



CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS

"THE EFFECTS OF EASTER"

Sunday Morning, April 22, 1962
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
John R. Claypool

Scriptural Reference: I Corinthians 15:12-22

In a poem entitled "The Widow in the Bye Street," John Masefield depicts a dramatic scene. A young man is being executed by the state, and watching from the crowd is his widowed mother. When it is all over, she begins to sob uncontrollably, and as she turns away she is heard to say something about "broken things, too broke to mend." That phrase describes her hopeless situation, for now her own flesh and blood is gone. But it also captures a very prevalent attitude toward the whole of reality. Who of us has not looked out on the world and come to this same conclusion? What is human existence? It is just a lot of broken things - shattered fragments - littered wreckage. And we are haunted by the fear that what we see is "too broke to mend."

This mood was certainly present right before the first Easter. Here too was the scene of a young Man being executed. His followers and family watched it all in stunned disbelief. Just a little while before they had been so impressed with Him. He spoke as no one had ever spoken before. He performed mighty works and had all the characteristics of the Expected One. They had been so sure that He was the Messiah. For centuries the chosen people had waited for God to intervene; every horizon was scanned and every generation was examined in hopes that the Deliverer would appear, and for a while the Carpenter seemed to be that One. But then, almost as quickly as He appeared, His fortunes turned. The crowds began to dwindle, the opposition hardened, and one Thursday night He was seized and tried, and by Friday afternoon He was dead. This was more than the extinction of one man; this was the death of a great hope. All that they had dreamed and expected was shattered in that cross. Something in them died that day, and when the tomb was sealed, so was their gloom. Huddled together like animals in a thunderstorm, His followers gathered behind locked doors and unrelieved despair settled over them. If you had asked any of those folk about life, they probably would have agreed: "It is just some broken things, too broke to mend."

And what can be said about the mood prior to the first Easter can also be said about Easter, 1962. Is not despair about our world the very order of our day? You may try to run from it or not think about it, but the fact is: hope is a scarce commodity on today's market. What do they call us? "The Beat Generation" - and for good reason. The atrocities of this century have been enough to disillusion everyone. They have robbed modern man of all confidence and left him "bewitched, bothered, and bewildered." The contemporary chorus is a monotone of despair. Take Jean-Paul Sartre for example: he is the most popular writer today in Europe. What is he saying? He equates existence with absurdity; he entitles his first novel Nausea, for this best describes his personal reaction to life. As a symbol of utter hopelessness, he stands at the center of our time.

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But this despair is not confined to European intellectuals. Even ordinary folk like us participate in a kind of quiet fatalism. It seems that everywhere we look, things are going bad. Everything seems to turn out wrong. Even our best intentions and noblest endeavors come to naught. I will never forget hearing about a social worker speaking to a large audience. She told of walking through a slum one day and finding a little boy who was a pathetic sight. He had been hit by a truck years before but given no medical help. His spine was twisted and he was doomed to helplessness. She resolved to do something, so she marshaled all resources, got him into a hospital and under a specialist's care, and saw him through a long series of operations. One day, two years later, her office door opened, and that boy walked into her presence. He even turned a cart wheel to demonstrate his complete recovery. After he had gone, she said a deep satisfaction settled over her. "Here," she thought, "is one person I have actually helped." Then the speaker paused: "Do you know where that boy is today?" Several guessed: "Governor? Senator? Mayor?" "No," she sobbed, "he is in the penitentiary for the worst crime a man can commit. I taught him how to walk, but he walked the wrong way."

This is what seems to happen, more often than not, in our kind of world. Little wonder that a kind of creeping despair has overtaken us. If you were absolutely honest, many of you would admit that you have some question about the future. With the bombs getting bigger and dirtier and men's hatred growing more intense, what does lie ahead for human history? Do you really expect to live out your "threescore and ten" - you, your children, and your grandchildren - or do you figure somebody will hit the wrong button and quite soon it will all be over? Certainly the phrase of that widow is not limited to her plight or the feelings of the early followers of Christ. Right today, life looks like some "broken things, too broke to mend."

It is to this haunting fear - this age-old suspicion - this persistent doubt - that the message of Easter speaks. It bears precisely and directly on the most ultimate of all issues - what is the true nature of Reality? Who is really Lord of this universe? Does Purpose exist and is Good a potent force, or is the whole thing "a dirty trick" played on us by some cosmic Sadist? On which side is the real supremacy? To put the issue bluntly: can the Creator carry through His purpose, or does evil - futility - emptiness - have "the last say?" These are questions that cry out for an answer, and on that answer turns our whole outlook on life. The issue was forged a long time ago; the moment God created the world and then things went wrong, a cosmic question mark cast a shadow over all.

The story of Easter is involved in the resolution of that dilemma. It is the climax of the greatest "struggle" in the history of the world. For we are told that in the year 5 B.C., or more exactly "in the fulness of time," God responded to the challenge of evil and came for "a showdown battle." Now what was the strategy God used? Would He exercise omnipotence and destroy the whole thing in "one fell swoop"? This is the insight found in the old story of Noah and the Flood (Genesis 7). Men got so wicked God could not handle them, so He wiped them out and started all over again. This proved His supremacy, all right, but it also implied defeat. For under the conditions of creation, God was outmatched and had to "call it quits." A potter who finally in frustration dashes his creation against the wall is superior to it, but hardly victorious. And by the admission of the writer of Genesis himself, the strategy used in the Flood is certainly not God's final approach to the problem of evil.

Rather, in the first century, God made a daring move - He willed to come to earth in human form. Laying aside omnipotence, He accepted all the limitations of creaturely existence, that under these very circumstances supremacy could be measured.

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So just like man He was "born of woman" (Galatians 4:4) and entered the human stream. When Jesus emerged a mature Man, the stage was set for the ultimate contest. The Creator-As-Creature met "the challenger"; in the outcome, the Lord of history would be proved. As the battle began, every weapon of evil that had broken man was loosed on Him. He was tempted, maligned, tricked, cajoled, but God-As-Man did not waiver. The two Figures approached each other in increased intensity, and finally, all else having failed, they collided in moral conflict - death was loosed. That greatest of all weapons that had decimated all creation cut down the God-Man. He died, and on that Friday, the Adversaries disappeared into the tomb.

We are familiar with the dramatic device by which a struggle takes place out of sight. You can hear the noise and sense the intensity of the battle, but you cannot see who is doing what. Then things get quiet, and you know that someone has prevailed. But who? Tension mounts as you watch the door, waiting to see the victor emerge.

So it was with this cosmic struggle. They were last seen going in the tomb; a mighty battle took place, but who had won out? For three days creation held its breath. All was quiet; Friday night - Saturday morning - Saturday afternoon - Saturday night, and then Sunday morning, just as the sun arose, there was a sound and look! There stands Jesus, emerging the Victor. He had taken all that evil could muster, and having stood all, there He stands. Behind Him lay the tomb and death and evil - all vanquished and overcome. In the crucial showdown, in this kind of world, supremacy was proved. He took that cosmic question mark and straightened it into the exclamation point of victory. Here for all to see was the true nature of Reality; here was graphic demonstration that the Creator could finish what He had started. The world is a lot of broken things? Yes! "Too broke to mend?" No, for God is able, even in the face of the worst, to accomplish His best.

This is the message of Easter, the crucial turning point in the struggle between light and darkness. What the Russian campaign was to Napoleon; what D-Day was in World War II; what West Virginia was to the Kennedy campaign - the Resurrection is to the cosmic war. The key battle has been fought and won; the scales have been tipped; the tide has turned; now we can know who is the Lord of history. Out of the tomb steps Jesus; here in triumphant adequacy.

The first Easter completely transformed those early followers. They made a full turn from tragedy to triumph. And if you dare believe, it can have the same effect on you. In many ways we are just like those women who stumbled out into the dark that first Easter morning. They were going out of habit and certainly expected nothing to happen. But it did, wonderfully and dramatically; and listen my friend - the same can happen to you. In terms of basic outlook on life, Easter can be of radical ultimacy. I dare you to look at the empty tomb; see what it means. Here is your hope. Even in this kind of world, you can take heart.

Leslie Weatherhead tells of a five-year-old boy back during World War II who was accustomed to seeing his parents listen to the radio. He could not understand all the words, but he knew generally that it was "the news." One Easter Sunday the word "God" kept recurring on the broadcast, so the little one ran downstairs where his grandmother was cooking and said: "Quick, grandmother, turn on the radio. It is the news, and today it is about God."

This is Easter. The news today is about God - what He has done in Jesus Christ. And it means that we can hope even in 1962. He has risen! He is Lord! Halleluiah!