

"THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE"
March 31, 1991

TEXT: Mark 16:8 "And they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid."

I do not know how many times I have read those words, but this time they have special meaning for me. This year I understand what those women must have felt far better than I ever did before. Especially those closing words: "And they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid."

I always wondered about that. Why were they so afraid? How could they have kept silent? They had just been through the most wonderful experience imaginable. They had gone to the tomb that morning to perform the last sad labors of love for their friend and master. Their hearts were heavy as they went; their lives devastated.

But when they got to the tomb, they found it open. And, inside, instead of a corpse, they saw a young man dressed in white, who told them that Master was not there because he was not dead. He had risen and was alive. When they heard that, why did they not burst forth with joy? Why did they not run as fast as they could to share their news with others? How could they be afraid? How could they keep silent?

However, this past week something happened which, for me at least, put that passage in a whole new light. Something which helped me understand their fear --and their silence. For last Thursday, our son called from Saudi Arabia to say that he is scheduled to be back at Fort Bragg next Friday.

For seven and a half months, we waited to hear those words. But, when they finally came, they seemed almost too good to be true. While part of me wanted to go out and shout it to the world, another part was afraid. Afraid, perhaps, that if I said anything, it might not really happen. I do not expect you to understand that. I am not sure I understand it myself. But now I know how those women must have felt.

And now, instead of wondering how they could react the way they did, I am more inclined to wonder how we can react the way we do. How we can take the most wonderful, the most marvelous, the most miraculous of news so calmly, so matter-of-factly. For many today, what centuries of the faithful have viewed as history's greatest miracle has now become little more than "Spring Break." A chance to head south for a week of fun in the sun.

And, for those of us who remain here, Easter can still be just a spring festival. How much would it mean, for instance, without the flowers, without the new clothes, without the Easter egg hunts? Thursday evening we celebrated Christ's Last Supper with his disciples. And, not counting those who were involved, there were seventy-five people here. That may sound like I am complaining --and maybe I am a little-- but that is not my point.

What I want to suggest this morning is that, somehow, the real meaning of Easter may have become old hat for us. Perhaps we have heard the story too often to be excited by it any more. Or perhaps we have not really heard it at all. Perhaps we have only heard what happened to Jesus. Perhaps we have missed what could happen to us.

The nineteenth century preacher, Phillips Brooks, who wrote O Little Town of Bethlehem, once said, "The great Easter truth is not that we are to live newly after death --that is not the great thing-- but that we are to live here and now by the power of the resurrection"

Easter celebrates more than the coming of spring. It celebrates more than something that happened to Jesus two thousand years ago. In a very real way, Easter is a celebration of life. Life as God intended it to be. The life as God gave it to us, which we feared lost --or damaged beyond recognition-- by pride and self-centeredness.

Easter affirms that the life which we have squandered so thoughtlessly, which we have crucified on the cross of self-interest, can be ours again --fresh, and pure, and new. Jesus said to Nicodemus, "Unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God." And Easter offers that new birth. New in our relationship to God. New in the power of God's spirit in our lives.

This new life breaks in on us, first of all, by freeing us from the burdens and failures of the past. Years ago, when I was playing football at Washington University in St. Louis, the newspapers often referred to us by our school colors, myrtle and maroon. Then, one day, a janitor washed the chancellor's office, and, lo and behold, the official university plaque was not myrtle and maroon after all. It was plain old green and red. Decades of dirt and grime had darkened the colors and made them seem like something else.

It can be the same with life. We, too, start out bright, and clean, and beautiful, like my three month old grandson. But the grime of living --wrong choices, selfish deeds, angry thoughts-- obscures the beauty of our spirits. We may even start to doubt we can make right choices or live in self-less ways. "After all," we say, "I'm only human."

So, where our sins once bothered us, as the grime accumulates, we may come to accept our faults, perhaps even be cynical about them. Is it any wonder, then, that most common psychological problems today are some form of self-hatred? Many of us do not like ourselves very much because, somewhere down deep, we know our true selves have been obscured.

But Easter can restore us, just as washing restored that university plaque. The forgiveness for which Christ prayed on the cross he demonstrated toward his disciples after the resurrection. With incredible grace, he neither punished, nor condemned, them.

He just accepted them, and, even more amazingly, entrusted them with his sacred work, as if they had never failed him at all. And what he did for them, he offers to us. To wash away the grime of the past, to reveal in us once more the beauty of our creation, so we can love each other --and ourselves.

Easter also gives new life by setting free the great potential God has placed in us. After all, the greatest proof of the Resurrection is not in the empty tomb or even that Christ appeared to the disciples. It is in the changed lives of those who saw him.

Take Simon Peter, for instance. Jesus had seen in him a well-disguised potential for greatness. He had called him Cephas, or Peter, which means, "the rock." How the others must have snickered at that! Simon the braggart, yes. Simon the impetuous, maybe. But Simon the rock? Not likely. Look at the night when Jesus was betrayed. "If I have to die with you," he said, "I will never deny you." But he denied him three times just the same.

Then look again after the resurrection. There he is a rock, indeed. Look at the second chapter of Acts and see this former coward, standing there before those same people who had frightened him such a short time before. Standing there and preaching Christ as the Son of God. That same kind of thing happened with the others, too. People who had fled just a few days earlier, now became leaders of the movement which turned the whole world upside down.

Easter reminds us that what Jesus did for the disciples, he can also do for us. If we give ourselves to God --without reservation-- we, too, can stop being helpless and afraid. We, too, can become "rocks" of faith, willing to dare. We, too, can be a "new creation" in Christ.

And, finally, Easter offers newness of life by giving us new direction for the future. Peter Drucker, probably the world's best known management expert, says the one thing that sets one company apart from another is the quality of its management. That is also true of life. One of the reasons you and I so often

fail to live the Christian life is because we operate under the same old management.

But Easter tells us that we do not have to. We can fire that old self-serving "Adam" who has been running our lives. We can put a sign in the window of our souls which says, "Under New Management." We can make Jesus Christ our new chairman of the board.

And what Lee Iaccoca did for Chrysler is nothing by comparison. "As in Adam all men die, so in Christ shall all be made alive." (I Corinthians 15:22) That is the "Good News" of Easter. Christ has risen. And, by his Grace, so can we. Alleluia! Alleluia!