

"HE IS RISEN"
April 15, 1990

TEXT: I Peter 1:3 "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."

Once again it is Easter. And, unless I miss my guess, most of us woke up this morning with happy hearts and smiling faces, put on our very best and newest clothes, and came to church expecting to find a joyous celebration. On the way, and here at church we greeted those we met with a cheery, "Happy Easter!" How different it was that Sunday morning so long ago in a garden outside of Jerusalem.

There, a little before dawn, a handful of sobbing women made their way to a lonely tomb not far from the spot where Jesus had been crucified. It was the custom in those days to visit a loved one's tomb for three days after the burial. For they believed that the spirits of the dead hovered about the tomb until they no longer recognized the body because of decay.

John's gospel mentions only Mary Magdalene, but Mark and Luke speak also of another Mary, the mother of James, --and of Joanna, and Salome as well. However many they were, they found to their dismay, that the stone was rolled away from the door and the tomb, itself, was empty. Had his final resting place been desecrated by grave robbers? Or did his enemies fear and despise him so much that they had come and stolen his body? They did not know, and they scattered in confusion. But Mary had the presence of mind to go and tell Peter and John, who ran to the tomb to see for themselves. They, too, were mystified, for, in John's words, "as yet they did not know the scripture that he must rise from the dead."

With who knows what kinds of questions and fears, Peter and John went back to their homes again, leaving Mary alone in the garden with her grief. Then it was that she saw two angels, and, a little while, later Jesus, himself, whom she mistakenly thought to be the gardener. After all, it was still almost dark, and her eyes were filled with tears. But, when he called her name, she realized who he was, and her grief was turned to joy. Finally, as Jesus commanded, she went and said to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord."

It is a very touching story. So touching, in fact, that I often have trouble reading it out loud. By the time I get to the place where Jesus speaks to her, my eyes, too, get watery, and I

have trouble making my voice do what I want it to. But, touching or not, what can such an ancient story have to do with us? What difference does it make in our lives?

It makes a great deal of difference. For there are tombs into which we, too, may peer with feelings of helplessness and despair? We, too, have our griefs and our fears, all of which can be transformed if we could only say, as Mary said, "I have seen the Lord." Helmut Thielicke, a well-known German pastor and theologian, writes, "If Jesus lives and rules then I am --for example-- no longer completely without hope. My cares are driven away. Then I know that my loved ones who have passed on have not passed away from me but have passed on to Him. I do not have to take much of the disappointment in life so terribly seriously anymore. Doubtless even my car, my television set, and the hoped for raise take on a somewhat different rank in my life's scale of values."

For the disciples, those two nights after the crucifixion were the longest, most terrible nights of their lives. But perhaps some of you have suffered through your own long nights. Perhaps some of you have shed your tears and longed for the morning to come. Some, for instance, may have listened in disbelief as the doctor said, "I'm sorry. There was nothing we can do." For others, perhaps, there was a phone call --or a knock at the door-- and someone saying, "There's been an accident. You'd better come." For some it may have been standing silently and hearing your supervisor say, "It's nothing personal, you know. It's just that the company's had to make some cuts." For some it may not be anything bad in itself. Perhaps it is something good, like a new baby or a promotion, which brings with it responsibilities we are not sure we can handle. Perhaps it is just the wear and tear of everyday living.

There are many kinds of griefs and fears. And all of them desperately need the touch of Easter. In her book, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Maya Angelou writes of her lonely childhood as a little black girl growing up in the deep South. Recalling how she was often shunted back and forth from one relative to another, she writes, "Of all the needs . . . a lonely child has, the one that must be satisfied, if there is going to be hope . . . is the unshaking need of an unshakable God."

An unshakable God, that is what Easter means to me. That is what lifted the disciples out of their grief and despair. That is what transformed them from cowards to warriors of the Gospel, to men prepared to die rather than deny what they had seen and known. And that is what lifts the followers of Christ in every age.

During World War II Helmut Thielicke, of whom I spoke just a moment ago, preached on the rubble of a bombed-out church. He knew a great deal about fear, for he, himself, had barely escaped the wrath of the Nazis. Death was all around him, yet

even in the midst of despair and devastation, he rejoiced in the love of God and addressed these words to his congregation: "Where Christ is King, everything is changed. Eyes see differently, and the heart no longer beats the same . . . In every hard and difficult place the comforting voice is there, and the hand that will not let us go upholds us."

That is what it means when we say, "He is risen." It means that evil has been defeated. It means that, in the conflict between good and evil, between truth and falsehood, the last word is with God. We may not always see His victory, but it has been won just the same. Leslie Cooke writes, "In every great conflict there comes a turning point where to one contestant or another comes the assurance of victory. The contest may continue, its end may not be in sight, but its issue is settled. That is what the Resurrection means. The issue is settled --the last word is not with evil, with darkness, with death. It is with God." Something happened on Easter Day which made our Lord more alive on the streets of Jerusalem after his crucifixion than on the day of his triumphal entry. And it makes us more alive, too.

The importance of Easter lies in its insistence that the power which raised Jesus Christ from the dead is still active in the world today. We, too, may live in the power of the Resurrection. It can transform men and women here and now, giving new purpose, new power, and new meaning to their lives.

So, if some of you feel like giving up on the world, or on yourselves, be confident of this: He who raised our Lord from death can bring to you new birth and a living hope, an inheritance which is incorruptible and undefiled and which passeth not away. His help is much closer than you think. The darkness of the moment and the tears in our eyes may blind us to the friend who is standing quietly nearby. Yet, in his quiet way, he asks, "Woman, why are you weeping?" "Sir, why are you afraid?" And, if you listen very carefully, you will hear him call your name. Then you will know that he has been there all along. In the long, dark night your greatest ally is faith in him who promised, "I will not leave you comfortless. I will come to you. And because I live, you shall live also."

He is not dead. He is risen. Allelujah!