair. And that's why my heart goes out to Simon Peter - one of the most tragic persons connected with the events of Holy Week. We read in Matthew's Gospel that Peter now sits with the guards, waiting, watching "to see the end". It was almost all over.

Peter had given it such a good try ever since that day back there in sunny Galilee when Jesus first crossed his path and said to him, "Come, Peter... follow Me." And he had followed Him, and slowly but surely all of this talk on the part of Jesus about a Kingdom was getting through to him and making such good sense. Rough, blustery and burly type that he was, Peter had grown to appreciate those frail intangibles that Jesus was talking about all the time - things like faith and hope and love. Yes, it was getting through to him.

OUT OF CONTROL

But after Palm Sunday things had suddenly started to slip out of control. It had all happened so quickly. The opposition lined up against Jesus. For His part, Jesus had ruffled a few feathers early on in the week by throwing the money changers out of the Temple and then cursing a fig tree. After that memorable Thursday night Last Supper in the upper room, Peter had tried in Gethsemane's Garden to help the cause by the swift use of his sword, but all he got for his trouble was a sharp reprimand from Jesus that "those who take the sword shall perish by the sword".

Then in swift succession came the traitor's kiss, instant arrest, and the trial before the authorities. The Big Fisherman saw what was happening; he could read the handwriting on the wall. He wanted to protect his own life, save his own skin. And so we come across this line woven into the record,

"But Peter followed Jesus...at a distance...as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and going inside he sat there with the guards...waiting to see the end."

You see he figured it was all over - not only the end of this good man, his friend, whom he had grown to love, but all that He had come to represent. He saw the curtain coming down with a dull thud on this whole scene. He sat there with the guards to witness the end of all of his hopes and dreams.

SITTING TO SEE THE END

Jumping from then down to the present, I know of people today who like Peter are sitting...waiting for the end. Disillusionment, despair, pessimism blanket many a heart. Some will tell you that we're living in "the final days" and that some grim "inevitability" is slowly moving in upon us.

Sitting seems to be the appropriate posture, for we feel at times that there's so little we can do. We sit - to watch the end of peace initiatives;

to watch the decline of the UN; the end of western influence; the growing arms race; the end of integrity in city government; the end of law and order; the decline of the influence of the Church and the end of belief in God.

TOUGH TO GO ON LIVING

Let's face it. It's a tough and demanding assignment trying to go on living with a measure of hope and faith as we feel these "ends" of the world creeping closer and closer to us at times. Some may even harbor that feeling privately of, "oh, what's the use...it's just a matter of time before some one, somewhere presses the button on the little black box and the missiles go off".

And, of course, such feelings can push us in the direction of a new isolation in the nation - public and personal. Someone once pointed out that so many of the young men and women who were attracted to the "Jesus Movement" of the seventies were "burned out" activists of the mid-sixties who found they couldn't change the world or the nation in two or three Summer vacations, and so they retreated, many of them, into the strange womb of piety with its emphasis on the "other world", attracted to the "Jesus Movement" and to some of the cults and fads of the passing years. Trying to help history along is about as futile as re-arranging the deck chairs on a sinking Titanic.

Then, too, along with this posture of retreat into wombs of comfortable and non-demanding piety, there's also a new surger of hedonism among us. It's the old cry of "grab all the gusto you can...for you only go around once." Take the pleasure of the moment, for there's no tomorrow to really count on. It's the old philosophy that leads to fun and games, ultimately to boredom. Maybe what's wrong out there in the world will somehow go away if we dull our senses sufficiently. Maybe it's only fiction.

Remember that delightful cartoon that showed a rather harassed and upset motorist next to the rear tire of his station wagon which had a flat tire. It was a hot, broiling Saturday afternoon out there on the Major Deegan. Traffic was heavy. Everyone was in a hurry...no help in sight. His kids were peering out the rear window offering all sorts of helpful advice to their harassed daddy. The tag line underneath the picture was, "But kids, we can't switch the channels on this one. This isn't TV. This is the real thing!"

Most of us just "rought it out" - glad, I suppose, for the daily routine that keeps us busy and from having to dwell on ultimate meanings and happenings. Yes, we try to keep a straight face as we make "ultimate concerns" out of our personal attempts to cut our taxes by signing up for an IRA, or planning the next vacation, or to reflect on the coming baseball season. We all do it. Hello somebody. And sometimes we get ourselves so involved in the "non problem problems" of our TV shows and what's going to happen to J. R. Ewing and the rest of the Dallas cast.

The truth of the matter is that when your life and mine are void of any semblance or concern for the transcendent they sink slowly into the courtyard of the absurd. And "Peter followed Him at a distance...going inside to sit with the guards to watch the end". Soon he would deny his Lord, which is to say he would renounce His vision and His way and walk slowly away from it, retreating... for nothing was left...nothing but that feeling of great emptiness, a hollow emptiness. It looked to Peter like it was a Good Friday world after all and he was ready to toss in the towel, forget Jesus and go back home.

GOOD NEWS OF EASTER

But then came Easter, and the good news of that first Easter morning was that Peter had almost left too soon. And he wasn't the only one. They all should have hung around and stayed close by to see what happened. The word was that the world was not coming to an end...a stop, but rather it was coming to a start, to a fresh beginning!

For you see, God got into the act. He intervened. He reversed the sentence that man had imposed on Jesus and on all for which He had stood. "On the third day He rose from the dead." Those who had come to Joseph's lovely garden prepared to mourn left running...rejoicing. "He is not here. He has risen." Death had done its worst and its worst was not enough. God had pronounced His divine "Amen" on all that Jesus had said and done. That Kingdom built on those frail intangibles of faith and hope and love had a future. The twilight through which Peter had passed was not the twilight of the night, but rather the twilight of the dawn!

TWO LEVELS OF MEANING

This event we celebrate today has meaning for us - profound meaning for us - on at least two levels.

First, at the personal level, Easter means that death need have no power over us. I believe that with even greater certainty than the Psalmist of Israel, we can affirm, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." We can place our loved ones to rest in the sure and certain hope of a life beyond this, an Eternal life - brought to light through the death and the resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Secondly, this Easter event also has something positive to say about the world we live in and the meaning of history. I think we dare not so "privatize" Easter that it has to do only with individual men and women and the life to come. Easter has a lot to say about history - personal, national and global. We need to remember this and not put all of our Easter eggs in the one basket.

To me, this Resurrection event affirms God's intention to establish His Kingdom here on earth. It is not His aim to evacuate the faithful from the arena of life, from this earthly scene, but rather to work through His children who share this glorious Galillean vision...to bring the Kingdoms of this world beneath the rule of God - His Fatherhood and the brotherhood of man.

This does not mean that every human alignment now standing will continue to stand - that current balances of power will prevail forever, that the institutions to which you and I are accustomed will survive unchanged, that familiar forms and structures will continue as we have known them and loved them. But it does more assuredly mean that God's purposes for people will ultimately prevail; that service will triumph over exploitation; that generosity will triumph over greed; that freedom will triumph over bondage; that grace will triumph over sin; that love will have the last word!

And to live by faith is to believe that this is so. Against Auschwitz and Hiroshima; against Belfast and Bangladesh; against apartheid and the assassinations of good men, and yes - against the petty hatreds and private antagonisms of our lives, God sets the resurrection of His Christ and invites our trust and our response. It was as one who trusted and believed that Nicholas Berdyaev wrote this line:

"It is not possible for my faith to be shaken by man, however low he may sink; for this faith is grounded not on what man thinks about man, but on what God thinks about him."

In the light of the Easter message, we are to keep busy with God's unfinished tasks, remembering the marvellous spirit of Paul who once wrote:

"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed."

ONE DAY TURNED IT ALL AROUND

One day turned it all around for Peter, and what a day it was! Let the message of this "one day" turn it all around for you. Let it put new faith in your life, new confidence in your step - for Easter is God's grand nevertheless flung in the face of all that would assert itself against His will.

Peter came so close to leaving. That was his near mistake. To think he might have gone the way of Judas...and possibly missed that day. One day brought him back and one day can do as much for us...for some person present this hour whose life is blanketed with doubt, with cynicism, with discouragement.

CLOSING

I've always been fond of the poem "Columbus" by James Russell Lowell. The poet in the lines of this poem feels his way into what it must have been like to have had the vision of Columbus and then to have had to face the obstacles he endured - first, on land...then, at sea. Toward the end of the poem, the crew puts the pressure on Columbus to go back. All those days at sea and no sign of land. The food supply and the water supply diminishing. They plead with him, almost to the point of mutiny - to turn back, to head for home.

But Columbus begs for one more day. He cries out:

"God, let me not in their dull ooze be stranded;

...

One poor day!

Remember whose and not how short it is!

It is God's day. It is Columbus'

A lavish day!

One day - with life and heart -

Is more than time enough to find a world!"

Friends in Christ. Easter, 1986. Remember this is God's day...more than time enough to find His world. And well may the trumpets sound this day all over the world. Well may heart and mind rejoice and be glad. For God - not man - has had the final word!

PRAYER

"One day - with life and heart - is more than time enough to find a world."

For this Easter Day, dear Father, opening as it does to us the larger areas of life, we give You our thanks.

Take our natural impulses and stretch them on this day of days. Let no hesitancy in believing, no heaviness of circumstance, no dullness of heart, no familiarity with Easter past, deprive our souls of this day's deep joy and great peace.

Help us to see our world, our neighbors, ourselves in that light that streams from Joseph's lovely garden. In the name of the Risen Christ, we pray and we sing. Amen