

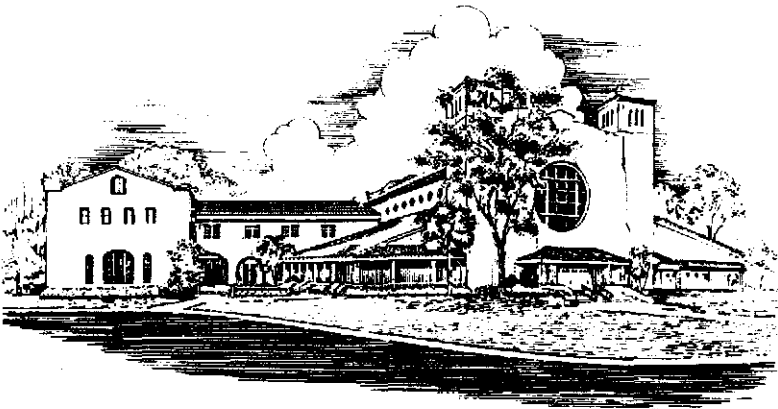
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First Church Pulpit

"ON A CLEAR DAY"

Text: ". and very early on the first day of the week they went to the tomb when the sun had risen"

- Mark 16:2



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Each year, for over a decade now, I have begun the Easter sermon with a light-hearted story, intended solely to be funny. I have justified this unusual custom with my single-handed discovery, after intensive research, into what is called a "Risus Pachalis", an Easter joke. The custom started in the late Middle Ages, when Lent was literally a time of giving up and self-denial. I have come to know that you good Fort Lauderdale Presbyterians do not give up much for Lent. It is easier that way, to be sure, yet...

But, back those centuries ago, the Fast was broken at midnight, Easter Eve. Then, after a time of fast-breaking (and I am not referring to a basketball game), the people and the priests, having spent the whole long night taking up whatever they had given up in the six previous weeks, often were in an uproarious mood at dawn. And the Reverend Fathers, missing the point (as clergymen can), began to entertain the congregation with funny, so-called uplifting stories, to get them each and all out of the doldrums of the Lenten fast.

In fact, it all got so ridiculous that one Pius Pope forbade the telling of the Risus Pachalises, a prohibition which you will probably wish to be re-issued again, before I am through. No doubt you have already guessed that I am to give you a Risus Pachalis, an Easter story.

The Story

There was this proper Presbyterian woman, who had a parrot as a pet, and the parrot's name was Polly. A nicer parrot you would never want to see, prim and proper, even pretty. The only problem was that Polly had an awful habit: Whenever she met anyone, she screeched out loud, as parrots do: "Whoopie, Charlie, I'm a good time girl!" On and on she went, embarrassing her mistress, until one day, near Easter, the Presbyterian parson came to call (Now this, I remind you, was not a Presbyterian Pastor, like Drs. Bininger or Neumann - this was a proper Presbyterian Pastor). Sure enough, as he entered the apartment, Polly shouted: "Whoopie, Charlie, I'm a good time girl!" Oh, the Reverend Sir was shocked, and so was the proper Presbyterian owner of the parrot. "I'm sorry", she opined. "I think I can help you", said the Reverend. "You see, I have two parrots down in my office at the Parish House. They are so well behaved, I think they would be a good influence on your Polly. In fact, all they ever do is pray, all day long they pray.

So, she agreed. The Reverend took poor misbehaving Polly to the Parish House. When he entered his lovely office, sure enough, his own two parrots, with beaks bowed low, were praying for all they were worth. And, you guessed it, dear Polly bellowed out her "Whoopie, Charlie, I'm a good time girl!" Thereupon, the Parson's proper praying parrots stirred.

With his wing, the one nudged the other and said, "Hey, Luke, wake up, we finally got what we have been praying for!"

Now, if we should do downhill from here (that is unlikely, I'd say), then at least you have had your Risus Pachalis, your Easter smile, and all will not be lost.

The Sermon

I. On a clear day...you can see forever! I am here to tell you that Easter is the clearest day of all! The clearest, the bravest, and the best! I would not want you to miss the view this Easter morning, not the clearest view in all the history of the world. It is too precious, too necessary, too satisfying to tumble on into tomorrow without truly seeing it today. So, open your eyes and the window of your soul. On a clear day, you can see forever. Easter is the clearest day of all. You can see all the way into eternity...

Some of you will recognize the words of our title from the musical comedy by Richard Rodgers and Alan Lerner, the story of Daisy Gamble, a young woman with extraordinary powers (Barbra Streisand played the part in the movie). Daisy could see into the future. She could find lost objects with ease. She could make flowers grow all by herself. A delightful, playful, endearing little fantastic girl. The title song declares in favor of what can happen: On a clear day, she says, you can hear a world you have never heard before; you can see

forever and ever and ever and evermore. We all need that, friends. A place, a day, a memory, a mountain, from which to see the world.

That is what was happening back at the beginning of that first Easter morning. The view was breath-taking. It was not a holiday, I remind you, not back then, just the first day of another week, the "Monday" after a long holiday week-end. The Passover celebration was over. They were heading back to the workaday world. Oh boy, the day after the Passover. It was like Boxing Day in Britain; or the day after your Fiftieth Wedding Anniversary; or the morning after your high school prom. If anything important would ever happen on the day after Easter here, hardly anyone would notice it at all. Just like God to do it that way in the beginning...so unexpected, so surprising, so marvelous!

As St. Mark tells the story, it is short and simple, and not quite as sweet as the other three Gospel writers tell it. Very early that first Easter morning, Mark writes, three women were on their way to anoint the body of Jesus, wondering who would remove the heavy stone in front of the tomb. On arrival, they found that the stone had been rolled away. Entering the now open doorway, to their amazement, they found that the body of Jesus was gone, and they were afraid someone had stolen it. Then they found a young man, dressed in white sitting there, who told them that Jesus was not there, he had risen, as he said,

and pointing to the empty bier, he said: "See, that is where he used to be." Then, he told them that they were to go and tell Peter and the disciples that Jesus would meet them up in Galilee.

Tremendously simple, isn't it, this tumultuous news so simply given, and even directions as to where they should go next! Then, concludes Mark...the three women fled, trembling and disobeying the man in white, they told no one, because they were afraid. End of Mark's story, the opening scene of a clear view of life and death.

Now, I want to alert you to Mark. He does not go in much for the frills. He is a no-nonsense-strong-straightforward-simple kind of meat-and-potatoes man, I mean. That is Mark. He does not speculate very much, never elaborates. He tells you what he knows, not what he wishes he knew, nor what you might want to hear. For example, he does not even mention the birth of Jesus, or the heavenly songs, or angels out on an ancient hill. They are not his thing. Those are for Luke or John in the Revelations. Nor does Mark like theologizing, that is for John and Paul in Romans. He simply tells you what he has heard, and what he knows. If you want to read of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, or his walk with the disciples (Luke), or a breakfast by the sea (John), or his Ascension (Acts), please do not count on Mark.

And, I warn you further, even in the simple little Markan story, there are

some problems for the scholar. For one thing, somebody, it appears, added verses to the original as Mark wrote it. In some Bibles you will see the last ten verses of his book omitted or footnoted, or italicized. Then, also, there are some little persnicketies (I call them) between Mark and the others, like the names of the women are inconsistent within one verse. John tells us the body was already properly anointed. Mark's version implies it was not. In Mark, as they go out, they are wondering who will roll the stone away, surely shortsighted. It seems to be there to give dramatic effect to the coming scene, where they find that the stone was already gone. The original version in Mark never mentions, as the other Gospels do, where and how and to whom Jesus appeared.

"What about it, Mark?" you might want to ask.

Mark would say: "I didn't know about that. I told you what I know. You will have to talk to Luke or John."

"O.K., but what happened next, Mark?"

He would say: "I don't know. I have heard some stories, to be sure, most of them marvelous, and some of them no doubt true. But I cannot give them to you as Gospel truth. I wrote down what I know."

"And what is that?"

Mark would say: "It's simple. The body of Jesus was not there. He was gone."

"Yeah, but maybe somebody stole it, right?"

"Nobody stole the body, that I know. I talked with everybody (remember, Mark was there). Nobody stole the body...If the Romans or the Jews had it, they would have produced it within five seconds when the story of his Resurrection galloped across the kingdom, and began to topple theirs. They would have tossed it down on Central Square in Old Jerusalem. They would have said: 'See, there he is...dead as a doornail! He is not raised.'"

"Yeah, but maybe the disciples took it, just to prove their point."

"Nonsense. If the disciples had stolen the body, well, it is hardly likely that a whole group of men, as reasonable and rational as we are, could have been so inspired and renewed and courageous as martyrs, if they knew the body was squirreled away somewhere in a private tomb. They would not have died in the arena over a trick. He was not there. That I know. More than that, I can tell you what I believe. I believe he rose to Heaven, but I never saw it."

In fact, in Mark it seems as though Jesus rose immediately to heaven. The post-resurrection appearances seem to come later.

So (Pastor Cromie is speaking again), do not be alarmed by all this. I declare the Resurrection as the touchstone of my faith. I believe it. If Christ is not raised, we are among all men most to be pitied, Paul said. I simply want to inform you that my belief is based on an exhaustive twenty-five year search to understand the Gospel records. It has not been easy. I need to tell you that the exact physical details of that first Easter morning are open-ended. The story opens in mystery, amazement, astonishment. It ends with fear and trembling, and a strange and silent disobedience of the women.

What Mark does clearly say is that Jesus the Christ is risen from the dead. He has overcome the very early darkness of morning with the great shining light of his rising; the marvelous and unending view, which God intended us to see from the dawning of Creation. The dark is over. The night is gone. Morning has broken. Day is at hand. Spring is here. The fog is lifted. Death is conquered. The view is marvelous: You can see forever and ever and ever on this clearest day in all the history of the world. What more could you want to see?

II. I also said it was the brightest day. By brightest I mean brightest, as opposed to darkest. The clear bright light which shines into and through the darkest moments of our days and decades. The second dictionary meaning for bright, by the way, is: "Radiant

with happiness, having experienced the joy of the morning."

Oh, you need that view, sometimes more than others, to be sure. I don't need to recite the long list of human heart-aches here, or why the tears were forming in your eyes all week. You know how we all so often need a leisurely walk along the top of the highest mountain. Once the world was dark. Then came the shining light, when the first dawn broke on Easter. Sometimes it is so bright that our eyes, accustomed to the night, can hardly bear to look at it. Oh, how heavy it can be with broken hearts and scattered dreams... And cranky old Koheleth (from Ecclesiastes) and all his kith and kin, with their nonsense about how absurd it is to believe that things will ever change, that anything will ever be new. Dead men tell no tales, and dead men never rise. It all is vanity, they say, till all our strivings cease. Just shuffle along, fill your time as best you can, but don't expect stupendous surprises. Calculate carefully. Guard against your emotions, and never, ever be open to miracles.

"At the moment of my greatest need", a tired old dying woman in the nursing home is speaking, "I find God growing nearer to us all."

"Why, these people have no view", the little country girl said, when she first visited the towering canyons up and down the streets of New York City. "I'd never like to live anywhere where there is no view."

Then, there was the teenager who returned to my study ten years later to tell me, "The thing you said which helped me most was that the darkness would pass..." I said: "That's all." He said: "That's all."

And the young couple said after seven years of marriage and two of marital trouble: "We never would have made it without someone telling us that when it all looked dark, we needed to view the long look, back and ahead.

III. The clearest, the brightest, but I said it was also the bravest. "If anyone came back from death to talk to me, I'd be terrified. I'd think I'd lost my mind," Robert Browning once confessed. And people run from real and imagined ghosts everywhere in all the real and literary corners of our time and space. Walking too near sepulchres is not our kind of thing, especially when it is still dark. Except for once a year, at high noon, to decorate the graves for Memorial Day, we do not visit cemeteries, and then we hurry home...alive. Maybe some of us do not believe in Christ's Resurrection, because we are afraid to believe. It would upset the applecart of all we think we know (Isn't that a funny thing to say?). We mourn the passing of the ones we know and yet it is worth a minute to remind ourselves that we would hardly want this Jesus back. If we had been there, and had betrayed him, and forsook him, and fled, better not to have to meet with him again,

now that he knows everything. Hey, Peter, are you sure you want to face him? What about you, Judas?

But, we need also to remember that Jesus was their nearest, dearest friend. The bravest view I am speaking of is to walk right up to the tomb, while it was still dark, and expect to find him there. And then, braver still, to hope, on the basis of what you think you know, and what you so longingly believe, that you can in Christ see right through and on out the other side. The bravery required here is absolutely monumental. Only a few really manage to be friendly with the dark.

I watched a friend's plane go off from Heathrow out of London fifteen years ago now (He asked me to be there, and wait until he was safely in the air. So, of course, I did). I watched and waited until the plane was just a speck in the distant sky, and then gone. I could not see it anymore. Gone...But gone where? Gone from my vision, that was all. The plane was just as real, the engines just as roaring, the people just as breathing...The change was in me, and in my vision. You need to be brave to say goodbye. But you need to be brave to see far enough to say hello. Ah, but in Christ, you are. It takes a brave man to say, "Yes, I'll believe that. It's God having the last word. Scoff if you will, but I am brave enough to look into an empty tomb.

IV. Then, after the Clearest, Brightest, Bravest, comes the Best. Remember back

in the days when everybody got something new for Easter? I hope you got something new this year. If not, tell your husband or father there is still time to do it. I can remember how hard my parents used to shuffle things around from the daily fare, to buy the four of us something new for Easter. We were never allowed to wear it until Sunday morning came (I have a new suit to wear this year). Then off to Sunday School like princes and princesses we went... "See my new shoes, see my new coat, see my new hat?" I hope you got something new this Easter.

What was it? A new hope? A new humility? A new vision? A new clear city, in which you can look through eternity, and see forever and ever and ever and evermore? Something new - like an eternal victory!

Let's close it with a story. Do you remember the name of Mahandas Karamchand Gandhi (Mahatma), the greatest leader India ever had, a Hindu nationalist, who helped that faraway, impoverished land to emerge into its independence. What a world leader, what an inspiration, what a man! Well, he was assassinated in 1948 by a high-ranking Brahman, who detested Gandhi's peaceful ways.

For three days (E. Stanley Jones related this incident), the nation mourned, alternating between stunned silence and loud wailing. Then, in due time, it was

proper for the people to begin to speak. The national poetess, Mrs. Kamala Naidu, spoke for her people...with eloquence: "O ba tu", she pined, "O little father, please come back and lead us. We are orphaned forever without your presence on the earth. O little 'Father Gandhi', please come back and lead us through the dark nights of the present, and all the unknown future...Please come back...Please...We are lost without you."

Oh, thank God that no one who has ever been to Easter morning and shared the Cleanest, Brightest, Bravest, Best view in all the history of the world needs ever mutter that mournful plea: "Please come back. O little Jesus, please come back, please come back..." For he is back. He is here. You need never be an orphan on the earth again. Death is not victorious. Gone from one's sight, that is all...

You see, they went looking for a body; to fuss over it in memory of the good and lovely things which had passed forever from the earth - or so they thought. They wanted to do some little last thing for Jesus. But, already he had done every last thing for them. He was back: there and waiting. Yet, their souls were so used to mourning, their heads so used to bowing, their hearts so used to feeling empty, their sad countenances so used to trotting out for such times as these; and their eyes so filled with tears, professional mourners all, they

almost failed to see Him...almost, until he spoke to them...And they were brave enough to stop and listen. "Only that day dawns to which you are awake", Thoreau once said. I want you to be awake on Easter morning.

They might have missed it, had he not spoken to them. I hope he speaks to you today. "Come and see the place he was in", it says, "then go and tell them all." Come and see...Go and tell. Receive. Share. That is the way it always is. It is yours and mine to have and to give, the happy news that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. He lives, he reigns... and on this clear day, you can see forever. Halleluiah, Amen.

Sermon preached by Dr. Richard M. Cromie