

"THE CERTAINTY OF EASTER"

TEXT: "It could not be that death should keep Him in its grip" (Acts 2: 24)

INTRODUCTION

It was Peter who expressed this thought....but Peter, strangely enough, had not always thought that way. Nor had his fellow disciples for whom he so often served as spokesman. They had followed Jesus to Jerusalem. And the events of Palm Sunday had sent their spirits soaring. True, Jesus had spoken ominous words about His approaching death, but the triumphal entry into the capital city had left little room for foreboding. But then all at once catastrophe was upon them. Jesus was arrested, condemned, crucified. It happened so quickly. And their behavior in the moment of crisis was pitiful. Judas had betrayed Him, Peter denied Him, and the rest forsook Him and fled.

The chances are that if we had been in their shoes, we would have done the same. They had looked to him for emancipation from Rome, and Rome had put an end to Him. And to them, it seemed as though God Himself had endorsed the verdict of Caiaphas and Pilate, and by permitting Jesus to die on the Cross had placed on Him the stigma of His own curse. For the Law said, "Cursed is everyone that hangeth upon a tree", and to the proud Jew the curse of the Law was God's verdict, from which there could be no appeal. Who were they to let their memories of Him, the impression He had made on them by the breadth of his spirit, the power of his teaching, the wonder of his works, stand for one moment against the unmistakable sentence of God? What was there for them to do, their hopes shattered, but to forget it all....all that had happened and go back home and pick up the threads of the old life.

THEN CAME EASTER

Then came the astounding experience of Easter morning. Christ crucified, dead and buried, had risen from the grave. The tomb was empty. Death had not vanquished Him. He had vanquished it. And what clinched the matter for them and put confidence into them was his actual appearance - to Mary, to Peter, to James, to the Apostles, to Thomas, to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. As they experienced more and more evidence that he was still alive, their bewilderment gave way to exhilaration. The face of the world was changed for them. The fact of the Resurrection took fire in their souls and utterly transformed them. No longer was there any talk of their going home, for Jesus was not a lost leader, but a living and present reality. Reunited in fellowship with Him they went out on the streets to make known the great good news that He was still living, still guiding, still at work in the world.

Within a few weeks they wondered that they could ever have believed anything else. In retrospect they saw clearly that what had happened, in the very nature of the case, in God's world, was bound to happen. It was inevitable; any other sequence of events would have been inconceivable. A life like His, a mind, a spirit, a character could never have ended at the grave in defeat, and extinction. This was what Peter, standing before the crowds on the day of Pentecost meant when he said: "It could not be that death should keep Him in its grip".

OUR CONVICTION, TOO

Isn't this our conviction, too? What does Easter mean to you? Surely more than the perpetuation of a great memory, more than reverence for the noblest soul that ever breathed, more than a sanctified kind of hero-worship. Think about Jesus. He is absolutely unique; by far the most significant person the world has ever known. As Lecky the historian wrote: "He did more in three short years to regenerate and soften mankind than all the disquisitions of philosophers and all the exhortations of moralists".

"Thou seemst both human and divine,
The highest, holiest mankind Thou"

This is the Christian conviction. It is incongruous, incredible as well as incongruous, to think of Christ as crucified, dead and buried - period.....at the mercy of an indignity done to His body, swept into nothingness, Good Friday really Black Friday, the final chapter in the story of Jesus. Who can believe that? Who can make sense of that? And so it is on this Easter morning we say with Peter, too: "It could not be that death should keep Him in its grip".

Why, even for those who fall short of the moral and spiritual stature of Christ, we make similar claims. That death is not the end is an old and persistent belief, sociologists telling us that it is more widespread even than belief in a God or Gods. At their best men and women find it difficult to reconcile themselves to the theory that they were made to live their life, do their work, and then rot in the grave. If a person, in Dr. Fosdick's phrase, becomes a real person, grows with the years, grows in wisdom, strength of character, grace of personality, is full of good works, it doesn't make sense to think of death blotting him out. George Herbert Palmer wrote these lines about his wife after she had passed away:

"Though no regrets are proper for the manner of her death, who can contemplate the fact of it and not call the world irrational, if out of deference to a few particles of disordered matter it excludes so fair a spirit"

Doesn't your mind work the same way? Don't you find yourself making the same sort of instinctive demands? At Easter, we fall to thinking of the best souls we have known. We recall the gifts and graces that drew us to them....the faithful hearts and strong intelligences that won our admiration and affection. We find it difficult to resign ourselves to the belief that all is over with them, that the bright spirit that burned in them has forever been extinguished - so much courage, so much endurance, so much faith, so much affection. In our minds we say with Peter: It could not be that death should keep them in its grip. What tremendous force then the conviction has when applied to Christ. The noblest life of which history has any record could not have come to a full stop at Calvary. The Crucifixion was not the last, the final chapter in Christ's story. "God raised him from the dead".

WHAT KIND OF A WORLD DO WE LIVE IN?

More is at stake here than personal survival after death.

Also at issue is the question: what kind of a world do we live in? Is this a spiritual universe? Is it under the control of a God of justice and righteousness? Is it rooted and grounded on moral foundations? Or is human history merely a mad scramble for wealth and power? Are the Communists right when they deny that there is anything over and above and beyond the natural order of which we form a part? Where does the final word lie - with love, goodness and truth, or with hate, evil and error?

This is the ULTIMATE question, and the Resurrection is the answer. It stands for more than the assurance of personal survival after death. It has cosmic significance. If a life like the life of Jesus could vanish as a bubble, if all that nobility was utterly at the mercy of the wickedness of men, virtue trampled on, goodness mocked, the last word with Pilate and Caiaphas, how is it possible to believe in God or in the Kingdom of God. You have on your hands a riddle to which there is no clue. You are shut up to the conclusion that the forces in which evil has rootage are stronger than the forces of goodness - "Truth on the scaffold, wrong on the throne, no God within the shadows keeping watch above his own". It is a dismal, dreary conclusion.

See, by contrast, what the Easter faith affirms. Death did not keep Jesus in its grip. The cause to which he devoted himself did not go down to defeat. The last word was not with Pilate and Caiaphas. And what an appalling thing it would be if we lived in a world where the Neros and the Napoleons, the Hitlers and the Stalins had the last word, where hatred and lies and wickedness were supreme, our best loves and loyalties - like ourselves - poured through a hole at the heart of things and lost. But we do not live in such a world. Spiritual forces and values are at work and woven into the nature of things. And Easter comes by year after year as a reminder that this is God's world, that there is a power at work behind the universe which is on the side of goodness and truth and love. We associate Easter with the assurance of immortality, but there is still a greater assurance. The Resurrection strengthens our faith that there is an eternal order of righteousness and that the universe at its heart is spiritual. "Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory" - "forever" - "Amen".

WHAT DO YOU MAKE OF IT

What, personally, do you make of all this?

What does Easter mean to you? Or rather, what does Christ mean to you? Do you put him in the same company with Socrates, Buddha, Gandhi - a notable historical personage? Do you reverence Him as the greatest ethical teacher of all time? Or do you believe that He overcame the sharpness of death, that is to say, He is not only the Jesus of History, but also the Christ of Faith - alive and at work in the world here and now. If you are inclined to shy away from that last question, dismissing it perhaps as sheer mysticism, take another look at the facts. Christianity is something more than hero-worship. It is not just the perpetuation of a great memory. It is a relationship to and a fellowship with Christ who is "alive for evermore". Everything in Christianity depends on the reality of the Resurrection of Christ, on the fact that he rose from the dead, appeared to his disciples, made his presence felt in their lives, and still makes His presence felt in the lives of people today.

"Shall I tell you" Savid Livingstone once asked the students of Glasgow University on his return from sixteen years spent in Africa, "what sustained me amidst the toil and the hardship and the loneliness of my exiled life? It was the promise, 'Lo I am with you always, even unto the end'". For multitudes this is life's most precious conviction. When they speak about Christ, they use not only the past and future tenses but the present tense as well. He is not only a great memory and a great hope, He is the eternal contemporary, offering the same transforming friendship today that he offered to Mary and Peter and John and Paul long ago.

"No more in Galilee we look for Thee, o Risen Lord.
In every land and on each moonlit sea thy voice is
heard.

And when they saints are gathered in thy name,
closer thou art to each thatn fire to
flame."

"Lo....I am with you always" This is the heart-warming, heart-gladdening fact we celebrate this morning. "It could not be that death should keep him in its grip"

PRAYER: We thank Thee, Our Father, that we may gather here this day not for a memorial service to a dead prophet, but for a festival of thanksgiving for a conquering Christ. Remind us again of the empty cross, and the empty tom~~e~~, and the truth of all truths that thy victorious son is present in the world where we live to have dealings with our pain, sin and discouragement, and to have ultimate dealings with our death. In all we do, make real to us his vital, shining presence and his resurrection's quiet joy. Amen

gates of knowledge have been opened for you in a significant way by the education you have received in a particular school or college, you do not hesitate to offer your convictions and your recommendations to others. I think that when we really feel deeply about anything that has touched our lives in a meaningful fashion, in a way as to make a profound difference, our instinctive desire is to share it and to tell others about it.

There is a story in John's Gospel about Jesus and a woman that he met while he was resting at Jacob's well. Like many people of our own day, she was a woman with serious inner difficulties, conflicts, tensions, frustrations. She had no idea, of course, with whom it was she spoke. She took part quite naively and sincerely in the conversation, realizing gradually that she was talking to no ordinary persons, but to a person who seemed to understand her, who could see right into her life and through her, the way that light can go through an open window. Still she didn't know exactly who it was but, when she went back home, she said to her friends, "Come see a man who told me all that I ever did....and they went out of the city and were coming to Him". At times like that the ordinary shyness that most of us have that makes us hesitant about invading the privacy of another person's life simply disappears. Our own enthusiasm overcomes it the way that light overcomes the darkness. And we are compelled to go to our friends, our neighbors, to others in other parts of the world and say to them, "Come see a man who has done something for me....and I want you to see Him too and to benefit from that life he has to share..."

And so the question that enters into our minds in a disturbing way as we come to the conclusion of this part of our thought about the missionary activity of Christian people is this: is it that we are too shy, really? Or is it that our faith is too shallow? I wonder. I raise the question in your minds. I should like to think that it is shyness, but I have the uneasy feeling that it may be because nothing much has happened to us, big enough or great enough, significant enough, to make us want to go out to other people and say, "Come....see what I have found". A person may lead a fine Christian life; he may be impeccable in his morals, meticulous in the matters of churchmanship, serving on this committee or that committee, attending church faithfully - but, if he has no inner compulsion to share that life with others then, to my way of thinking, he has not grown up into a mature understanding of his faith.

II. BROADMINDEDNESS

Suppose we go onto the second thing that I want to examine with you - a cultivated broadmindedness. This, too, is responsible for our hesitancy in sharing our faith with others.

Our broadmindedness is rooted in our growing appreciation of the other great religions of the world. There isn't any question about this. Our horizons are immeasurably wider than they were two or three generations ago, and the reasons for this are obvious. We travel more, we read more, we mingle with other people from other parts of the globe. Hinduism is not only a name in a book; we have met Hindus...some young people have roomed with them in college. The chances are that in this congregation today we have a goodly number of people who have, at one time or another, been in conversation with a Hindu, or a Buddhist, or a Moslem.