

Sermon for Sunday, April 14, 1974 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"BEGINNING OR END?"

St. Mark 16:1-14

Text: "But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it." St. Mark 16:11

Was the cross of Jesus to be the end? Does death have the last word after all? That's an important question. And the older we grow, the more important it is. As more and more of our loved ones go to the grave the more relevant the question becomes. I know that for my family and me the question takes on a new dimension this Easter.

About the middle of the last century a Frenchman named Renan wrote a book about the life of Jesus. Many books have been written on that subject, but the unusual thing about Renan's book was that he did not believe in Jesus. He was an atheist. When he had brought the story along as far as the cross, he brought his book to a close with a single word, "Finis"--the end. Then, on the fly-leaf after that fatal word, a picture of the crucifixion was printed. There was Jesus, hanging on the cross with drooping head and matted hair and pale, blood-streaked face. Overhead the storm clouds had gathered in the sky and the foot of the cross was deserted for all his friends had forsaken him. Everything about the scene spelled defeat. Yes, "finis"--the end.

When I first read that story I could not help but think of our text for this morning, "But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her they would not believe it." Across the shattered rubble of their dreams; across the crumbled, broken fragments of their hopes and aspirations, had been written "finis." What had started out as such an exciting, grand adventure had ended now with a dead leader hanging upon a cross, his body limp and broken in defeat and death--yes, the end.

Death did three things to the disciples. Let me share them with you. Those of you who have lost a loved one can appreciate in a special way what was happening to them. First of all they lost their faith. From the beginning everything about Jesus had attracted them. Then, in the three years that followed, he had confirmed their highest hopes. Finally, Peter had spoken for them all when he cried out, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." They had listened to his teachings, they had shared in his companionship, they had seen his miracles. They could not possibly have come to any other conclusion than to believe he was indeed the Messiah of God. Now, everything was changed. They had seen the forces of evil--of power--of godliness go to work and that figure on the cross so limp and still was the evidence of just how powerful evil really was. God had seemed so helpless, so powerless, in the face of evil and their faith was shattered and broken.

Have we not felt that way? A car out of control and loved ones dead on the highway--cancer out of control and a loved one wasting away in bitter pain--a job lost unfairly--a loved one who no longer loves in return--and where is God when all of these dreadful things are happening? Where is God when hopes and dreams lie tumbled into the ashes of life? Is God without power, helpless in the face of the worst that life does to us? Yes, we know what it is like to doubt and question and feel the faith in our hearts slipping away.

The second thing that happened to the disciples was that they lost their footing. Every man builds his life on some foundation--some mooring--some footing. They had built their lives on Jesus. He had looked into their eyes and said simply, "follow

me." And they had left everything--whatever foundation they had been building life upon they simply dropped it where it was and followed him. Like the parable he once told about the two houses, one built on sand and one built on the rock, they had been convinced that they were building on solid rock--a sure foundation--a solid footing. But now, with the cross so vivid and fresh in their minds, their world had collapsed under them. Everything they had built life on was gone and they had no place to stand--they had lost their footing.

What are you building your life on this morning? What do you stand on and what do you stand for? So many things that some of us have built life on are failing us. Toffler in his book, Future Shock, tells us that all of the values, the institutions, the structures that many of us have built our lives on are collapsing and disappearing. I remember visiting a wealthy lady once who was in the hospital. She had gone from doctor to doctor, from city to city, looking for a cure to her problems but they could find nothing wrong. The truth was she had built her life on material things and on a few close people. But now, as the years moved on, her loved ones had either deserted her or betrayed her and she found that her money meant nothing. "I've lost my footing," she said, "everything and everybody has failed me." And surely many of us this morning can sympathize with her because we are discovering that we have built on shifting sands, too, and we are losing our footing.

But death did a third thing to the disciples. Not only had they lost their faith and their footing, but worst of all they had lost a fellowship. Jesus had been the dearest and best friend they had ever had. When they had been lonely and afraid, he had comforted them; when they were tempted and tested, he had been their strength. They could always fall back on him--he would know what to say, what to do. And no matter what problem life brought, he could handle it. They could share with him their deepest feelings, their deepest needs, and be always understood. Now, across that deep friendship the cross had written a cruel and bloody "finis." Yes, a fellowship had been broken and an awful loneliness filled their hearts with a desperate ache.

How lonely people are today. Dr. Paul Tournier, a Swiss psychiatrist has written a book entitled, Escape From Loneliness. He said about his book, "I wrote it because the emotional isolation of modern man has deeply impressed me." There is a certain loneliness in each of us. Down deep all of us long for a friend, a loved one, with whom we can share life, with whom we can share our deepest thoughts, our feelings. In recent weeks this has come home to me in a profoundly new way how much we all need someone we can share life with--someone we can dare to be honest with and who will feel that what we are experiencing is meaningful and important.

That's what life is like if the cross is the end--a lost faith, a lost footing, a lost fellowship. As some poet has put it,

If Easter be not true,
Then faith must mount on broken wing
Then hope no more immortal spring;
Then hope must lose her mighty urge;
Life prove a phantom, death a dirge--
If Easter be not true.

If Easter be not true,
'Twere foolishness the cross to bear:
He died in vain who suffered there;
What matter though we laugh or cry,
Be good or evil, live or die,
If Easter be not true? (Henry H. Barstow)

The French writer Renan ended his book with the crucifixion and he wrote, "finis." But while it was the end of Renan's book, it was not the end of the Bible. You see, the Bible has another chapter. It begins this way, "Now after the sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the sepulchre. And behold...and angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead!....." Yes, not the end but the beginning. As some unknown writer has put it, "Life up your heads, ye sorrowing ones, and be ye glad of heart. For Calvary and Easter morn were just three days apart!"

No, death does not have the last word. Sin, evilness, hurt, pain--none of these have the final say. Jesus alive from the dead is God's promise of that. Jesus is God's pledge--his down payment--his promise that if we believe in him, as he raised Jesus, so shall we be raised. The cross is not the last word--God has the final say.

The disciples lost their faith--but look what Easter did for them! They went out into the world to tell people that they could trust God--no matter what happened, or how bad things looked, they could trust God. He was still in control of the world and of human life in spite of how bad things looked and in spite of the worst that life could do. Yes, a faith that we can trust God. When the children and I went to the funeral home after Elizabeth's death we prayed together there. And in spite of what life had done to us, we knew we could trust God. Somehow, in a way we could not yet understand, he was in control, and out of the worst that life could do he would bring good.

The disciples lost their footing--or so they thought--but on Easter morning when they thought they would drown, they found that their feet touched bottom and it was solid--it was sound. Dr. Jane Wheeler, a member of Wheaton College faculty some years ago, was discovered to have incurable cancer. Let me share with you a part of the letter she wrote to the students and fellow faculty members before her death, "Please do not give a moment's grief to me. Think of me only happily, gaily, as I do of you...I do not say a cold goodbye, but rather a warm, 'till we meet again.' By God's power and grace...in the land of the blessed, (perhaps) I will be allowed to draw aside a curtain and greet you when you enter. With a heart full of love for everyone of you." A loved one of mine once said, "Whether I live or whether I die, my God is good." When a person knows that, he has something to stand on, his footing is sure.

The disciples lost a fellowship--or so they thought. But on Easter morning they discovered that the Spirit of Jesus was let loose in the world in a way they could never have dreamed. In days to come they would be alone, but never lonely; often threatened, but never afraid; often persecuted, but never dismayed. No, they had a fellowship in their hearts with Jesus and nothing could separate them from the love of God.

You can have a friend like that this morning. Not long ago I read the story of a man who had lost his wife, leaving him alone with their little daughter. The night after the sad funeral, as he was awkwardly trying to manage the tiny buttons of her pajamas, the electricity went off. There had been some failure at the power plant. The little child snuggled in her daddy's arms for a moment and then whispered, "It's awful dark, but I'm not afraid because you are here, daddy." In the dark he laid his cheek, suddenly wet with tears, upon her hair and whispered back, "Yes, dear, it is darker than you could ever guess, but I'm not afraid either. My friend Jesus is here, too."

Yes, a faith to live by, a footing to stand on, a fellowship with a friend like that--a friend who will never leave you or forsake you. As he once put it, "I will not leave you comfortless, I will come to you." Jesus is my friend this morning--I want him to be your friend, too. Will you invite him--him who is alive and present here today--to come into your heart? You see, Easter wasn't the end--it was just the beginning.

...the first word... Jesus alive... raised Jesus... so shall we be raised...

The disciples had their hearts shut... but Jesus... they were still... and I want to the funeral... and the spirit of God... in a way we could not yet understand...

The disciples lost their footing... they thought they would... was still... some years ago... a part of the pastor's... for help... I will be allowed to... heart full of love... I find on... thing to stand on...

The disciples lost a fellowship... discovered that the Spirit of Jesus... never love themselves... threatened, but never... a fellowship... love of God.

You can have a friend like... who had lost his wife... right away... of her... never again... whispered... in the dark... back... other...