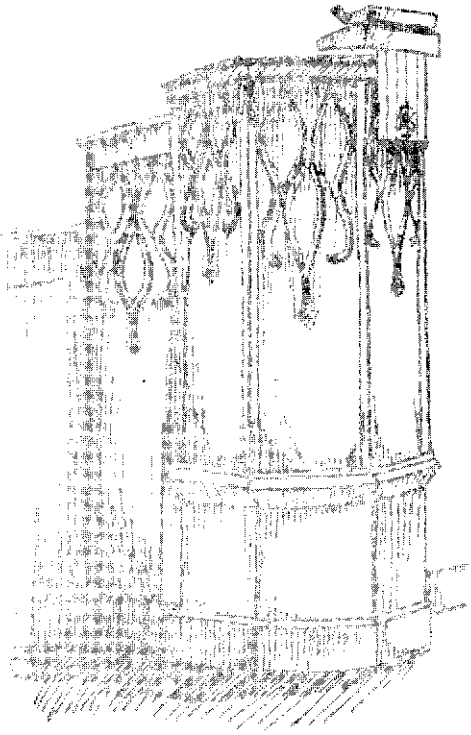


Sally & John 4/10/77

The Southminster Pulpit

SOMETIME BEFORE THE DAWN



"Now on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb."

John 20:1

Easter Sunday
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How sad and empty and awful and lonely they felt, Mary Magdalene, the other Mary, and Salome, as they eased out of their little homes sometime before the dawn of that first Easter morning - to venture over to the little garden graveyard at the foot of the Mount of Olives, for their first visit to the sepulchre where Joseph of Arimathea had placed the body of Jesus just two days before. The worst agony which any of them would ever experience in all their lives had come thundering into their fragile little worlds - that God-forsaken sadness lingered and dogged their every step from that moment since. Forty eight hours, why that's not enough time, people tell me, for the initial shock to wear thin. Sometimes, the first two days slip out of memory for good, so staggering and so overwhelming, when you lose someone you love. He is a risen Lord to us, we know how the story ends - or at least I hope you do - but to them; well, to them, He was the dearest one in all the world.

Maybe they were going there to weep, or to feel a little closer. Why do people visit graves anyway? What is certain is that they had been like spectators looking in on their own bodies while it happened: numb within, afraid without. We all respond by rote sometimes, and shock can stem the tears. I would guess that they had been up all night, and all the night before; preparing the spices, fidgeting, fussing, wasting away the hours until the dawn which, it seemed, would never come. People have told me that nights are bad, but mornings can be worse at the start: a whole new day lies ahead to fill, and it's still true. Things had thundered in on them Good Friday: bad day with all that shouting and hooting and jeering. How could people ever learn to love, watching an event so despicable and cruel as a crucifixion, and then cheering when it was over? How on earth inhuman can we be? Then after the storm, Joseph

of Arimathea, who didn't even have the nerve to announce that he was a follower and a friend of Jesus, managed to whisk the body away even before they had a chance to see it. Then, that big stone they rolled in front; and Mark records that they were worried who would remove it when they got there. It happened so fast, so shoddy; those sacreligious Romans and poor Jews hurrying a thing like preparation of a body, just so that the sun would not go down on their misdeed.

It was only fitting and proper that His body should have had some special treatment; that's the way you do things in ancient Palestine. Sure, the body is a casing, a house to hold the soul, but it holds the only soul and person which we will ever know; without that body, we could never live the first life, let alone go on to live again forevermore. The stuff of today is the stuff out of which immortality is made. Bodies are important to the Christian. Without these features - hands and hearts and eyes and words - we would never be. And, when Paul speaks of the Resurrection, he does not deny us body, he only trades it for a higher one.

Thing of them with me: Mary Magdalene, Salome, and the other Mary; poor dears; brokenhearted, and anxious, even angry, so ready to go and see, they could not wait a minute longer. So, while it was still dark, sometime before the dawn, they snuffed out their candles, wrapped their homemade shawls around their shoulders, and pushed out of their mud houses, to edge their way through the cold chill of the night air to go and visit the gravesite of their Lord, the one they loved.

So tragic, the way it ended. All their vaunted hopes and glories, all the dreams that they and others had that this time would be different. All they dreamed of being and becoming was invested in

that person. The one to set it right was there, who made it all worthwhile; and then it all cascaded down that dusty hill of Golgotha. The one remaining symbol was that silenced body, which had breathed and laughed and loved, now lying in a tomb. Life is a gyp - sometimes. Imagine, like a ship tossed at sea, drawing water, with the rudder broken, and the captain dead; imagine how lonely, as if some of you don't know already what it is like to lose the one you needed most in all the world. And while it was still dark, before they had to go....Well.....the pondering: God must have something great in store for them, but, man on earth, what could it be? Meanwhile, though, there is this little chore and veneration. "There's something we can do.", said Mary Magdalene. "Let's go by the grave and place our spices there, and our flowers, too." So, on the first day of the week, sometime before the dawn, they went.

Sometime before the dawn, that's when it happened really; and there's a hint there that it always happens then, while all of Jerusalem was still quiet, at rest and sleeping. The disciples and the others who had followed faithfully were in their rooms, which gave them shelter for their fears, and safely housed their broken hearts. No one else was there to monitor the crowds, and guards of every age are known to sleep at night. No one was there to announce it to the world. No one got the "scoop". No eyewitnesses as to when it happened. We surmise the way it came. One Gospel fragment says that the stone rolled itself away. Another speculates two angels came and moved it. But the act of Resurrection belongs to no one in particular, for it belongs to everyone in general. That single moment is common property, a common wellspring from which we each and all can draw on the living water

that we need.

Then, you know that happened, as we reach the crowning capstone of the Scripture; this is what it's all about. Both Testaments, all 66 books, 1189 chapters, all 1290 pages, 31,173 verses, all 773,692 words, written over 1300 years: this is the key that unlocks it all. This is the code which gives you right to know what it is all about. This answers the problem of why there is human sin. This answers your question, why the world was made the way God made it. This answers everything you want to know. This is what God has done, is doing, and will continue to do forever more, through the whole pattern of change - growing up and growing old and growing bad and growing good and growing God-like and growing manlike - This is what it is all about: one verse, one stanza of this celestial song, one great refrain, one line, one soul, one faith, one word, one birth, one Christ, one Easter morning!

When they got there, it says, the stone was rolled away.....I had never seen it quite so clearly until one day, a couple of months ago, over near Collingswood, New Jersey, at Harleigh Cemetery, where I had journeyed to bury the father of a friend. There I came across the tomb, to the left of the entrance and down a winding road, where the body of Walt Whitman is buried. Whitman is the poet who celebrated death as well as life, within the self and out of it, who more clearly than any other of our native poets, got the message of the things which death can never touch. Walt Whitman's songs are worth the singing.

But, it is not the grandeur of Whitman's songs which we will seek to sing this morning. It is only the image of his tomb I hope to take you to.

Picture it in your mind's eye, if you have never seen it: down there, just across the road, shielded by an oak tree, and nestled gently back into the hillside, behind the cedars and the daffodils - at this time of year at least - is Whitman's private mausoleum. It is worth the visit, and I shall go back that way again myself one day. In it, Whitman is buried with his parents and some of his family. Aside from blending into a hillside, rather than free-standing, it has an added feature: the sepulchre itself is guarded against entry and the various and sundry desecrations of our time by a huge iron gate, padlocked to the teeth. I think Whitman would smile at that, as if somehow he would guess that they were trying to keep him in, not others out. But, just to the right of the iron gate, as if it were a giant door swung open, taller than any man and broader than its width, is a huge granite stone which, from my research, I discovered is as close to the kind of stone which covered the grave in Joseph's garden where Jesus lay long ago in that Friday night so many years before.

I saw a symbol there, but just a symbol. The designer of that tomb was saying - it seems to me, at least - that Whitman cannot be contained behind that granite-covered stone within his native earth. It is as if that man were saying, "We cannot contain him in a tomb."; so, in symbol, let's roll that stone back and let him be free to go in and out with pleasure. And, as Whitman said himself - oh, I love these words - in a dedication to the one poem you should read if you read no other, Song of Myself:

Come, said my Soul,
Such verses for my Body let us
write, (for we are one,)
That should I after death

invisibly return,
Or, long, long hence, in other
spheres,
There to some group of mates the
chants resuming,
(Tallying Earth's soil, trees,
winds, tumultuous waves,)
Ever with pleas'd smile I may
keep on,
Ever and ever yet the verses
owning - as, first, I here and
now,
Signing for Soul and Body, set to
them my name,

Walt Whitman

Aye, Walt, you did! And no graveyard there,
or Harleigh's mound, can hold your soaring interest
in the precious gift of life. How much more with
Jesus who was and is the Christ!

So, this Easter morning in the year of our Lord
1977, let's say three short things:

1. One: my dear friends, don't get all bogged
down in the why and how and whethers of Resurrection.
It will not do you any good, anyway, even if you
could find the proof to make the logic of it fit.
That's just our trouble, isn't it? Our scientific
day has need to control and verify the things that
happen. Our methods and our logic become the
guides we use to monitor the miracles and messages
which the Lord God has in mind. But the power and
the grace of God cannot be contained within our
scientific symbols. It is enough to say that some-
thing marvelous and magnificent was happening there.
It is enough to say it, and those who are unprepared

to believe it and to lean on something less than that, well, only let them live in the version which their sagging souls can muster. That's their problem. Yours and mine is here and now. This is our moment. And in the dark of whatever life we have just now, let's be up and out and swing our arms together as we head out to that lovely little garden and the tomb where the body of our Lord was laid. I once heard an echo of an ancient Easter legend concerning a band of fallen angels who were asked, "What do you miss most?" "Ah," they said, "the sound of the trumpets on Easter morning." Just a sound, sounded for the faithful. To the rest, it is the noise of battle or of pomp and circumstance.

2. Secondly, now don't fall prey to the critics who say that believing in the after life lessens the significance of this life here on earth. What's a heaven for, if it does not give zest and nobility to the years we live on earth? The mind of God retains it all. Sophie Tucker said some great words in paying tribute to Irving Berlin one day: "What a wonderful feeling it must be to know while you're still alive that you're immortal." That's the tone of an Easter sermon. Easter says that. While we are still alive, we have already entered into eternal life. While we are still alive, we are immortal. That's not tame and ecclesiastical. Just imagine how it can move out to change the world. The world moves aside for a man who knows where he is going. What a great thing it would be if we believed in the eternal importance of each moment. If we could say to our political, social, emotional, business, labor problems, "I have seen the Lord. He gives my life its meaning. Now let's sit down and talk."

Ester Benson once told of the purity of the

tomb, when the Etruscan civilization affirmed a belief, in the Sixth Century B.C., of death and immortality. Their paintings on the walls of the burial tomb were joyous with a celebration of life. Two hundred years later, by the Fourth Century, they had changed their belief; and their lives, as well as their art work, were gloomy and clumsy. The afterlife ceased to be a continuance of the journey of life with all of its wonders, to be repeated and renewed and raised. It became terrifying. The Roman spirit of the Existential now had destroyed the soul and heart and beauty of that ancient way of life. It matters to eternity what we do today. The significance of eternity gives meaning to today. This life is not cheapened. It is rather enhanced. Otherwise, we are things; we are like arrows shot by an unknown bowsman to fall into the pit of earth or sea by whims or hostile will. The very thing that gives life meaning is our belief that it is precious and enduring - and it lives forever more.

I got a vision early this morning of the way a busy suburban mall should be: no stores open, no crowds pushing and shoving. There we were, just after 6:30, gathered for Easter Sunrise worship. As I walked down the hall, with everything else still, no merchandise on sale, no noise of harried people trying to pay more money for things they never needed, just a simple refrain coming from the group gathered at the end of the hall, with the echo of our own bell teams ringing and the refrain, "Christ the Lord is risen today." That's the way a mall should be; that's the way a mall should sound. That's the way the world must be. That's no idle dream or vacant promise made to get you through. Weeping may tarry for the night, but possible joy is born again with every morning.

3. Thirdly, the message of Easter really, in its largest setting; the symbol of the triumph of good

over evil; then over now; life over death; His over mine; the affirmation of what can be over what is; magnificence over meanness. The only view which will be sacred now is the view which can look beyond and above and around the vicissitudes, vagaries, and vagueness of the weak and sorry life, where almost everything under the sun can happen, and often does, for the worst. We need to claim the dream, to hold it all together. The dream continues to live. You can kill the dreamer, but you cannot kill the dream. You can execute the messenger, but the message lingers on the sound waves in the wind. You can silence the singer, but the song will triumph on and on and on, on down the coming years.

Ben Franklin, writing his own epitaph, wrote, "The body of Benjamin Franklin, Printer (like the cover of an old book, its contents torn out and stripped of its lettering and gilding), lies here;but the work shall not be lost, for it will appear once more in a new and more elegant edition, revised and corrected by the Author." That's a mini-image of the Easter faith.

So, let's turn it all toward home.

Perhaps you caught that portion of the televised life of Christ last week, written and adapted from the Gospels by Anthony Burgess, where John the Baptist was in prison; and, while the scene does not appear in the Scriptures, it made a penetrating point when Herod Antipas said to John, "Baptist, what would you do if I should set you free?". John replied, "I would go back and follow the one whose way I have recently prepared. Without a single pause, if you would set me free, I should go on to live and serve the Christ, and if I should die today, I would miss all the tomorrows wherein I might serve

my Lord." "If I would free you, what would you do?"
.....That's your question, too, my friend, and mine,
now, here, in a different frame of mind, and in a
far different time and place. Yet, the question is
so similar, it should haunt you every footstep for
the remainder of this day and all the days to come.
"If one who has the power should free you, what would
you do? No - but, wait a minute. Why the if? The
conditions have changed as surely as the time and place.
If I should free you from the prison of your fears,
what would you do then? If I should turn it all around
so that you can join in with all the company of the
saints, who in his and her own way have seen the Lord
healed and whole and risen, as He said? What would
you do if I should free you from your fear of life and
death? If I should make it all a bad dream in the
night? If I should penetrate your darkness? What
would you do if I should free you? But why the "If"?
Rather, since we have been freed, since the heavens
and the earth are shouting, "All is well"; since the
battle's finally over now, we must now proclaim the
victory.

"The strife is o'er, the battle done,
The victory of life is won.
The song of triumph has begun.
Alleluia! Amen."

So, as we turn towards home,

MY EASTER WISH

May the glad dawn
of Easter morn
Bring joy to thee.

May the calm eve
of Easter leave
A peace divine within thee.

May Easter night
on Thine heart write
O, Christ, I live for Thee.

Now you can go on your way; the story's done.....But, one last look before we go, at that first Easter morning: The Sun finally rose. The dawn's early light came to ease the chilly darkness away. The angel messengers went back into heaven, I guess. Someone probably rolled the stone back into place again. It was business as usual down in Jerusalem. The morning was at its everyday work, awakening the ancient city to be up and at it once again, on the first day of that new week, to the waiting chores: jobs to attend, fires to warm, wares to hawk in the marketplaces, compromises to make. For most of them, it was very much the same as any other day. It came on looking just like all the rest; how do you know how to recognize the great exceptional days, anyway - they come on in such ordinary clothing, unannounced, without fanfare, without warning.

.....O.K.?, but.....Meanwhile, already on the move out on that little hillside near the lovely slopes at the foothills of the 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 little dusty path with all her might, so dangerously fast you might have wanted to reach out your hand to slow her down lest she stumble and fall; bounding along as fast as her trembling legs would carry her, going towards home to tell the others of the one and only news she had to tellOh, how I love that scene: carried in

the hint of that early dawn, lifted up above herself, so much so that her feet never touched that 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, flopping back now and then into those shining open eyes, which just a moment back 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's saying, as she runs, "Oh dear God, it's true. He is not dead. He is Risen as He said. It's true. I tell you I saw him.....I saw him.....His eyes met mine. Because He lives, so shall I live, too.... It's true. I saw Him. Jesus Christ our Lord is Risen from the Dead!" Halleluiah, Amen. Amen.

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