

Sermon for Sunday, March 30, 1975 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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WHEN SEEING IS BELIEVING

St. John 20:1-10

Text: "Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed..." St. John 20:8

Why is it that so many of us make a special effort to be in Church on Easter morning? I have heard a number of superficial reasons given, such as the desire to show off new spring outfits. Yet, I cannot help but feel that something far more profound is involved. I am convinced that all of us - even though it may be only dimly felt and subconsciously realized - feel that somehow Easter is basic to life. As one writer has put it, if the resurrection did not take place, then Christianity is a false religion. If it did take place, then Christ is God just as he said he was and the Christian faith is the most true thing in the whole world. And somehow we recognize that Easter is the hinge of all we believe.

See how it works. In science we have the so-called Second Law of Thermo-dynamics, sometimes known as the Law of Increasing Entropy. According to this universal law of science, to which there is no known exception ever observed, every system tends to become disordered, to run down and eventually die. Its entropy, which is a measure of disorder, always tends to increase. And that is our experience of life, too. No man is smart enough to outwit death or buy his escape from it. All the animals ultimately die and the plants wither eventually with age. Cities grow old and perish and are covered with the rubble of time. Even the universe, we are told, is running down. But over against this stands Jesus Christ who has been raised from the dead. Over against this is Jesus who says to us, "because I live, you shall live also." So Easter is the hinge of all we believe. If Easter is true, we have the secret to the most startling event in the universe - the secret that death does not have the final word or the last say. That's why Easter is so important. If it is true, it is the most important fact in the world. It stands in contradiction to all we know about death. And instinctively we recognize that somehow on this occasion we are dealing with the single most significant event in human history.

It is not my purpose this morning to give you all of the proofs for the literally resurrection of Jesus. However, let me mention in brief some of the reasons we have for believing it actually occurred. First, there were the predictions of the resurrection. The resurrection was predicted in the Old Testament. If one were not able to understand those predictions, Jesus himself told his disciples he would be raised. Yet, the resurrection caught them by surprise. They had not anticipated it in spite of the predictions. It took the strongest of evidence to convince them it had actually taken place. And once they were convinced their lives were transformed by it.

Second, there is the evidence of the empty tomb. In our text this morning we read that the disciple who followed Peter into the tomb saw the empty grave clothes and believed. So powerful was their testimony - and so dependent was that testimony on the fact of the empty tomb - that had their enemies been able to produce the body the whole movement would have collapsed right there. Yet, those who wished to stop the Christian movement could not produce such a body and resorted to many tactics and lies instead. They claimed that his body was stolen or that on the cross he had merely swooned, but they could not produce a body.

Thirdly, there is the evidence of those who saw him. Not only the disciples saw him, but St. Paul tells us in I Corinthians that over 500 saw him and he said that most of them were still alive at that time. In other words, he said, "you can check it out for they are still alive." We could believe that one or two or even a few might be

victims of a vision or hallucination, but not over 500 people.

Fourthly, there is the evidence of the witness of the Apostles. It is utterly impossible that the apostles could have preached and written as they did unless they were absolutely sincere in what they believed and taught. They had changed from craven, cowardly men hiding out in an upper room to bold, Spirit-filled proclaimers that Jesus was resurrected. Yet, if they were faking or if Jesus lay on some sick-bed, or if they were involved in some plot, or had merely seen a vision, it is entirely improbable that all of them without exception would have continued such a make-believe to the point of death itself. As Dr. Arnold, formerly professor of history at Oxford said, "I know of no one fact in the history of mankind which is proved by better, fuller evidence..." Or, as Simon Greenleaf, one of America's great legal minds and top authorities on the matter of what constitutes sound evidence - the man who developed Harvard's Law School - concluded, "It was, therefore, impossible that they could have persisted in affirming the truths they have narrated, had not Jesus actually risen from the dead, and had they not known this fact as certainly as they knew any other fact."

So, all of the evidence points to the validity of the resurrection. There is every reason to believe it - there is really none to disbelieve it. But the question is, did his resurrection make any difference? Does it really matter? In answer to that question, notice first that it gave the disciples the power - the courage - to believe. Dr. Mackay, former President of Princeton Seminary, puts it this way, "What kind of a universe must this be, a reflective mind says, in which the only perfect man who ever lived is done to death? Admitting the nobility of the life of Christ and the fact that His glorious spirit was unbroken by his murderers, the terrible question still remains: Has the universe no place for a man like this? Is it not more likely that we live in a great cemetery of dead values and lost causes, that the life of Christ and all the inspiration derived from His life and death, are no more than a beautiful phosphorescence on the ocean routes of history?"

And isn't that true? If there is no place in our world for a man like Jesus and if the cross is but the headstone marking the grave of dead values and lost causes in a world gone mad, in a world that won't accept goodness, it is not even worthwhile to believe. But the Bible says the disciples saw and believed. It means that the dirty vile things in the world, the bad and evil things in the world, do not have the last word. Not even death wins out. And you and I can dare, too, to believe in Jesus and what he stood for because good - not evil - has the last word. In spite of the apparent triumph of evil and greed and war and crime and cheating and stealing, we know those things do not win out in the end. We can dare to believe in Jesus and what he stood for; we can have the courage to live for him because we know that in the end those are the values that endure. Today you and I can dare to believe in Jesus and what he stands for. We can dare to live for goodness and rightness; we can dare to do the best thing, because we can believe that evil and bad do not have the last word.

Notice secondly that the disciples could not only dare to believe, they could also dare to live. With the death of Jesus their courage to live had been punctured like a balloon. Life had defeated them and like cowardly recruits they had deserted their place in the ranks. Life had lost its meaning and they were hid out in some upper room because they had lost the courage to live. Can we not sympathize with them? When we have faced some cruel disappointment, when our hearts have been broken, when some loved one dies, when some dream is destroyed, we know how hard it is to have the courage to keep on living. Yet, when they discovered that Jesus was alive and that his promise "Lo, I am with you always" was no empty promise, they found the courage to live. Dr. Paul Elmer More, perhaps the greatest Platonist philosopher

American has ever had, was at last converted to Christianity. At first he had believed in the ideal world of Plato, but in the end found such a world lonely without a Lord. He wrote, "We cannot escape the ultimate responsibility of choosing our path, and no true man would wish to do so. But to know that we have a great Friend at our side who voluntarily shares with us the consequences of our faults, who will not abandon us though we err seventy times seven, who shows us that the evil we do is a breach between person and person - to know that is to gain a new insight into life.."

Yes, the courage to live. The courage to live because he - the Risen Lord - is with us. Back when my two sons, Mark and Peter, were little boys of 5 and 3, I overheard them one day discussing going up the street to visit a little friend. Peter at three was a little uncertain about the trip. After all, there were grownups on the street and a big dog up the way. He said to his big brother, "Let's hold hands." Five year old Mark agreed to this, but Peter still wasn't satisfied. He looked at Mark and said with a sort of fierce intensity, "I mean let's hold don't-turn-aloose-hands!." And isn't this what we all need? Someone in life to hold don't-turn-aloose-hands with us? Easter gives us a living Lord to do just that: to hold our hands and stay by our side. And when we know that, we have the courage to live.

But not only did Easter give the disciples the courage to believe and the courage to live, notice thirdly that it gave them the courage to die. Back there when they watched from afar as Jesus was crucified, they had no stomach for the whole affair and they forsook him and fled. Because they were afraid of death, they hid out from the Jewish authorities. Yet, when they knew Jesus was alive from the dead, death lost its fear. The Bible tells us that almost all of the disciples met violent ends. Those of you who watched the movie "Quo Vadis" the other night saw what happened to those early Christians as they were put to the sword, fed to the lions, crucified and burned. Yet they went to their deaths with a song on their lips. Why? Because they had the courage to die. You see, if Jesus is alive, death does not have the last word and we don't have to fear it.

Are you afraid to die? When Elizabeth, ambitious Queen of England, lay dying, she cried out in terror, "Millions of money for an inch of time!" Yet, for all of us life marches on towards death. As Longfellow once put it, "Art is long, and time is fleeting, And our hearts, though stout and brave, Still, like muffled drums are beating Funeral marches to the grave!"

Would men who were afraid to die have invented the story of the resurrection? Would any man invent a story in order to be crucified upside down as was Peter? Or to get his head chopped off, as did Paul? Or to be stoned to death, as was Stephen? No, they could face death because they had the courage to die. Do you have that courage this morning?

In one of his sermons, Peter Marshall tells a wonderful story about a little boy with an incurable illness. Month after month the mother tenderly nursed him. But as the time went by, the little fellow gradually began to understand he would not live. One day he quietly said, "mother, what is it like to die? Mother, does it hurt?" Tears filled her eyes and she fled to the kitchen pretending to attend to something on the stove. She leaned against the kitchen cabinet and prayed for God to help her to answer him. And at once she knew what to say. She returned to his room and said, "Kenneth, you remember when you were a tiny boy you used to play so hard, when night came you would be too tired even to undress, and you would tumble into mother's bed and fall asleep? That was not your bed - it was not where you belonged. In the morning you would wake up and find yourself in your own bed in your own room. Your father had come and with his big, strong arms carried you away. Kenneth, death is just like that. We just wake up some morning and find ourselves

in the other room - our own room where we belong - because Jesus loved us." The little boy never questioned again. Several weeks later he fell asleep just as his mother had said. That is what death is like. And when we know that, we have the courage to die. As the Bible puts it, "And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away." (Rev. 21:4)

Yes, Easter is at the very heart of life - if Jesus is alive, we have the courage to believe that goodness - not evil - has the last word; we have the courage to live because there is someone to go through life with us who holds don't-turn-aloose-hands; we have the courage to die because Jesus comes to say to us, "because I live, you shall live also."

But not only did Easter give the disciples the courage to believe and the courage to live, notice thirdly that it gave them the courage to die. Look there when they waited from afar as Jesus was crucified, they had no stomach for the whole affair and they looked on him and died. Sometimes they were afraid of death, they hid out from the Jewish authorities. Yet, when they knew Jesus was alive from the tomb, death lost its fear. The Bible tells us that almost all of the disciples now who were those of you who watched the movie "The Ten Commandments" the other night now were among those early Christians as they went out to the sword, led to the lions, crucified and burned. Yet they went to their deaths with a song on their lips. Why? Because they had the courage to die. You see, if Jesus is alive, death does not have the last word and we don't have to fear it.

Are you afraid to die? When Elizabeth, abolition Queen of England, lay dying, she cried out in terror, "Millions of men for an hour of time!" Yet, for all of us, life marches on towards death. As long as we are here, we are marching towards death. And our hearts, though strong and brave, still, like millions of men are beating funeral marches to the grave!

Would men who were afraid to die have invented the story of the resurrection? Would any man invent a story in order to be crucified upside down as was Peter? Or to get his head chopped off, as did Paul? Or to be accused a deceiver, as was Stephen? No, they could face death because they had the courage to die. Do you have that courage this morning?

In one of his sermons, Peter Marshall told a wonderful story about a little boy with an incurable illness. Some other month, one mother tenderly nursed him, but as the time went by, the little fellow gradually began to understand he would not live. One day he sadly said, "Mother, what is it like to die? I hope, does it hurt?" Tears filled her eyes and she led to the kitchen cupboard and prayed for God something on the stove. She leaned against the kitchen cupboard and prayed for God to help her to answer him. And at once she knew what to say. She returned to him and said, "Remember when you were a tiny boy you used to play so hard, when night came you would be too tired even to eat, and you would run into mother's bed and fall asleep? That was not your bed - it was not where you belonged. In the morning you would wake up and find yourself in your mother's bed. Your father had come and with his big, strong arms carried you away. Kenneth, death is just like that. He just picks up some tiring and kind mother