

Easter

This Easter morning, we come to consider the most critical question of our life. It is a question posed by Job, and it is the Easter question: Shall we live again?

I see it as THE question of existence. Nobody escapes interest in it. It says, "how alive is life?" It cannot be ignored.

This question grows out of a deep insistence embedded in the human consciousness, that wants to know the why, the when, the wherefore of Life. What does this space, this time, this fleeting moment called earthly existence mean?

Now, there is one thing I want to try to put in perspective. This is not an issue that begins with Christianity. It is pre-Christian. It is pre-Judaism. The mystery-religions of ancient Egypt first raised the question about immortality. In the pyramids we saw the issue graphically portrayed in the way the leader was buried. They prepared the King for a long journey. He had provisions and fabulous jewels even suggesting that he or she was going to have to do some bargaining somewhere. He had money and perfume. They were wrapped in linens that were specially prepared...why? So they would have a better chance of arriving with their bodies intact. And their portrait was painted on the winding cloth, so if their bodies were disintegrated before they got there, those at the other end would know what the person looked like. But this was an Eternal Life that was reserved for the gods, the kings and the upper classes.

What is critical about Easter is not the FACT of resurrection. The resurrection idea did not start with Christianity. But what is critical about Easter is the peculiar content of Jesus' resurrection – not the fact of immortality, but the content of Jesus' immortal life.

In the context of Jesus' preaching, we find what is critical to understand the power of His resurrection. He declared that what, up to that point, had been the special province and privilege of Kings and the upper classes belongs to everyone. He declared that in the mind of God, you are ultimate, you are eternally precious. "Ye are the light of the world...Ye are the salt of the earth...The Kingdom is locked up in you." YOU are God's ultimate hope for this earth. Jesus robbed the elite of their exclusive entrance to the Holy of Holies. He broke the hold on Eternity of the statused and the upper classes. He democratized Heaven!

Jesus said the Life that had been reserved only for the privileged is available to you; to everyone!

When this happened, human life broke through the limitations of finitude. Jesus said: You are ultimate. Your life is forged for more than time and space. And when people began to hear this, they began to believe that within their finite form, there was the indwelling of ultimacy. There is that in you, Jesus said, that by definition, by God's intention, is destined to outlive your earthly time. The Kingdom, he said, is not of this world but is locatable in you, which means that there is a part of each created person that is larger than this world. And so in this understanding, the idea that "dust thou art, and to dust thou returneth," is not spoken of "all" of you. "Dust thou art, and to dust thou returneth" is about the chemical part of your body. It does not speak to the soul.

There is one critical idea in the four Gospels, and that is: You are of ultimate significance to God. That was a radical idea in a world that had all of ultimacy tied up with status and class.

Now. The people heard it, but they were indifferent. They said, that is interesting; it would be nice if it were true. And then after they killed him do you know what they said? They said, well, he sounded good... yeah, he was a good preacher...

When he died, it was like a dream gone flat, and they were wandering, hiding from friends. They didn't want the newsmen to catch them, and interview them. But, then it says, they had a sense of Presence, and it was real to them. It was almost like what he said, and what he was now, was declaring itself to be the continuing truth. For indeed, if he believed us to be ultimate, we would expect that he, himself, would know ultimacy. And if He was ultimate, then the Force of his person should reappear continuously in history, if we were to believe that it could even be true for us. And they said, there was something strange happening to them. They said, we had better take another look at this thing. He told us we are ultimate. He told us we are forged for claims larger than historical time, and they killed him last week, and here he is! The Force of his person among us. He told us that wherever two or three are gathered, there He will be, and indeed, we FEEL the Presence, we SEE him here. It is real. But even with that, the death dealing forces were also there.

Death dogged the people. It was like a hound of hell gnawing at the heels of those whose sense of Divinity would surface, and would push them to strive to walk the high places of time. Death would be there grabbing at them, to bring them back. Death was always there to lay low and to waste their larger-than-life claim. Death would admonish them and to prove its case, it would take them with it, before they fulfilled their commitment. It would take them while they were still unfulfilled, and it would make its case against this Jesus ideology. And death was confirmed by the philosophic mind that said, "You had better, eat, drink, and be merry now, for tomorrow you die."

You hear a story about a few little disciples who were on the road one day, and they had something happen to them, but they don't tell you about the hundreds of thousands of people who thought they had "done it" to Jesus, who thought maybe the disciples would learn, and stop being so ridiculous, and fanatical.

And the fear of death had the effect of paralyzing the committed. Death evidenced its ability, as it continues to do, to cut people off from a sense of their own destiny, and make them take low estimate of themselves....oh, you know, I have only got a little while and I am just human and I can't do it all. That is what I am talking about – taking shortsighted analysis of oneself. Death trapped, and traps people, in defining life in its own terms, and death terms are diametrically opposed to the Jesus-conscious terms. Death terms are what you can see. But, do you remember what Paul said? What is real is what is invisible.

Now, today not many people are interested in carrying the Jesus consciousness forth very much. I don't run into too many people who are on fire with the ultimate preciousness of their existence; who are burdened and intentioned with the fact that though caught on this earth, they indeed, are now a citizen of two worlds, here and heaven, here and eternity; here and that world larger than this one; here and the Spiritual One. I don't run into too many people who are wasting too much time with that. I run into a lot more people who say, this is real, and what they are busy doing is trying to secure this illusory self that is consistent with Death's message. And therefore, we buy a new suit and look into the mirror and say, this is it. You get a new hair-do, a new automobile, things to add to this illusory self, as you attempt to make it real. And the dilemma is, you are trying to take nothing and make it be something!

Jesus' life was so locked up with the mystery of the Creative One, that at one point, he said, I and my Father, (he was talking about the Source of Life), are One. He said, I am One with God. It is no wonder then, that a week or so after they had wiped him away on Golgotha, as the disciples were walking down the road, something grabbed them.

The definition of life that was fulfilled in and through Jesus was powerful. That is the reason that Resurrection, in our tradition, is important – not the fact of it, but the strange power of this particular Resurrection. The power of it had not been experienced before. They knew that as he talked they listened to a

revolutionary idea about life. They sensed the possibility that if He prevailed, he would break the boundaries of normal society; because he talked like a world-changer. Well, they said, as they watched him, certainly he is a boundary breaker. He died, and yet he is with us, with all of the force of his presence as we remembered it. It is not diminished. As a matter of fact, the text goes on and says, it not only was not diminished, they said, THIS IS THE MAN. And one said, I will check him out, I will put my finger in his side so I will know!

What I am trying to tell you is that this Presence hit them, and having come on the other side of death don't you understand how you would feel if indeed, it had happened to you? You saw the man die. So if indeed, on down the road, someone tapped you on the shoulder and you said, IT IS THE PRESENCE OF THE LORD! What would you think? This Presence has now been informed by the grave. Whatever has happened, He has passed through death, and still lays hold of me, still claims my life.

It happened. He continued to impact them, he whispered into their consciousness...boundary breaker...and he whispers down through time. There need not be an end. You do not have to relinquish eternity to the powerful and the moneyed. Jesus said no, and the thought caught on; and I am told that galley slaves on ships heard the message. Slaves looking at ruthless masters heard Him saying, "One fold have I, only one," "One fold and one sheep." I am told that the Black slaves said to their master: "Before I'd be a slave I'd be buried in my grave, and go home to my God and be free." And Jesus consciousness broke the back of the onslaught of death. The slave said, "I can take death, if you want, because I know I can be free beyond you. Jesus made clear that I am of ultimate worth in the sight of God." If that is not cause for revolution, I would like to know what is. If anybody holds me back from full participation in the beatific vision, which is God's creation in all of its fullness, I have a right to move on him.

When one touches the sense of ultimacy in their own existence, in a sense they are already beyond the social control of the time. They are already

participating beyond history. The life of Jesus makes it clear that this is not something that happens totally as a gift from God; nor does it happen as an achievement of your own religiosity. Jesus makes it clear by example that you do not arrive at this freedom that he talks about and this ultimacy that he preached about from your own little regularities, praying, fasting, paying dues and being nice. It may have something to do with it, but not much. Nor do you sit around and wait for it to drop out of the sky. But what happens is a part of the mystery of rendezvous – of joint venturing. It is a divine/human encounter, and your life on this earth becomes the nexus, the meeting place, and the trysting place, where divinity and humanity are fused.

And in the life of Jesus, God unleashed an unrelenting, agonizing love, first visited on history in his own agony and love on Calvary. And the power and the force of His Life, exhibited in the focusing of his will on God's desire, forged a personality of such potency that through Him his own disciples, and thousands of people since, have discovered the basic ultimacy of themselves. And so He is a continuing Presence, breaking through the jaws of death, and moving with fierce aggressiveness, and with a frightening patience; moving with a bewildering attractiveness – moving on to lay hold of people, to seize them, and save them from self-defined illusion and destruction and sin.

It is the power of the Resurrection of Jesus that makes Easter a peculiar event in history. Not the fact of it. There had been others. But the Power, that is related to the fusion that took place in His own life, between God's will and His own action. It became a saving power. As he made contact with the Creator, the Creator laid on that Life, all of its agonized concern, care and longing, for the creature that it had participated in making. He laid that concern, that undying Love, on the person of Jesus, and Jesus brought that agonized love back into the world and it is so powerful that death itself is confounded by it. Death is confounded by God's intention and God's insistence that we become aware of the magnificence of our own creation – that we become aware of the awesome hand that is laid on the intricacy of our very form.

The poet says: "Rescue the perishing, care for the dying, Jesus is merciful, Jesus will save."

It is a saving mission...not search and destroy. A search and save mission. "I sought the Lord, and afterwards I knew, he moved my soul to seek him, seeking me. It was not I that found, O Savior true, no, I was found of Thee."

I have preached to you today about the awesome power of the Continuing Presence of Jesus in history. To those of you who ache, who know the message has truth in it, I want to tell you that he is the author of salvation. He is the way for you to deal with the injustice, the mercilessness, the unrighteousness, the corruption, the mediocrity, the dullness, the blandness, the agony, and the ache of your own life.

The author of salvation continues to confound the author of destruction. I entreat you, if you think, in your consciousness, that you encounter the continuing Presence; stop awhile.

I know that one who is capable of saving me – the Force and Presence in history that is capable of infusing my life with grandeur – I know He is alive. The text says: "I know that my Redeemer liveth". And a good translation of the redeemer word is "avenger." What does an avenger do? The avenger goes to court and argues for you when the accuser shows up, and we have translated that into redeemer. I know that my avenger is alive! And to use the Psalmist understanding: I know that I have surety, standing at the Bar of Life, pleading my case for me. I know that my Redeemer liveth! And though worms destroy this body, yet without flesh, shall I see God!