

THE EASTER SURPRISE

THE STONE HAD BEEN MOVED

Three women were making their way along the road that led to the cemetery where Jesus had been buried less than two days before. They were not taking flowers to decorate his grave as people so often do today; they were taking spices to anoint his body. It was a Sunday, early in the morning, and the sun was just coming up. All along the way they had only one thing on their minds, and that was the stone. Who will move the stone for us? The tomb, you see, in which Jesus had been laid to rest had been sealed by a huge stone in order to protect it from intruders. This stone had been rolled in front of the entrance to the tomb. The three women knew that it was an enormous stone and that the three of them together would probably not be able to budge it if they had to, and so all the way there they kept wondering to themselves, Who will move the stone for us? And if nobody is there to move it, what will we do? How will we get into the sepulcher? And the more they thought about it, the larger that stone became in their imagination. And when they finally got there they discovered that the stone had already been moved!

Isn't it true that so very often in life nine out of ten difficulties that we anticipate from a distance disappear when we get there; or, if they do not completely disappear, they either shrink in size or we grow in stature, so that they are manageable. For instance, an ordeal is ahead of you. You see the dim outline of it beginning to form in the not too distant future. Perhaps a month from now, or perhaps six months from now it will meet you face to face, and as you see it in the distance, you dread it. You know that it's not going to be easy and you imagine all of the things that might happen in connection with it. It may be an ordeal with a surgeon, or a dentist. It may be an ordeal with a person that you feel obliged to discharge, or with a job that calls upon you to do something that doesn't come easily to you. You ask yourself, How am I ever going to do this? Or, who is going to pay the bills? Where will I get the strength from to do this? And then, as you approach this thing which you have been dreading, some of those difficulties which you have been anticipating melt like wax, and somehow or other, you find the means and the strength to hurdle the few remaining obstacles. To be sure, it's not easy, but on the other hand, it's not nearly so difficult when you get there as it appeared from a distance.

Or you think of the inevitable separation from a person with whom you have been knit together in constant affection for years, and you picture to yourself all of the wrenching changes that separation implies, and you say to yourself, How can I ever face it? How can I manage without the one upon whom I have counted for so many years? The stone gets larger and larger as you think about it. When you get there it isn't easy. God seldom makes things easy for us, and yet some of the things that you anticipated are not there at all and other things, when you begin to mount them, seem much less steep than they did from a distance.

When you come right down to it, there are so many things in our future that we face with dread - old age, retirement, death, insecurity, failing health - they are like great stones and we wonder as we move along life's pathway, who will roll the stone away? I can't move it; and if there isn't anybody to move it for me, how can I go on. Yet how many times when we get there we find that the stone has mysteriously been moved. This is the first surprise in the Easter story.

THINGS YOU THOUGHT DEAD AND
BURIED ARE OFTEN UP AND ABOUT

Now when these three women went inside the tomb, to their great amazement the body of Jesus was not there. They knew that it had been placed there - lovingly and tenderly - at the invitation of Joseph of Arimathaea. They had seen it with their own eyes when it had been placed in the tomb. But the body was not now there. You can see why they were frightened and upset. Instead of a corpse, they saw a young man very much alive, dressed in white from head to foot, and he said to them, "Don't be frightened! There is nothing to be frightened about. I know you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth. He is risen. He is not here. See the place where they laid him".

This too reminds us of something about life, in general, the way that it works, namely this that things do not always work out the way that we expect them to. They expected to find Jesus in the tomb, but he was not there. He had risen. We do not always find things in exactly the same place where we left them. For instance, you leave a man in his room. He has been in that room for several years, - an invalid, - confined to that room, not able to move around to to help himself. You leave him there and think that he will be there the next time you drop in to see him. Several months later you stop by to see him, but he is not there. You're told that he is up and out and well, leading a perfectly normal life once again.

Or you leave a man standing on the ground where he belongs. Men were made to walk, not to fly, like birds. If you and I had been brought up in the last century the chances are that this is what we would have said, the chances are that we would never have thought it possible for a man to do anything but walk, or sail or ride. You leave him there on the ground and several years later you come back and the man, to your amazement, is not on the ground. He is now in the air - flying, like a bird, with wings..

There are patterns, to be sure, in life - fixed and rigid patterns, and thank God for that, but as we go along we sometimes are led to see that these patterns are not quite so inflexible as we think they are. Nature runs quite regularly by law and we can be thankful for that, else we wouldn't know where we were going; but every once in a while, nature seems to skip a step or two. In other words, we live in a universe which has had its secrets opened to us so far as human values and purposes are concerned. And things you thought dead and buried are often up and about and alive. This is the second surprise in the Easter Story.

JESUS HAD RISEN

The young man whom the women met in the tomb told them that Jesus had risen. I doubt very much if they heard what he said. So often in life we fail to hear the things that are said to us, unless we're prepared to hear them. And if we're not prepared to hear them, we fail to hear them at all. They weren't prepared to hear what this young man had to say. If he had said that the body had been stolen they would have heard that. They could have taken that in. But they were not prepared to take in the fact that he had risen. It was too much for them.

But it ought not to be too much for us, not if we watched him with any care at all on Good Friday. As we watched and followed and reviewed the events of that day they seemed from one point of view to move on with a kind of relentless finality that might finally grind

him out of the picture. And yet on the other hand as we watched him on Good Friday (I don't know how it was with you, but this is the way it was with me) - I had the feeling that He was not going down like a sinking ship whose hull had been ripped and battered open and whose form was slowly descending beneath the waves. I didn't have that feeling at all. I had the feeling that he was more like a star that was just beginning to rise in the heavens.

Cruelty battered away at him from every side - mental cruelty as well as physical cruelty. He rose above it. He was not cruel. He wasn't even bitter; and when he prayed, he asked God to forgive the people who had been cruel to him. Loneliness humiliated him, leaving him high and dry, a stark figure against the sky, as his followers one after another deserted him and fled from the cross. He rose above it. He made a new friend in the thief beside him. Pain gripped him as he died of exposure and exhaustion. He rose above it. He scarcely mentioned it. He drowned it in a sea of larger concerns. He was so preoccupied with other people, with the soldiers, with the thief and with his mother and his friend, that he didn't have time to think of his own pain.

Darkness descended upon him, engulfed him, not only outer darkness, but that inner darkness in which a man wonders whether life has any meaning at all or not. He faltered for a moment (My God why hast Thou forsaken me), but then he rose above the darkness and prayed: "Father into thy hands I commend my spirit". Death finally claimed him - his body, as it will every human body. And you can picture it as it was taken down from the cross - lifeless and limp.

Is it any wonder that he rose above death as he had risen above cruelty and loneliness and pain and darkness. These are the things that kill a person inside, and these are the things that he had risen above. Is it any wonder then that he rose above death so that death had absolutely no dominion over him, none whatever.

I am sure that there is a great deal more to be said about the resurrection of Jesus, more than you and I will ever be able to say, let alone think. Let me just put this to you by way of personal advice, something that was put to me sometime ago when I was encountering difficulties in trying to understand the great mystery involved in this mighty event of the resurrection. If you find it difficult to think of Jesus as rising from death, think of him as rising above death into another dimension of life where death is lost, where there is life, a life far more glorious than anything that we experience in this our earthly environment. He went through death from start to finish, but he rose above it. He rose from death into life, and this is the third and the greatest surprise in the Easter Story.

THEY COULD RISE WITH HIM

But there is still another, another surprise to consider. Gradually his followers came to realize that as he had risen, so they could rise with him. That is, if they were willing to die with him, they could rise to that new and glorious life he had risen to. For instance, if they were willing to die to their own lust for revenge, their own desire to get back at somebody who had offended them, and to forgive that person, they could rise above cruelty. And they did! If they were willing to die to their own thirst for popular approval and were willing to be alone and to stand for things in lonely places, they could rise like him above

loneliness. And they did. If they could die to their own fear of the dark (and here I do not mean the darkness of the night, but the darkness of the mind and soul, the darkness of doubt, of anxiety,) if they could die to that kind of fear, they too could rise above the dark into the realm of light and faith. And they did. And they believed that if they were willing to accept death without fear, without dread they would rise above that too!

If they could rise with him, so can you. And so here at the end of this service, I would lay a question upon your hearts. Have you risen with him? That is, have you risen with him in the sense that you have risen above your own desires for revenge and cruelty. Have you risen with him in the sense that you have risen to a better understanding of the needs of all men, regardless of race and color? And have you risen with him in the sense that you are willing to stand alone for the things which in the end brought him to the loneliness of the cross? Have you risen with him in the sense that you, because of what happened on that first Easter morn, can walk without fear and without anxiety through the darker moments of life?

The Easter surprise always startles us and always speaks to us no matter how old we are or how many times it has been put before us in the years past. It says that the way down is often the way up and that the way to sacrifice, the way to death of one's own desires, is the way to life. Or going back to Good Friday, to something that Thomas a Kempis once said, "If Thou bear the cross cheerfully, it will bear Thee."

Put that down in your minds, in that place where you keep the things that are most important in your life, to be taken out and looked at at other times during the year. "If Thou bear the cross, it will bear Thee". For this is the meaning of the resurrection. This is the Easter surprise.

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 tomb, and the truth of all truths that they 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

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The women, of course, had no way of knowing this. They were too close to it. The young man who spoke to them in the tomb startled them by saying "Don't stay here; this is no place to stand around and mourn; go tell the other what has happened and then go home and you will see him there." They were so excited, so unstrung by all that had happened, that they didn't do it at once. And you can easily understand why. But they gradually gathered themselves together and told the others. And they saw him too, the risen Christ. Don't ask what they saw. If those three women were here now in person the chances are that they wouldn't be able to tell in so many words just what it was that they saw. But what they saw was real, as real as flesh and blood; in

a sense it was more real, more alive than anyone they had ever seen. And what they saw was all they needed to convince them that Jesus had risen above death. And this is the third and the greatest surprise in the Easter story.

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