

"REALITY MAPS AND ROLLING STONES"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
April 16, 1995

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### INTRODUCTION

My personal greetings to all of you on this Easter Day and special greetings to those of you whom we don't get to see as often as we'd like to. Some time back a woman confronted me at the door following a service and complained,

"Every time I come to church it seems you always sing the same hymn, 'Christ the Lord Is Risen Today'".

It was clear to me how often she came to church and I responded by telling her that if she came back the next Sunday she'd get to chose a hymn. She was quick and with a twinkle in her eye caught my off guard by saying,

"She'd like to chose the 'HIM' that read the Scripture."

### DEVELOPMENT

But on to the Easter sermon. We're all familiar with maps and I know of people who have grown up with a real fascination for them. Granted, we do not associate them with Easter...but let me give it a try.

They say that when the British actor, Robert Morley, died that they honored his request that all of his credit cards were buried with him. A somewhat strange request, to be sure. Following his funeral, the London Times reported receiving quite a few letters from people pondering their needs for the hereafter. One letter writer said that she wanted a good map buried with her.

"I have intense trouble finding my way in this life, so I am extremely worried about the next. A map would help!"

John Alexander, in his book, The Warrior's Edge, introduces us to the phrase "reality maps". According to John Alexander, a reality map is a way of "looking" at the world. Call it, if you will, a belief system. An example or two may help.

For instance, during the time of Homer, Greek sailors never sailed out of sight of land. They would hug the coastline because their reality map told them that any sea-going ship would be lost. According to their belief system, the sea was filled with deadly monsters. Their reality map limited their travels.

Another example. For centuries, European sailors navigated by reality maps that told them that the world was flat. If you sailed out too far, you might drop off the edge of the world. Their reality maps told them that, but Columbus, of course, changed all of that when he landed in the New World.

About one hundred years after Columbus another young sailor by the name of Juan Combe returned to his homeport of Madrid where he enjoyed celebrity status because of his trip to the New World. He was wined and dined, the "toast of the town", but then one day it rained and Juan walked through the streets of Madrid wearing a wonderful cape that kept him dry, but that cape that kept him dry was soon to be the source of trouble for him. The superstitious people of his hometown believed that this cape must be some sort of magic. He tried to explain to them that such "rubber-coated" capes were widely used in this New World where he had visited...but his explanations did not satisfy the authorities and they had him arrested.

And after examining this curious garment and questioning Juan, the judge pronounced his verdict. He was declared guilty of wearing a cape through which water would not pass and the judge felt he was interfering with the "will of God" who had sent the rain "to drench the just and the unjust". And such evil interference was witchcraft and it was punishable by death. That was what their reality map had told them about rubber. At times our little reality maps can be quite limiting.

Here's one closer to our time. Sister Kenny developed an effective treatment early on in this century for polio in her native Australia. It was a treatment that made use of heat and massage and therapeutic exercises, but the doctors of Australia had other methods and would not accept her cures and her procedures. Denounced and denied funds for her clinics and for her procedures, she was forced to leave Australia. She took her cures to the rest of the world where they were gratefully received. Her theories revolutionized the treatment of polio and along with the vaccines are still used today. The reality maps of those doctors "down under" prevented them from seeing the broader insights and truths that Sister Kenny was giving to the treatment of polio.

✓ Let me share with you what John Alexander writes in his book, *The Warrior's Edge*. He says,

"The wrong reality map can kill you because your reality map sets your expectations. The right reality map can free you....vindicate you...or make you a hero. For individuals, and nations, and cultures...all empowered by belief systems, reality maps are often the place where history is made and fates are decided."

And so the first concern, the first question for today is: what is your reality map? Or, what is your belief system? I'm not asking you to recite a creed or answer or remember your catechism. I'm asking you to probe...to probe those beliefs that really guide and nourish and undergird your life.

#### AN OLD REALITY MAP

There was a time long ago when our reality maps said that life ended at the grave.

They say that the great actress, Sarah Bernhardt, kept a coffin at the foot of her bed that she could see without any effort upon waking in the morning. They say it never left her presence even during her travels. When asked to explain the "why" of all this, she simply said....

"This is to remind me that my body will soon be dust, and that my 'glory' alone will live on forever...."

Her reality map was telling her that life ended at the grave and her coffin was there to remind her of the urgency of her work. Her belief system was telling her that there was no legitimate hope of a life after death and therefore, she might as well make the best and the most of this world....for it's the only world there is.

According to the Arizona Daily Star, there's an organization that has followers in sixteen different countries called People Forever International. PFI members believe they can cheat death and live forever. This group began in

1960 when co-founder, Charles Brown, experienced what he calls his "cellular awakening" while meditating. Brown says that,

"We are a species that has the ability to perpetually renew itself", and his idea is that by tapping into the intelligence of our cells we can prolong life indefinitely.

Brown has offered no guarantees of immortality since, he says, rejuvenation is an individual process. I think he's wise not to promise too much. At least three members of PFI have died, but who can blame them for grasping at straws. For as Woody Allen has put it,

"I don't know anybody who can contemplate his own death.....and hum a hymn tune at the same time....."

If your reality map is telling you that life ends at the grave then it would be the most natural thing in the world to try to extend life as long as possible. It's no wonder that people yearn for some method by which they can cheat death. Their reality maps are telling them that this is the end of the line - the end of the road.....but don't believe it!

THE FRIENDS OF JESUS HAD THEIR REALITY MAPS

were carrying around with them.

This was the reality map that the friends of Jesus

They were a demoralized group of people after the events of Good Friday. As far as they were concerned, their dreams were futile. Their leader...their master was dead and there was nothing left for them to do but to go back to their nets, back to the tax tables, back to their kitchens....back to whatever they had been doing before He came into their lives.

They would try to forget. It was all an illusion, following this Galilean. He had spoken to them about an abundant life, but now He was dead. He had even promised them a new Kingdom, but "kings" don't die on a cross like a common criminal. He had spoken to them of God, "as a Father"....but when He most needed God, where was He? He had felt forsaken, all alone. How foolish they had been to give up their dreams to immerse themselves in His dream. He was dead and with Him, everything He had stood for. That's how His friends felt that first Easter morn. It was over. Finished. Kaput, but all of this was before they found the stone rolled away!

They found the stone...rolled away. And their little reality map was outdated, forever shattered. It really takes your breath away. The accounts of that first Easter morning are a little jumbled. Each of the Gospel writers gives a different account....a different perspective. And that's not at all surprising. After all, what we have here is not some "finely-honed" script, but eye-witness accounts and such accounts are usually a bit jumbled.

We know that Mary Magdalene was the first to the tomb. All the accounts seem to agree on that and they were all in agreement to what she found. The heavy stone had been rolled away. The grave was empty. He was alive. Just imagine the impact this event had on the lives of His followers! Never again would they think of death in the same way. Once a reality map is shattered, it can never be put back together. When a stone is rolled away, the world can never again be the way it was!

Yes....at one time people thought the world was flat, but Columbus sailed his boats and a stone was rolled away. The world was forever changed. At one time scientists and theologians believed the earth was the center of the universe, but Galileo rolled away a stone and never again would humanity's perspective on the universe be the same. At one time people attributed illnesses to all kinds of strange influences, but then Louis Pasteur did his research on bacteria and a stone was rolled away.

Some may remember the "four-minute" mile barrier. No one, experts declared, would ever be able to run the mile in less than four minutes. Then back there in 1954, a medical student by the name of Roger Bannister did the impossible to be shortly followed by John Landry. The barrier was broken. A stone had been rolled away. Once a stone has been rolled away, nothing can ever be the same.

GOOD NEWS OF EASTER

And the Good News of Easter is that yes - even today, stones do get rolled away. It happens. Things are changed. Some present may need to hear this...and be reminded of it.

Mary Magdalene and the other women went to the tomb and found that the stone had been rolled away. Death had been conquered. The teachings of Jesus had been validated. Nothing would ever again be the same. And the lives of those who loved Jesus and followed Him would now have extraordinary power and meaning because the stone had been rolled away.

✓ A farmer down in Arkansas had the opportunity to go fishing on the Gulf of Mexico. This Arkansas farmer had never been fishing on a body of water any bigger than a small lake not far from his farm. He would often fish there but now he was really looking forward to this new experience. The fishing turned out to be lousy. Nothing was caught, but still - he had a great time. He was especially enthralled by the sunrise and the sunset over the Gulf. Never before in his entire life had he been able to see the entire horizon as the sun came up and then as the sun went down. The rapidly changing colors were just awe inspiring and since he had his camera with him, he took a number of pictures.

Upon returning home, he was anxious to get his pictures developed and when he at last finally got his pictures back, he made a discovery. He could no longer tell which of them were of the sunrise and which were of the sunset. Why, they all looked the same!

CLOSING

Thanks to the rolled away stone and the empty tomb, death is like that for the believer. To many it appears to be an end - the end of life, the end of a relationship, a time of great sadness....if you will - a sunset. But for those who believe in Christ it is a sunrise - a beginning, the beginning of a life with God....where all of the issues of life are ultimately resolved.

Poet James Weldon Johnson wrote of Sister Caroline in Go Down, Death:

"She saw what we couldn't see....  
She saw 'Old Death'...coming like a falling star,  
But 'Death' didn't frighten Sister Caroline.  
He looked to her like a welcome friend."

That first Easter changed our reality maps about death and the meaning of life. The dusk became dawn. An old enemy became a welcome friend. Reality maps and rolling stones. Because of a stone that was rolled away, I trust that your reality is truly up to date.

PRAYER

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They were a demoralized group of people after the events of Good Friday. As far as they were concerned, their dreams were futile. Their leader...their master was dead and there was nothing left for them to do but to go back to their nets, back to the tax tables, back to their kitchens....back to whatever they had been doing before He came into their lives. And there,

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An old and feared enemy became a welcome friend. Dusk had become dawn.

Those lines are in the same spirit of one of my all-time favorite poems, Gambler, by G. A. Studdert-Kennedy. Those of you who gathered here at the foot of the cross on Good Friday will be hearing it again.

"And sitting down, they watched Him there,  
The soldiers did;  
There, while they played with dice,  
He made His sacrifice,  
And died upon the Cross to rid  
God's world of sin.

He was a gambler, too, my Christ,  
He took His life and threw it for a world redeemed.

And ere His agony was done,  
Before the westering sun went down,  
Crowning that day with crimson crown,  
He knew that He had won."

Because of a stone that was rolled away, I trust....indeed, I hope and pray... that your reality map is truly up to date....to help you find your way, both now and in the days to come.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive, O God, to Your nearness and to Your presence in these moments. May the message of this Day open our minds and hearts to the larger areas of life. And help us to make the most of them... never to be satisfied with the shallows of cynical, doubting, skeptical... Take our natural impulses and stretch them to God's. Confirm them and reassure them on this Day of resurrection. Wrestle with until we see the stones of life being rolled away. In the name and spirit of Him in whom we see life's highest hope and in whom we have experienced its deepest meaning. Amen.