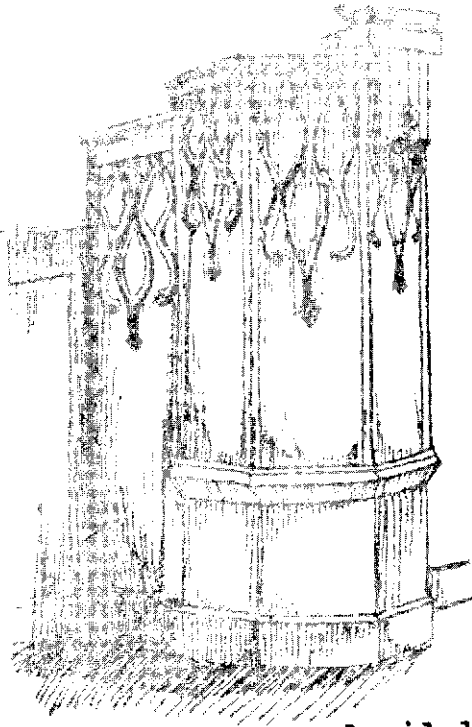


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The Southminster Pulpit

"MY LORD, WHAT A MORNING!"



Text:

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

Mark 16:2

April 15, 1979

Easter Sunday

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Mount Lebanon, Pennsylvania /

Each Spring the Three Rivers Arts Festival comes to downtown Pittsburgh, and culture blossoms out all over in a bright and welcomed extravaganza of painting and poetry and music and drama and all the rest. The invited artists display the product of their talents in the lobbies of our fine Corporate headquarters, on the streets themselves, in the park, and on the stage. Some even produce particular pieces and hurried paintings while you watch - a veritable workshop for the Arts. It is one of the finest things we do in western Pennsylvania.

Some years ago, there was an artist from New England there, who brought a most unusual art form to our city. Gifted with chalk pastels, he entertained the passing public with beautiful and lovely pictures which he drew in their presence, but he sketched on the sidewalk, smack dab right on the concrete, mimicking the way any old kid would do it, only better. They were beautiful, and it was incredible. A big, grown-up boy, drawing portraits and still life and city scenes in chalk, on the sidewalk. Others sold their paintings and fine jewelry and macrame, hopefully to last forever and decorate suburban homes, but his art lasted barely through the night. People eventually walked on his treasures, and come the next rain, this marvelous creation was washed away - gone for good...Sad...

Now that scene has haunted me for several years. It does affirm the importance of the moment, but it misses the enduring quality of what is permanent. And, while intriguing, it reflects into the mainstream of human life what we have come to believe about many of the sacred objects and ideas of the earth.

I bring it to you this morning, because I think it says a word about all that Easter means: "My art is for the moment," he said when asked, "that is all we really know we have." Others have said the same about the creation itself, and about human life, and about the after life: "What you see is what you get." That God, as a kind of grown-up kid, is playing games, creating the universe and life just for existential sport, to be washed away, the moment the next cosmic rain falls to the earth. I come to speak to you about the permanence of the gift of life, and about the mornings God has prepared, and about the central and salient significance of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In so doing, I want to share with you four possible reasons why you and I can or should believe it. I would never try to prove it to you. Faith is always a gift, more so here than most other places. But once having received it as a Gift of God, there are some important and influential foundation stones which you can claim to hold it up in any and every company.

I. First, let me say that the Biblical evidence supports it. That will be a rather novel statement to believing Christians, but I say it consciously to let you know that an intense examination of Scripture is imperative before we can return to the simple conclusion. The evidence comes mainly from the Gospel records. Outside the Bible, there are just two isolated historical references to the Resurrection, both of which simply report it as being believed by Christians. It is the Holy Scriptures which record the Resurrection.

To some of you this will be an ipso facto final proof. "Prove it to me from the Bible, and I will believe it," Wesley once said. "I don't care about any other book!" Some believe that. Others, though, reject the Bible; "Too narrow," they say, "It belongs to a pre-scientific day." "Fairy story things," a doctor said. "People don't come back from the dead!" Some reject it. But still others ask quietly, "But what if they were biased? What if some even accidental conspiracy developed to prove that Christ was victorious anyway? What if their disappointment led them to over-compensate?" I am aware that proving it from the Bible will not carry the same message to everyone.

But, whatever - throughout the New Testament, there is no serious disagreement regarding the Resurrection. The four Gospel writers - as they often do - differ in detail. We are forced to conclude that an accurate harmonization of the several Biblical accounts is impossible. The stories differ concerning when it happened, who was there, what they found, and who they saw. With Luke, Jesus never appears on Easter morning at all. The angel simply tells them he has gone away. Three women were present in Mark, two in Matthew; in John, only Mary Magdalene is present.

Some of the appearances are in Jerusalem, and some are in Galilee, and they overlap - an impossible journey on the same day. Later on, St. Paul, in passing, makes reference to the five hundred brethren who saw Jesus at one time; but no explanation is recorded in the Gospels of so monumental a claim. We all know the famous story of Doubting Thomas, but Matthew also says that others of the eleven doubted when they went out to meet him on the mountain. That is an enigma!

What we have then, according to the Scripture, is the record of something monumental and stupendous which occurred during that Saturday night. The essentials are agreed. There is unanimity that the Tomb was empty, even by the enemies of Christ. Some have claimed his body was stolen; others have said it was transferred to a new place. But, oh dear, if the Pharisees stole the body, or if the Romans re-buried it, they would surely have reproduced the body to stamp out this growing new religion. And if the disciples had stolen it, well it hardly seems possible that a group of devoted followers could live with such conviction and die with such courage, knowing that the touchstone of their new faith was a lie. But then the empty tomb was never their reassurance anyway. They were reborn in the words of the angels and in the appearances of Jesus. Ten appearances are recorded. He was in some way transfigured but usually recognizable form. They knew who he was, even if they could not touch him. It is puzzling that some who knew him best did not recognize him when he spoke to them. But antithetically, it is equally puzzling that he ate food, told them to touch the wounds, and that his body bore the marks of what had happened. I tell you all this not to weaken but to strengthen your faith. We need to examine it closely and our faith takes on more depth.

We must conclude from the Scripture that the literary evidence leaves some doubt as to exactly what happened. No positive solution is really possible. One problem is that two separate traditions are converging in the Gospels, reflecting two ways of looking at death and eternal life. One is a bodily resurrection which the Pharisees

believed. One is what French Biblical scholar Xavier Leon Dufour calls the Exalted View, that the spirit or soul, not the body, survived death. Not unlike our own time, they argued over whether one would wake from sleep and be raised in body, or whether one would be lifted up and exalted in the spirit to everlasting life in the heavens. The Gospel Resurrection stories significantly combined both of those. Jesus is both a resurrected body, and an Exalted spirit.

St. Paul complicates it a little further, for when he refers to the post-resurrection appearances of Christ, he seems to group them all together as if the others were visionary experiences similar to the one he had on the Road to Damascus. He does not appear to be writing about a physical resurrection at all. All that could torment you if you allow it to.. I still like little Mark, the earliest of the Gospels - He leaves it in a healthy mystery. The women are asked to leave the tomb almost the moment they got there. It is like a springboard which hurls them back to their ordinary days. As the Bible often says, "These things are too wonderful for me."

The Biblical accounts are different in detail. Sure they are. But if they agreed completely, any lawyer would tell you, someone coached the witnesses. The records are fresh and new, revealing bewilderment as well as beauty. They differ, but there was no conspiracy; it was too magnificent and marvelous for words to contain.

But whatever else is true of detail and suchlike, the Biblical evidence supports that a Resurrection occurred. That is first....

II. In the second place, it is significant to notice that the early Church came to believe it. That is not as obvious as it seems. I would caution you not to assume that it was automatic just because some of them said they were there. Everytime the extraordinary impinges on our ordinary way of doing things, there is always a difference of opinion as to what happened and a decision has to be made. People have asked me time and again in the years of my ministry: "Could it be possible I actually heard his voice? Tell me, Dr. Cromie, can the vision I had of the white light and of this huge tunnel, and I saw my husband there and all of my friends who were gone, and my parents...Is it true, or is it a figment of my imagination? Was it a dream?"....."Was the Lord speaking to me that way?", one woman said just a little while ago. Everytime something mysterious occurs, it causes one to question: "Is it true?"

Some others just as near, with the same information, doubted that it was the Risen Christ. Still others said it was nonsense and tried to prove it false. And yet the Church came to believe it; chose to believe it, I should say, and that is significant. For the most part, they were just as intelligent and healthy and sane and sound as the lot of us, with all of our diversity. And their belief transformed them, you see. They found the courage to go on, and from the absolute desolation of the worst, from the weak and frightened moments, from the hours they had deserted their Lord and Master and Friend - they came up with new conviction; something happened, and that is a mighty evidence for me.

Without that conviction, there would

have been no Church, no Roman Empire, no Reformation, no Western civilization, no missionary movement, no abiding concern for health and human dignity, no antidote to hatred and to death. Evil would have triumphed. If Christ is not raised, your faith is in vain. It is all related, you see, to the power of the Resurrection which they managed to find, to cling to, to share, and to pass along to us.

A lie cannot keep you courageous and stalwart in the midst of the arena wrestling with the lions, not through nineteen centuries anyway. A lie is not good enough to keep you tied to a cross when the fire begins to burn. A lie may live in a Guyanan jungle for a while, but grape Kool-Aid will wash it away in less than a decade. The testimony of those early disciples and all the others since gives authenticity to the story. If I should not believe it, if I should be a non-believer, the greatest obstacle I should have to hurdle is the conviction of the disciples and all of those in history since who have believed it, and experienced in it the transformation of their lives.

Sure, there are perfectly good and intelligent people who do not believe in Resurrection. That I know; but, on the other hand, there are perfectly sane and marvelous and deep and intelligent people who do, thousands and millions of them who do. You need never be ashamed in any company whatever of your belief in the miraculous power and presence of the Lord.

And I suppose the famous names would be impressive, but I think more of people that I know and have known. I could refer you to the crowning victories of David Livingstone,

St. Augustine, Albert Schweitzer, John Calvin, William Carey. But I think of my own mother and my own father, their testimony to me, and my own teachers and my Howard Scharfe and my Samuel Stedman Eure, my friends - the names on our Memorial List of Easter flowers - my Jesus Christ, those who rise up with me each happy morning to greet and give me courage to go on.

That does not carry the point alone, but the testimony of those who have and do believe it, is terribly impressive, if not overpowering. I like the company in which I find myself.

We have said the Biblical evidence supports it - the disciples and all of their descendants have believed it -

III. Then thirdly, it is compatible with the other things you know about the mysterious way in which God works with men.

Lo, it says, I tell you a mystery, says Paul of the Resurrection. I like that, but what is a mystery anyway? It technically means "relating to the ways of God - beyond human comprehension". A mystery is inscrutable, there, but incompletely known, as the mystery of the Eucharistic presence of the Lord...I tell you a mystery...God normally chooses to deal with us in mystery.

More casually, I would say a mystery, whether it is in the hands of a magician on stage or on the whole grand stage of life, a mystery is something you know is there, but you are never quite sure how it got there. Something magical accomplished, but it is a mystery because you do not know how it

happened. Do you understand? Akin to the mystery of life itself and the mysteries at the heart of the universe...The mystery of Creation itself, out of nothing the universe was made; and should there have been an observer present at the moment when it first began, the observer would have said, "Oh, dearie me, how did he do that?!" Wow!

Whatever other explanations we give the whole DNA spiral and the vast evolutionary process - it is all for nothing, and we know it. We know little of the how, and nothing of the why. God moves in mystery; miracles do not happen. The moment Christ was born was surrounded by a mystery. Virgin births just do not happen. Parthenogenesis for a male of the species homo sapien is literally impossible. The guiding star - how did they know it? How can you follow a star? Not everybody saw it. Some thought they were crazy. And our lives from day to day, from birth to love to death, all are conveyed in mystery.

Should you wonder here? Should you begin to wonder overly about this particular mystery at the open door of the empty tomb when there are so many others? Is it a greater mystery that life should keep on keeping on? I mean, if God made it, it must be for more than chance. And it is so like God to give you a tiny peek up over the top of the mountain. Sure enough, just like God to tease a little: Wow! How did he do that?

Lo, I tell you a mystery. I will let you in on it. I will share it with you. I will give you a quick peek - everybody ready? I will let you see it for this one morning.

Ready?..Gone..."I blinked my eyes this Spring," Annie Dillard said, and "I missed it all again." It touches the tip of the way God reveals himself to us - He who is higher than I.

The Bible supports it - They all believed it - It echoes the way God works -

IV. But, lastly, if that were not enough - The Resurrection offers you a word you need to hear - the Word of Victory. The reassuring word which we all need to hear at the low and trying moments of our lives, at the edge of an open grave. You need to believe in the sun even when it is not shining, believe in love even when you feel it not, believe in God's reigning victory even when you are losing.

That brings us home now to the closing of this sermon, and my old friend Loren Eiseley is there to greet us. Deep and religious he was. He told the story one day of a some-time friend he had in northern Montana at a small observatory - Jim Radnor by name, a common man with a gift for imagination. And he said the one thing Radnor tried to teach him was that there was a missing planet out there somewhere. Radnor believed there had been a planet in that giant gap of space out between Jupiter and Mars. In the eons time out of mind ago, it would have been a most likely candidate to have housed life. He believed that it had exploded and was gone, and every night he would wander up to his homemade observatory and train that long telescope to the space and peer hopefully into the emptiness...searching, he said, for the interplanetary bones of a planet now gone.

And Eiseley said, "I thought I had him." I said, "Radnor, surely if there was a missing planet there, someone would have found it. Every telescope on earth is penetrating to the deepest recesses of the whole galaxy and to the far edges of outer space, and no one has found even the remnants of your planet." You know what Radnor said? "There are asteroids there, Loren, moving where there should be a planet. But the trouble is that no one is looking for it. They are all looking for something else. There aren't enough watchers in the world, or we would have found it by this time. For I know it is there. Someday I will have it in my line of sight and in my grasp."

You see, my friends, we need more watchers for the morning, too. More people to be standing there, looking at the heavens, as all through the Middle Ages Christians did. They went out at night at three o'clock on Easter Eve and prayed and waited for the morning. And when it finally came, cannons boomed the news, and bands struck up the music, and people sang and laughed and cried. My Lord, What a Morning! My Lord, What a Morning! When the stars began to fall...An old legend says that the sun dances on Easter morning, skips three cheerful little times at the moments of its rising in honor of the Risen Christ...I hope so.

When the end at last has come, when the Lamb who was slain unravels the scroll of life, and the stars and the planets leave their respective places, and the moon and the sun go to dark for good, when all that is hidden will finally be made known, when everything is put back again where it belongs - Oh happy day! Oh, what a morning!

Meanwhile, it is over. The news you need to hear is waiting just for this moment. It arrived in Jerusalem one morning while most of the old city was still asleep. The last enemy was met and conquered during the night; you need fear the falling stars no more. Christ has died and, risen, makes intercession for us. You can trust the one who made it all. It is not as silly and senseless as it sometimes seems. Everything is still okay. The hair is lifting, but look quickly...don't even blink...or you may miss it once again.

And you need the view; you need a little word to help you believe that life is more than chalk marks on the concrete city streets, more than what can be washed away in the next passing rain, more than the next demonic passerby can rub to ruin, some word that your life and the life of those you love are in his tender care and keeping. You need that word, and you have it, guaranteed by Christ himself.

Well...ready for one last peek? Here it is. Thoreau once said only that day dawns to which you are awake. You only find what you are looking for...ready?.....Already on the move out on that little hillside near the lovely slopes at the foothills of the green and verdant Mount of Olives, there was a young woman you and I have come to know by name, on this and every other Easter morning...Racing down that dusty little path with all her might, moving so dangerously fast you might have wanted to reach out to slow her down lest she stumble and fall; but bounding along as quickly as her trembling legs would carry her, heading towards home to tell the others of the one and only news she had to tell...Oh, how I love that scenecarried in the hint of that early dawn,

lifted up above herself, so much so that her feet never touched that dark and dusty ground again in all her life; out on that path, with a show of the blue heaven in her eyes...watch that pretty gal in white, with her shiny, raven hair streaming behind her in the breeze, swinging back now and then into those believing eyes, which just a moment before were moist with the tears of that awful hurt, when she could not find the body of her Lord; oh, just watch her there, lifted on the wings of the morning which she had greeted sometime before the dawn, a fresh new day; watch her running, bounding, fair fleeing down the hillside, and listen one last time to the words you need to hear once more. Listen to the shortest, sweetest, loveliest, finest little Easter sermon which anyone has ever heard. "Oh, my God," she is saying, as she runs, "O dear God, it's true. I tell you I saw him...I actually saw him...He's alive. He looked into my eyes. He lives. Because He lives, so I live, too...It's true. I saw him. Jesus Christ our Lord is Risen from the Dead!" Hallelujah! Amen.

IF EASTER BE NOT TRUE

If Easter be not true,
Then all the lilies low must lie;
The Flanders poppies fade and die;
The spring must lose her fairest bloom
For Christ were still within the tomb-
If Easter be not true.

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?

If Easter be not true -
But it is true, and Christ is risen!
And mortal spirit from its prison
Of sin and death with Him may rise!
Worth while the struggle, sure the prize,
Since Easter, aye, is true!

- Henry H. Barstow

This sermon is printed as preached by Dr. Cromie at Southminster Church, but was not revised for publication.