



NORTHMINSTER Baptist Church

**3955 Ridgewood Road
Jackson, Mississippi**

“Stoicism, Hope, and Easter”

A Sermon
by
John R. Claypool
April 19, 1981

Scripture: Mark 16:1-8

In what is perhaps the best-known of his many books — a series of lectures entitled **The Courage To Be**, Paul Tillich asserts that Christianity had only one real rival at the time of its inception, and that was the spirit and philosophy of Stoicism. To be sure, there were many competing religious systems in the Graeco-Roman world, but in terms of basic vision into

reality, all of them were more compatible to Christianity than that system of metaphysics that roots far back in Greek philosophy and was formulated first by a man named Zeno in Athens in the third century B.C. The essence of Stoicism is a spirit of resignation toward all things. Reality is regarded as fixed and static, and human beings are felt to have little real power to alter or modify anything. Reality is not going to change on its own and no one has the potency to change it. Therefore, the appropriate human stance is one of accepting and adjusting and coming to terms with "things-as-they-are." "Live consistently with nature" — this is the great motto of Stoicism, and literally millions of folk since then, many of whom may never have heard the term "Stoicism," nonetheless have embraced this vision of reality and lived out their lives accordingly.

And Tillich is correct in asserting that Christianity represents the polar opposite of this vision and this way of doing life. Here is the affirmation that reality is dynamic and not static, and that because human-kind are made in the image of such Dynamism, they too possess real potency to make things happen. St. Paul sees behind all things a God "Who can make the things that are out of the things that are not, One Who can make dead things come to life again." (Romans 4:17) This means that creativity and ingenuity and infinite becoming are more characteristic of reality than the static and powerless images of Stoicism. To give the contrast a very simple form, a Stoic would move into an old house and ask, "How can I manage to live here with things as they are?" The Christian would move in with relish and excitement and say: "Let's see! What can God and I together do to expand and renovate and fulfill the potential of this place?"

Do you see now why Tillich said there were and still are just two basic options at the ultimate level? All behavior grows out of some vision of reality, and to see all things as static and yourself as basically powerless will lead to one way of being in the world, while to see all reality as dynamic — yourself included — will lead to a very different way of doing life.

Some years ago a doctoral student in the Department of Psychology at Duke University ran an experiment on this point with two identical rats. He put each one in a vat of water with only one differential. One of the vats was sealed shut while the other was left open. The vat that was sealed obviously had a limited amount of oxygen in it and no escape, and the

creature that was swimming for its life in that context quickly perceived the static state of his situation. There was no apparent chance for him to modify things, and in exactly six minutes by the clock, this creature instinctively gave up, sank to the bottom, and drowned. However, the other rat, sensing that there was unlimited oxygen and a possibility of escape, swam for an incredible **thirty-six hours** before the experiment was mercifully ended. Now whatever you may think about the morality of this use of animals, it at least highlighted the functional significance of hope. We are all familiar with the cliché — “As long as there’s life, there’s hope.” It is just as true — “As long as there’s hope, there is life.” A sense of dynamism in either the structures of reality or in ourselves is what keeps life flowing and alive, and this of course is what the Christian vision of reality is capable of doing over against the Stoic vision.

But setting practical impact aside, the question has to be asked. Which of these opposing visions of morality is true? It makes no difference that this rivalry has been around for a long time or that certain kinds of behavior grow out of such vision. The ultimate issue is one of ontology; that is, which of these systems most accurately describes the world in which we find ourselves?

Obviously, there is evidence to be found for both positions. Stoicism would not have as wide a following or as long a history if there had not been much in human experience that did lend support to its assertions. Who of us at times has not felt overwhelmed by realities that we could not change, or deep frustrations with how little comes really of our best efforts to alter anything? Years ago, I remember hearing about a social worker who was reading a case history to some of her colleagues at one of their regional meetings. She told about walking through an urban ghetto one day and seeing a little boy sitting on the stairs of a tenement who was little more than a crumpled heap of human flesh. His deformity was so startling that she could not suppress the desire to inquire more fully into the matter. It turned out that he had been hit by a car several months before, but his parents who were fresh in from Appalachia knew little about the complex systems of the city and had not gotten him to proper medical attention. His present condition was what had resulted, and although he was not part of her case load, out of genuine human

compassion, she took him to an orthopedist at a nearby medical school and learned after extensive examinations that there was hope through a long and involved series of operations that the child's body might be brought back to normality. There was much bureaucratic red tape to cut through, of course, and a considerable amount of money to be raised, but this was a determined social worker, and she successfully set the whole process in motion. A full two years after this child entered the hospital, she reported hearing a gentle knock on her office door, and to her amazement that lad **walked** in on his own two feet. In utter glee, he even turned a cartwheel for her to demonstrate the completeness of his recovery. The two embraced each other warmly for what had been accomplished, and when he left, the social worker reported a kind of quiet glow permeating the whole office. She said to herself; "If I never accomplish anything else in my life, at least here is one person to whom I can point as having made a real difference." At that point, she paused in her presentation, and said, "This was all several years ago now. Do you know where that boy is today?" And caught in the idealism of the moment, several speculations were made — "a school teacher," a "surgeon," perhaps a social worker himself. But then there was an even longer pause, and with real emotion the speaker said: "No, he's in the penitentiary for one of the worst crimes that a human being can commit." Then she said: "I was instrumental in teaching him how to walk again, but there was no one to teach him where to walk." And with that, tears filled her eyes, and a discussion ensued among that group about how hard it is to help really and how little often seems to come even from our most diligent efforts. No wonder a vision of reality such as you find in Stoicism is widespread and old. There are days this option seems very real to me, but wait — that is not all the evidence that one encounters in life and history.

How do you suppose the Christian vision ever came to be or account for the fact that over a billion people on this planet ever adhered to a vision of reality that is the polar opposite of such pessimism?

There are many answers to such a question, I am sure, but the event that we are celebrating today may be the most seminal of all. I am speaking now of the event of Easter. It all began some time before the actual day, when a young Carpenter from Galilee began both to embody and articulate this dynamic

vision of reality. "The time is fulfilled. The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. Repent and believe the Good News" is the way He had inaugurated His ministry, and there was something about Him that stirred people to the depths both in relation to God and their own potency. Even simple folk like fishermen and farmers began to believe they did have worth and could make a difference with their lives as they collaborated with a dynamic God. What the Carpenter represented was certainly not brand new. It had been alive in history since the time of Abraham and that encounter he had with a God Who wanted to bless and fulfill all human-kind. Jesus simply brought the faith of Abraham to its fullest flower, but then the same happened that occurred to the good intentions of that social worker. The hope and dynamism of the Young Carpenter offended all the folk who had no hope and did not want to hope. They turned against Him with a vengeance, and in our swift succession of events, one Thursday night He was arrested, and tried, before the sun went down on Friday afternoon, He was crucified, dead and buried. You talk about the triumph of Stoicism — I suppose the world came as close to going over to that vision of things that Friday and Saturday as ever before. If reality ever seemed to be static and human effort futile, it was that first "Holy Week," and then the absolutely unexpected occurred. Some women went out early Sunday morning to finish preparing Jesus' body for burial, and when they got to the tomb, they found the door rolled back and the body gone. So deep was their Stoic despair that it did not occur to them at first that God had anything to do with all this. They assumed grave robbers had added insult to injury and had taken the corpse, but then they encountered a shining Presence who said: "Guess what! He is not here! He is risen! God had done something and there is something you can do. Go tell the disciples and Peter that Jesus has not given up on anything. You deserted Him, but He has not deserted you. He still has hope for what can be. He goes before you into Galilee. Go and meet Him there and get on with the business of finishing creation." You want to know how the Christian vision of reality ever got started? Easter has to be its birthday, that moment when it became clear for all to see that Reality is dynamic and not static, and that human beings do have power if they will only realize it. God is "the One Who can make the things that are out of the things that are not, and the One Who can make dead things come to life again," and does not that constitute a basis

of hope, not just about some things but about all things? If absolute nothing and the condition of death are not beyond God's power to do something, how can we look at our problems and say despairingly: "There is no hope. There is nothing that can be done." The Christian sets no limits to what might or might not happen, given this sort of Ultimate Reality. The words "possible" and "impossible" are left to God, and this morning, I beg you to take Easter into account as you make up your mind about which of these visions of reality is true.

To be sure, there is much to make it seem that the vat with the lid tightly shut is the nature of our human situation. Judas Iscariot must have thought so. As I said a few weeks ago, his tragedy did not lie in what he did, despicable as that was. It lay in what he did not do. He did not stay around to see what dynamic Reality could do with what he had done. He gave way to Stoic despair, and not surprisingly did what that hopeless rat did — gave up and sank into suicide. But Simon Peter and the other ten — they were little better than Judas in terms of moral performance — they all abandoned and deserted our Lord. But they stayed around, and look what happened! There was both a Power and a Mercy in reality that would not let go or give up, and possibilities emerged on the other side of that trauma that no one could ever have envisioned in their wildest imagination. All of which is to say that hope is a very realistic alternative, right up to this very moment.

Paul Tillich is right, then, Christianity did have originally and still does have only one real rival, that is the spirit of Stoicism — the belief that reality is static and humans are helpless and thus resignation and passivity are the ways humans are to be in the world. "Live consistently with nature," says the Stoic. You cannot change anything; accept it the way it is, adjust to it and be satisfied.

But over against this is the joyous affirmation: "Eye hath not seen. Ear hath not heard. Neither has it entered the heart of humankind what God has prepared to those who love Him." Here is the belief that God is in fact dynamic and we humans are made in His image, and thus "swimming on" and never giving up is the appropriate way for humans to be in this world. "Who knows what He — what we — can do with what is?" This is the Christian affirmation, and it is not just based on wishful thinking. Listen, on the **first Easter, God raised Christ Jesus from the dead.** If He could do that, what are your problems and my

problems by comparison? No wonder Christians say that despair is presumptuous. It is deciding ahead of time what God can and cannot do, and after Easter, who has a right to do that?

I am told President Eisenhower was once in France and saw a public building on which an inscription was carved. He asked his French driver what it said, and he replied: "Formally translated, it means 'History is prologue.' But colloquially, it means, 'Man, you ain't seen nothin' yet!'"

That is the spirit the Christian vision brings to every situation, including whatever you are up against this very morning. Just like the people in the first century, you really only have two options — Stoicism or Christianity. I know I cannot make the decision for you, but please, as you make up your mind, take Easter into account. Look at what God did with that set of circumstances. What might He do with "the sack of rocks" you find yourself carrying this morning?

"Live consistently with nature" . . . "Man, you ain't seen nothin' yet" — these always have been and still are our only choices.

Well . . . which will it be?