

"THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS"

INTRODUCTION

It was David Cairns of Scotland who succeeded in squeezing into one short phrase two diverse truths about the resurrection of Jesus. On the one hand, he expressed the doubt, the uncertainty that is apt to cloud the minds of many 20th century Christians as they try to think about these ancient truths. At the same time, he stated the rich certainties, the historical reality of the event we celebrate today when he said:

"The resurrection is the land where the great mists lie, but it is also the land from whence spring the great rivers...."

The land of the resurrection is truly a land covered by a great mist....a land in which you cannot see things clearly....a land in which things are so hazy in outline that one begins to wonder whether they ever happened...

DEVELOPMENT

We think immediately of the disciples and what must have been their reaction on the first easter. We think of Thomas...often referred to as "doubting Thomas". Thomas was a disciple of great loyalty and courage. When Jesus told his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and there suffer many things and die, it was Thomas who said, "Come let us go with him even if it means our death". The other disciples expressed restraint and caution. And yet when this loyal and courageous disciple heard the description of the empty tomb and the angelic visitors, he could not compel his mind to believe it. Remember his words, "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails....and place my hand in his side, I will not believe". He found it difficult to picture; it didn't fit easily into his pattern of thought and understanding. Because of this, we have called him "Doubting Thomas".

But as I read the New Testament, I wonder why it is that we single him out as the only one who doubted. The Gospel account shows that most, if not all, of the disciples reacted, at first, with some measure of doubt to the report brought to them by Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and the other women - the report of the empty tomb, the report of the men who spoke to them...the men in dazzling apparel. But we read, "These words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them". The disciples and other who had been so close to Jesus believed that these women were so overwrought with grief that they were not doing their best thinking. Doubt was their instinctive reaction.

If the land of the resurrection was enveloped in a great mist in the first century, how much more are those events likely to be hidden from the view of 20th century Christians. There are thousands of modern disciples who, like Thomas, would follow their Lord to death, if necessary, but who cannot compel their minds to believe fully in these ancient stories. Perhaps it will be helpful to some of these honest and reluctant doubters to know that many Christians base their assurance of the timeless message of Easter on altogether different grounds.

~~In spite of their doubts about the empty tomb and the various resurrection appearance, the original disciples were triumphantly certain of the presence of the spirit of the Eternal Christ.~~
Clarence Tucker Craig once put it this way:

"The early Christians did not believe in the resurrection of Christ because they could not find his dead body. They believed because they did find a living spirit of Christ".

In other words, the proof of the Easter message does not lie in the misty hills that surround that event, but in the clear and powerful streams that come into full view of history from that obscured source.

In John Masefield's play "The Trial of Jesus", Procula asks the centurion about the crucified Jesus: "Do you think he is dead?" "No lady" is his reply, "I don't". "Then where is he?" she asks. "Loose in the world, lady, where neither Jew nor Roman can stop his truth". Yes....the cross did not stop him. This a historical fact. He is "loose in the world". The rivers of power and vitality which spring from that mysterious and misty land, flow majestically across the pages of history. Suppose we consider in some detail four of those living and moving streams.

EXPERIENCE OF THE DISCIPLES

We begin with the experience of the disciples. We remember what a cowardly band they were in the last days of the life of Jesus. We recall how at the first brush with danger they all forsook him and fled. Only one of the twelve dared witness the crucifixion. The others were in hiding. When John joined them in the upper room they bolted the door and cringed in terror, fearing the knock on the door to be the knock of Roman soldiers. Then Easter came and with it came a miraculous change in the lives of those who had been intimately associated with him. These men who had been so timid now found themselves declaring dangerous truths with great boldness. Because of their fearless proclamation, Peter and John were arrested. They were told to stop preaching, but they replied, "We cannot possibly give up speaking of the things we have heard and seen".

As you know, many of these disciples met a death as terrible as that of their Master. Something, to be sure, had happened to these men which changed them from fearful, cowardly, persons to fearless, courageous defenders of the faith. They said the only explanation of their behavior was the presence - the living presence - in their lives of the spirit of Christ.

THE CHURCH

The church is certainly another stream whose source is in the land of the resurrection. "The Company of the Resurrection" is the name of an Anglican order, but it is also an accurate description of the Christian Church. There is really no other way to account for the dynamic growth and triumph of the church other than the living spirit of Jesus Christ.

You know the history of the church. These early Christians were far from successes in the eyes of the world. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many of noble birth". The church in the early days was composed largely of slaves and the riffraff of the empire. As this strange movement became more and more powerful, the mighty Roman Empire tried to stamp it out. Christians were thrown into prison; some were led into the arenas to be torn apart by starving lions. Others were dipped into vats of pitch, tied to trees in Nero's garden and set aflame to become living torches writhing in agony while the emperor's drunken orgies took place. There was not much that Rome **did not** stoop to in trying to root out Christianity. It is nothing short of miraculous that the frail church could survive such oppression. It not only survived the oppression. But in less than three centuries it triumphed over the empire. And in the fifth century when the Roman Empire crumbled to the ground before the barbarian invaders, only one movement survived. It was a movement led by the one who had been put to death by the soldiers of that great empire - the living Christ himself. How does one explain all this. Can we not say that it was because of what happened on that first Easter morn. God was there on that first Easter morn, and from that great event, a force was set in motion that cannot be stopped.

Back in the 18th century, Voltaire said that the church was a dying institution. He predicted that it would not last over fifty years. At the end of that time, the very house in Paris where he made the prediction was being used as a center for the distribution of the Bible. There are those today who predict the funeral of the Church, but the cynics come and go while the church keeps marching on. And if we may predict the future from the past, it will outlast every institution of our day!

INFLUENCE OF JESUS ON THE WORLD The profound influence of Jesus on the whole world would certainly be a third stream flowing from the great mists of the resurrection. Is it not surprising that he made any impact upon the world? At most his public ministry lasted only three years. His message and ways were unpopular. Dr. Fosdick speaks of Jesus as "An obscure Galilean, whose family thought him demented, whose church thought him heretical, and excommunicated him, whose friends though him a failure and disowned him, whose nation thought him a traitor and crucified him". It is unbelievable that such a man could achieve anything significant in a long lifetime let alone in three years. And yet of all the great men in the long march of history, he is undoubtedly the most significant. It has been said of Him:

"That of all the armies that ever have marched, all the navies that ever have been built, all the parliaments that have ever sat - all put together have not influenced the life of man on this planet as much as the life of this one solitary life."

His influence has been great, profound upon the history of mankind.

THE STREAM OF POWER AND
VITALITY IN YOUR LIFE..

There is one other stream which flows from the land of the resurrection which I would ask you to examine this morning: the stream of power and vitality that can come to and through your life. In the unusual play entitled, "Six Characters in Search of an Author", there is a fantastic scene in which six characters come to a stage manager and plead with him. "We want to live in you". This is what Christ has done ever since that first Easter. "Behold I stand at the door and knock". "I want to live in you. I want to rule within your life...in your heart" Some have opened the door and invited the spirit of Christ to come into their lives and to rule their thoughts and motives. It has made all the difference. They know not by hearing, but rather by their own experience that Christ's spirit "is still loose in the world".

David Livingston once addressed a group of students at Glasgow University. When he rose to speak he bore on his body the marks of his African struggles. Severe illness on nearly thirty occasions had left him gaunt and haggard. His left arm, crushed by a lion, hung helplessly at his side. After describing his trials and tribulations, he said, "Would you like me to tell you what supported me through all the years of exile among people whose language I could not understand and whose attitude toward me was always uncertain and often hostile? It was this - 'Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world'. On those words, I staked everything and they have never failed me". For millions this is life's most precious conviction. When they speak about Jesus of Nazareth, they use not only the past and future tense but the present tense as well. He is not only a great memory and a great hope, but He is the eternal contemporary - offering the same transforming friendship today that He offered to Mary, Peter, John and Pual 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 the saints are gathered in thy name,
closer thou art to each than fire to flame."

His spirit is searching for other lives to live in and to shine through. Will you accept the challenge of this Easter Day and bid him enter into your life....and rule within you.

If you do, your doubts about peripheral matters will be dwarfed into insignificance by the triumphant certainties that stem from your own experience. You will discover that the problem of the resurrection is not the problem of the stone rolled away, nor the problem of the nail prints in his hands, nor the problem of the appearance of Jesus through closed doors. The problem of the resurrection is what to do with the challenge of the spirit of the living Christ who seeks to live within you.

PRAYER: Let the life that was in Christ Jesus, O God, be in us, and let it be radiated from us and through us to other people. Give us the power and the grace to go out into our world and to live as though Christ were living in us, that our world may be raised from death to live. Amen

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