

Easter 1973  
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"Morning Has Broken"

Text: "Now on the first day of the week they came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been rolled away. They were perplexed...and the angels said to them, 'Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is risen, as he said.'"

Luke 24 (selected)

voice recording

The whole world seeks an Easter morning....And it was no different back in Luke. Their night of darkness had lasted for two full days. The Scripture says they had rested on Saturday. Ah, but what a shallow, strange, non-refreshing, bewildering rest it would have been. The Christian world of now pokes through the darkness of those first two nights to see that Christ the Lord is risen. But to those chosen few, it was their friend that died, the beloved, single most important soul in all their lives. He made the sun shine come, however dark it was. He was the source of all their joy. When they wondered what that crazy mixed-up world was all about, they found their answer when they thought of him. And, for those first few days, their hearts could not believe it. Surely this bad dream would pass on right on to someone else, as it always had before. Friday noon, would then become some cruel trick on their imagination, and it would pass; the nightmare would be over.

Imagine how they must have felt, or even truer, if you have ever walked that road yourself, you already know. The dazed stark loneliness of those first hours. He was gone, buried in a borrowed tomb, gone the way of all the flesh they ever knew. Desperate and lonely, afraid and empty, they passed those hours and waited, thinking he would come back in the door any minute, even though they knew he would not. Little wonder then, that while it was still dark on Sunday morning, they could wait no longer. Out they went to visit the tomb where two days before they had wept while Joseph and his servants buried him, and watched them roll a monumental stone to guard the entrance. A lovely spot I think it was, quiet, peaceful - a place to let the mind of meditation wander over what had been, or more exactly, what might have been, if only it would not have happened.

And when they came, the Scripture says, the stone was rolled away, and the tomb was empty. And, just like us, they could not quite believe it. So Mary said to someone standing there: "Sir, they have taken away the body of my Friend and Lord. Tell me where they have taken him." That someone was her Lord himself, but so busy was her worry, eyes so filled with grief and tears, she didn't even see him. She was puzzled - and she wept. Then he said, "Woman, why are you weeping?". She looked, and he said, "Mary", and she saw that it was Jesus. She had seen the Lord. And in that moment, the night was gone. Morning had broken, Easter morning; the light had come to stay, and what the whole world seeks was standing there before her eyes.

That's where we begin. Morning breaks in so many other ways, hope is found in many other corners of the universe, life is celebrated here and there and everywhere; but it is all so incidental, it all comes second to this one salient central point of all the aging history of the human race. Perhaps you don't believe it, and how many more beyond the stained glass windows of this holy place would bicker and complain that it is just some holy artificial balm to soothe the agonies of life, some made-up borrowed myth that fits the ancient scene, but too far gone for us, a kind of opiate to help the weaklings through the terrifying darkness of what the world can be.

Perhaps you would quarrel that man is looking more for something else. Perhaps you would not want to say that it all comes down to this question of what God wants to make of here and now, of you and me. Perhaps you are too wedded to the present time, giving, getting, shuffling to and fro, making progress on the road to nowhere and success. Perhaps you will be disappointed that this Easter morning message retreats beyond the pale of argument. Perhaps you will go home exactly as you came. Perhaps. But some of us will not. Some of us will see it here again, more clearly than we ever did before, believing where we cannot prove, trusting where we cannot see. Some of us will have our hope renewed and that's why we are here.

I pose it then for your consideration: If this possibility of life that conquers death is not the first, if this message of eternal victory is not your first important question, then, pray tell me, what other would you choose? The alternatives are so puny. Would you wed your purpose to this life and this alone? Would you say that man finds his ultimate significance in battering and being battered? Would you allow that time and chance and accidents, and micro-organisms that destroy the body also can destroy the soul? Can the essential stuff of all that God intended be subject to, and object of, elements and death? What kind of God, I ask you, would it be whose power is so finite, and who is God? Would you choose the moving cosmos, of some strange prime-mover of the universe? Would you choose to believe that happenstance and change is the destiny of man and His creation? Would you choose a universe that is alien to the highest hopes of man?

Ah, well, you can, of course. You can choose whatever form you like to bring your meaning to what the whole creation means. But someone, or something, brought it here. Someone, or something, when darkness was upon the face of all the deep, brought light, and life and loveliness to man. Someone, or something lies behind it all, or it would not, could not be. And if you can rest with someone or thing that couldn't care less about your life and where it is going, choose it if you will, but then you are stuck with it. You must then live without your hope; and Satre is correct, "Life begins in pain, prolongs itself in weakness and in fear, and then it dies by chance." The choice is yours. The alternative is there, but what a paltry choice it is.

And it is not all that unreasonable and childish. It is not all that primitive and mythological. Authentication of this item is beyond the touch of scientific realism. That's true for now; it is in the realm of faith and good theology, but that is not to say it is alien to the way we think and feel. The prior question is a deeper one. Don't get lost in the miracle itself. They were not fools or dupes back then, and we the first to think and doubt. But take it for what it means. The One who has the power to create a universe can surely guard your individual life. The One who just from nothing made the world, can remake a spiritual body from the ravages of death. Surely.

When Arthur Compton won the Nobel prize in Physics, he confessed: "Every discovery I have ever made, I gambled that the truth was there, and then I acted on it with faith until I could prove it true." And you can bet your life on it. We all believe things first, then prove them later. We all live on the hope that what we dream about and need will one day be supplied. The whole world needs an Easter. The whole world needs to see the morning breaking. The whole world needs to know that life is more than we see ending every day. The whole world needs to know that you and I and every other living breathing soul that ever was, is rooted in some grand eternal purpose beyond the change of life.

That's what gives the credence to the individual dignity of human beings. That's why we care - for ourselves and for each other. If man is just a thing, here today and gone tomorrow, it really doesn't matter what we do. If there is no more worth to life than there is to any other form of life or matter, we can treat man as expendable and Adolph Hitler wins the day. If God doesn't care, why should we? Weak, imperfect human beings can then be driven into Belsen, Treblinka or to Dachau, and aye they should, unless there is something significant and everlasting about what they are, unless we are made in the image of God. Think of it! What other motivation do we have to treat all mankind as equals; what other motivation is there to tolerate those who disrupt the gentle flow and progress? What other way to justify the energy and time we use to reform and remake the fallen images of God himself - caring, weeping, praying for poor wrecks of man? The answer is a horror, but it is true. Without that gift of holiness, without belonging to the purposes of God, without being His creation, people would be problems, never persons. And we should all get what we can while we can and let the strongest win.

That is what Easter morning means, mankind belongs to more than death. God cares for more than what we do in the span of years we get to live. God cares more for you and me than that. Think about it. Easter comes to reassure you that your life is safe in the hand of the One who formed you from the earth itself.

We live our days in the little valley called the earth. A little round ball of matter whirling about in a universe so far beyond we cannot see or comprehend its end. We live where the streams meander around the valley, and where green grass grows, where cherry trees are blossoming, and where life and loveliness abound. But we also live where the floods can come, where rock slides and lava flows can crush and cover all we make. We live in the precarious balance of a solar system that could fly off the handle at any second and send us hurling through the space we ponder over. Where hurricanes and winds can howl, and do. Where death and illness come to puzzle us. But Easter takes you higher. Easter morning gives the higher view. Easter brings perspective, where your world and mine are fastened to some movement beyond when and where the earth itself will end, or end for each of us some day not too distant.

We live where huge and monumental stones are rolled across our path to block our passage and our view. All the torments and predicaments that we from time to time must face. But Mary came and found the stone was rolled away. If you have to walk through the valley, it helps to have someone hold your hand. And he was standing there to do it. There are days when it is dark, days when the storms gather up with such monumental force that even the strongest bows in fear. There are times for all of us when the path is blocked, and we do not know what to do. Well, I tell you, my friend, you need an Easter morning. You need a rebirth of your individual spirit, you need to see yourself standing there in disbelieving awe. It is true. God loves you more than all the rest. You need to believe as much as God does in your worth.

So you are worried about your son or daughter. Worried that he will disappoint you or find some wreck and ruin for your high hopes and privileges. Well, my friend, you need an Easter morning. You need to stand back and let the love of God roll away that stone and let you see inside the symbolic resurrection of what God has in mind for this and every other son of man. Or you are worried for your loneliness, wondering how it will ever be that you can find the joy of life again. Aging and concerned about the coming future - Well, my friend, you need an Easter morning. You need to let the power of God break in upon your life. You need to stand back and turn it all over to the One

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who controls your life and the lives of those you love. Or you are worried about the illness that has struck the one you love? You need an Easter morning, need to know that One who made you and claimed you is able to keep you.

So you get all tangled up in what might have been or what never could. You get all depressed and rushing in with your worries and complaints and orders for the day. You get all set and ready to master it yourself. Then, along comes Easter morning, as a gift, freely given, to make it right for you. Right in the only sense that can every really matter, right in the sense that it is God's world, and His purpose will prevail. You don't need anything else just now, however much you think you do.

Perhaps you have read the recent book by Martin Gray, For Those I Loved. It tells the touching and tragic story of the young Polish lad who in 1939, was caught in the ugly trap which Nazi Germany was setting for all the Jews of Europe. He ran with the rejects of the underground; was incarcerated in the horrors of Treblinka concentration camp, where thousands died. He worked on the death squad while his wife and family was executed. Finally he escaped, and then years later, now remarried, and twenty years away from all that agony, his new wife and four young children perished in an enormous forest fire in Southern France. Crushed and alone, back through the depths of Treblinka, he then formed a foundation to help little children without parents in all parts of the world. And he said:

"I am living, doing things, keeping active. I escaped Treblinka, I survived, I built my fortress. But all fortresses are frail, temporary. I am still on the move. I don't want to live for myself...I'm still living for my people, through them, my family and way back, beyond it. I'm remembering that unknown people, my immemorial people, to whom I'm accountable for all my actions. I confuse all the faces. I'm nothing except what they made me....Alone I'm nothing. I live for those I loved, and for those who once loved me."

All fortresses are frail. You better not forget. Not you, Martin, and no one else.

Henry Frances Lyte was a Scottish Anglican minister in the early nineteenth century. He developed an enormous Church program down in Brixham, in Devon. Far, far ahead of his time, he formed a Christian education program that had eight hundred regular students. He trained seventy teachers a year himself and always had a substitute ready to back the regular up in times of illness. He called on the members of his parish. He wrote books about theology. And he even directed the music program of the Church. Little wonder that his health gave out and he ended his ministry there far from the normal retirement age. He also wrote some hymns. On his last Sunday at the Brixham Church, he walked down into the garden and in a few minutes, wrote our favorite evening hymn, Abide With Me. It speaks of his weariness, his failing health and waning spirit, his problems and his loneliness, his sense of the approaching end. But then, he found his strength in the last stanza:

"Hold thou Thy cross, before my closing eyes,  
Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies,  
Heaven's morning breaks and earth's vain shadows flee,  
In life, in death, O Lord, Abide with me."

The whole world needs an Easter Morning.

Remember reading about that night when Peter Marshall had suffered a mild heart attack, and was being taken to the hospital in an ambulance? Neither he nor his wife had any idea that he would die before the night was out. That attack was to be fatal.

So he persuaded her to stay home with the family, and just as he was leaving, he said, "Goodnight, Catherine. I'll see you in the morning." Little did he know.

"Heaven's morning breaks and earth's vain shadows flee,  
In life, in death, O Lord, Abide with me."

I collect epitaphs, for the meaning they give to what a person thinks of life and death. My most favorite one of all was pointed out to me by a dear friend. It reads, "When we saw the glory of the setting sun, we said it will be a lovely day tomorrow." How many of us have stood there, waving goodbye with the tears of our eyes and the grief of our souls, hopes dashed and hearts aching, but still we say, "It will be a lovely day tomorrow." The whole world needs an Easter morning.

No matter that the earth itself will be removed. No matter that the mountains will be carried into the midst of the sea. No matter that the waters will roar and be troubled. No matter at all. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.

When the interrogator called the prisoners together on Easter morning in the camp, he condemned the cross and Christ for one full hour. Then to the imprisoned priest he said, "Take five minutes to answer that." The priest replied, "Five seconds is enough." He said, "Christ is risen." And the whole, now happy, camp responded in the words of the ancient liturgy, "He is risen indeed!"

So, from the depths of all we are, from the top of all the highest mountains in the world, from the soul of all we long to be - repeat with me the words -

"Christ is risen, He is risen indeed! Christ is risen, He is risen indeed!"

Alleluiah, Amen!