

THE STORY OF JESUS  
"Chapter VII: His Resurrection"

INTRODUCTION

The sermons on the Sunday mornings in Lent this year have attempted to tell the Story of Jesus, and we have followed that story in great detail here in this church over the past six weeks, and we have paused here and there along the way in order to relate certain aspects of his life to our own lives. We come today to the final chapter in the story, and it has to do specifically as you might expect with that momentous and mysterious event which followed his death upon the cross. In recent years the Easter sermons in this church have been primarily concerned with the life of the world to come, and the resurrection of Jesus has been incidental to, and illustrative of, that great theme. But this year the sermon is about the Resurrection itself, and if I can add one ounce of solid content to one person's appreciation of the resurrection, I shall be more than content.

Just as the story of Jesus began in mystery, so too it ended in mystery - in a mystery that words are powerless to describe. Some of us, I think, would give almost anything to know what actually happened on that first Easter Day - not merely for the sake of idle curiosity, not merely for the sake of knowing what will happen to us when we die (and knowing what happened to Jesus might throw some light on what will eventually happen to us) - but because we sincerely want to know what happened to Jesus. Like children who have listened to a story, we want to know what the final outcome of the story is. What happened, for instance, to the idea of the kingdom that he cherished? And what happened to the life and love that he was so eager to communicate to other people? Was it all snuffed out like a candle at the end? Did the universe turn thumbs down on him? Is it really true that He who came to tell people about the kingdom of love and to show them what life in that kingdom was like, is it really true that he ended his life on Good Friday, on a cross - defeated, rejected by the world, and plowed into oblivion by the quiet passing of the years?

WE SHALL NEVER KNOW  
EXACTLY WHAT HAPPENED.

The chances are that we shall never know exactly what happened on that first Easter Day. As you know, the events of that day were reported by a great many people and ultimately were set down in writing by five or six of them. And as you might expect under the circumstances, the people who were making these reports did so according to their own observations, their own understanding, and their own interpretation of what had actually taken place. Moreover, they were writing under the influence of the spell or the rapture into which this event had rocketed them. They were not writing in a state of calm and disinterested objectivity; they were writing in a state of intense emotional excitement. No wonder their reports do not always agree. In fact, in some instances they are contradictory. But this should not bother us or disturb any of us. This does not surprise us any more than it would surprise us if five men reporting on the events of D-Day did not all report the same things. We begin this final chapter in the story of Jesus then by acknowledging the fact that we do not know exactly what happened on that first Easter Day, that is, we do not have all of the details concerning this resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

CERTAIN THINGS WE DO KNOW

There are however some things that we do know for certain concerning this event, and I think it will help us if we take time to review them here this

morning and to set them down in black and white. I think they will give us a standing place from which to reach for those other things that are far beyond us.

In the first place, we know that Jesus appeared to his friends after he died. He didn't appear, according to any record that we have, to the general public the way that he did, for instance, on Palm Sunday. He appeared to his friends, to the ones who wanted to see him, who were prepared to see him, who longed to see him and who were glad to see him. And the record tells us that he appeared first of all to Peter, just as we might expect - the one who was closest to him and in greatest sympathy with all he had attempted to do. And then he appeared to all of the other disciples, and then to quite a large crowd - to five hundred of his friends we are told. He appeared to the women who had faithfully followed him in the days of public ministry. And then, last of all and several months after the Resurrection, to the Apostle Paul who spoke of his own vision of Christ on the Damascus Road in the same terms in which he spoke of the Resurrection appearances Jesus made to others.

Now as far as I can see, there would have been no reason for their saying that Jesus appeared to them if he had not. And certainly there would have been no reason for them to risk their lives for it, and to die for it - if all of this was a lie or some sort of tale they thought up among themselves between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Therefore, if we put any confidence at all in the people who reported the Story of Jesus, it is hard to see how we can escape this fact - incredible though it may sound to us in this modern and scientific age in which we have been reared - that Jesus actually appeared to some of them after he died. This is the first thing we know, the first thing I want you to set down in your minds concerning his resurrection.

In the second place, we know that in most instances it was not a physical appearance that he made to his friends. At least, it gives no sign of being a physical appearance. He came and went through doors, and physical bodies as we know them do not do that. He walked on the water. He appeared simultaneously in Jerusalem and in Galilee. He was not always recognized by his friends when he appeared, as you would expect him to be if he were the same body that they had been familiar with in the days of his earthly life. And not only was he not recognized but some even doubted that they had seen him at all. He appeared to Paul as a glorified figure in the sky. So we can put this down then as one of the certainties about the resurrection of Jesus that whatever the appearances he made to his friends were like, they were no purely and simply physical appearances.

In other words what these New Testament reporters were trying to say was something like this: "The appearance of Jesus was to us more than just a glorified memory; it was that to be sure, for we do have wonderful memories of all that he said and did for us, but this was something more than just a memory, however much glorified. And it was different from an hallucination, because normally two people do not have the same hallucination at the same time. We really saw something. It was a real appearance." This is what they were trying to say to us, and it was an appearance that was vivid enough and real enough to change their lives, vivid enough and real enough to convince plain, ordinary, down to earth, practical and skeptical fishermen that Jesus was in a very real way still very much alive and that God ruled the affairs of human life just as Jesus had said that he did. This much we can put down for certain: he appeared to his friends and his appearance, not not physical, convinced them that he was still very much alive.

Several years later, the Apostle Paul on one of his great missionary trips was preaching in Antioch and he sketched rather briefly for the people of Antioch the history of the Jewish people - how they had been chosen by God for a special purpose in the world. And when he came to the story of Jesus, he told them how he was born, how John the Baptist prepared the way for him, how he went about doing good, and how he was condemned and put to death. Paul then went on to say: "And they took him down from the cross and laid him in a tomb, but God raised him from the dead and during the course of many days, he appeared to those who had come up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem". This, I think, in a nutshell is the New Testament Story of the Resurrection.

#### WHAT IT ALL MEANS

We turn now to consider what all of this means.

For I think that our interest in this matter is from the point of view of our own lives and the problems you and I have to deal with, and the temperaments and dispositions we have to make the most of in life. What we gather from all of this is that death was by no means the end of Jesus. We do not pretend to say that Jesus is present with us as our friends are present; what we do say is that he is present as spirit and power and truth, and that when we read the story of Jesus, the figure of Jesus is alive, not dead. He speaks to us not from the grave but as a real and contemporary person. We know him and feel his presence among us challenging our hopes, probing our consciences, and stimulating our spirits. Furthermore we say that if Jesus is alive, the things he lived and died for are real and true.

The fact that he is alive means that God really does rule the world; that God really does rule your life. It means that God really does care for you as an individual. It means that the hairs on your head are numbered; it means that the gentle shall inherit the earth in spite of all the evidences to the contrary; it means that love really is the only key that can unlock the gates of life; it means that those who humble themselves really will be exalted. It means that he that loses his life will really find it; it means that if a grain of wheat is cast into the ground and left to die, it will bear much fruit. It means that God really did so love the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.

It means that death was not the end of him, and that all the things that were represented by him and incarnate in him exist and are true and present among us now. It means that beyond this realm of time and space and physical circumstance, of life and disease and disaster and tragedy, there is a realm without boundary where things of the spirit reign and where individuals continue to pursue their lives in the presence of their Maker even though we cannot see them. All these things the Resurrection of Jesus means. So you might put these things down in your memory on this Easter Day, put them in that place where you keep things that are important, to be taken out and remembered on the darker days of the year. These mighty facts are not bubbles that were pricked by the sword point of death. They are realities that all the forces of evil could not overthrow.

#### THE END OF THE STORY

And so we come to the end of our Story of Jesus.

And yet it is not really the end, because as the story began with God, so it ends with God. And God has no beginning or ending. Several weeks ago when we talked about the birth of Jesus, I said to you that the important thing to remember was that Jesus came from God and on Easter Sunday you and I profess the faith and declare the truth that he returned to God. The Resurrection, I think, is not so much the story of how Jesus returned to earth as it is the story of

this life that once came and lived among us returned to heave - to the presence of God - to the realm of the eternal and the infinite.

It makes all of the difference in the world to me to know and believe that Jesus is alive, and that the kingdom of God for which he gave his life is alive and powerful and true and real. And it means that the only way you or I will ever find our lives is by way of that kingdom, by way of the cross and by way of love. There really is not other way, and that is why our hearts are filled with gratitude on Easter Day as we try to put into words what is really beyond the range of our words:

"That Jesus, though not in a physical presence, though not visible, though not here among us as one we can see, nevertheless lives and reigns forever and that his spirit can be in us and we can be in him."

#### LET US PRAY

We thank thee, O God, 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 thy victorious son is present in the world where we live, to have dealings with our pain and sin and discouragement, to have ultimate dealings with our death. In all that we do, make real his vital shining presence and his resurrection's quiet joy. Amen