

Mel Moorhouse at Westminster College in New Wilmington PA. might be sitting in the pews and will rise up to critique my sermon when I have finished.

Someone at Parkwood Church told me that I should speak with more authority and tell the parishioners what they should believe. I was sorry to disappoint him; but I have never felt it my responsibility to tell other Christians what to believe. Many preachers do, as if they had secrets whispered in their ears alone. I am always a little leery of pounding my truth into the heads of others. I think it is my job to make them think and work out their own conclusions. Spoon-feeding the little Christians I leave to someone else.

I am not apologizing. Far from it! I think the Lord God is pleased when we search for his truth. I think sometimes “maybe” is enough. “My ways are not your ways; neither my thoughts your thoughts.” Some clergy parrot back their opinion taken from a drive-by look at the Bible or what someone else has told them. They feel this makes them the final authority on everything. The Bible says, “Test everything, but hold fast to what is good.” I have tried to do both with integrity and conviction. I hope it is evident in these responses to the Resurrection. I welcome you to examine the fruits of my labors.



# I

## BREAKFAST BY THE GALILEAN SEA

*Text from John 21*

I want to warn you at the start— caution you, anyway — that you have to watch out for old John, the author of the fourth Gospel. He likes happy endings, he likes to keep it simple, and he likes to tie up loose ends. He was a fine Christian gentleman, a devoted follower of Jesus, one who earned the title of “The Beloved Disciple.” We know much about what Jesus said and did due to the fourth Gospel. You can trust John with the truth, but you have to watch out for his personalized approach to the life of Jesus.

As I said, John was fond of tying up loose ends and offering happy endings. As an example, after Thomas said that he doubted Jesus had risen from the dead, John is the only Gospel writer who tells us that Christ came back and spoke to Thomas. Thomas said, “My Lord and my God.” That put Thomas back on the first team.

John is also the only one of the four Gospel writers who tells us about the death and resurrection of Lazarus. It is remarkable that Matthew, Mark and Luke never even men-

tioned something so grandly miraculous. I don't know why. But John wanted us to know that Jesus loved his friend Lazarus, who was Mary and Martha's brother, and that he wept at his tomb just before he brought him back to life. John is also the only one who tells us about the miracle at the wedding feast in Galilee, when Jesus turned the water into wine. He wanted us to know that our Lord and his disciples were friendly people who loved family and friends and enjoyed life and weddings.

Conversely, John never tells us that Jesus rejected his mother and brothers when they came to visit him one day when he was busy. The synoptic writers tell it (Luke 8:19-21 and Matthew 12:46-50). He probably knew about it, but he did not include it. Apparently, he did not like that kind of story. He does not tell us that Jesus was rejected by his own family and friends in Nazareth. (Luke 4:20-30 and Mark 6:1-6), nor does he include the beheading of Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, by Herod in appreciation of his stepdaughter's fancy dancing.

So when we come to this last chapter in his Gospel, we should not be surprised that John alone tells the captivating story of how Simon Peter was restored to leadership by Jesus. In the other three Gospels, Peter is left having disgraced himself by the betrayal of his Lord the night before the crucifixion, but John likes to keep the good guys looking good.

This could be what happens when you reach a ripe old age: you come to worry less about details and sad things, and lean more on the simple truths of the Gospel. The great theologian Karl Barth said that as he grew older and was nearing the end, he was asked about the most important and essential thing he knew. He replied quietly, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong. We are weak, but he is strong." Can you believe it? How grandly simple! In the

end, it is child-like acceptance and surrender that matter most.

Remember: John wrote his book some 60, or maybe even 70, years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. That is a long time, time to set aside the nonessentials, time to bring it down to the one or two thoughts you cannot live without. Unamuno, the revered Spanish existentialist, told his students, "Worry not about what others think; worry only over what God thinks of you!" he said. It takes many of us a long time to learn that.

Anyway, I love the way John tells the story of breakfast by the Galilean Sea. The disciples are out on the water fishing when a man appears on the shore. The man was Jesus, but they did not know it. Why? In some of the post-Resurrection appearances, people did not recognize Jesus when he first appeared. This happened to Mary Magdalene on Easter morning in the Garden and to Cleopas and his friend on the road to Emmaus. Jesus walked beside them, and they did not know who he was.

But here at the seaside breakfast, the reason was simple: they did not know it was Jesus because it was early morning, the mist was still on the lake and the man on the shore was too far away to see clearly. There is nothing mysterious or otherworldly about that. This is not a spiritual body trying to break back into human form. It is the real, live, walking, talking Jesus. A couple minutes later, when he invited them to have breakfast, they would be certain who it was. After all, you do not sit down and eat and drink with a ghost now, do you?



To get the larger picture, we need to go back for a minute to the beginning of Chapter 21. After the crushing disappoint-

ment of the crucifixion, some of the disciples left Jerusalem and went back to Galilee. It says Jesus told them to go there and said he would come and meet them. But I have never thought that was why they journeyed home. Nah. Even though Mary Magdalene had seen him outside the tomb, and there were hints that he had appeared in some form or another, I think they were bewildered and decided to go back to the little town from which they had come to clear their minds.

They were most likely in Bethsaida. John says they were on the Sea of Tiberius, but Tiberius is the name John uses for what the others call the Galilean Sea. Tiberius was the largest and most influential city on the Lake. Notice that just seven of them were there. I am not sure where the other four were. Judas was gone, of course; he hanged himself. Peter, James and John were there. The two unnamed disciples were surely Andrew and Philip. Thomas the twin was there, along with Nathaniel of Cana. It would have been a long and perilous journey on foot for the 75 miles from Jerusalem to Tiberius. It was an almost identical journey, by the way, to the one Joseph and Mary had taken 34 years earlier down to Bethlehem, she being great with child. Travel conditions would have been dreadful off the system of Roman roads that ran up and down the country. It would have taken them a long while to get there, possibly seven or eight days and nights. And immersed in their bewilderment and grief, now that their guide and master was gone, it would have seemed all the longer: the road home from the funeral of someone you love is the longest road in all the world.

So, let's assume it was a week or so after Easter by the time they got home. I imagine it was worse when they arrived, although the Scripture does not mention it. Knowing some-

thing of human nature, I can easily guess the ridicule the disciples faced from their friends and families. "Hey, lookee here, the great adventurers have returned. Look at 'em. The boys are back home again, dragging their tails behind them, Hey Abe, Simon is back — heard he changed his name to Peter; and there's his stupid little brother. And the Sons of Zebbie who left their father and the family business are back again. Hey Salome, the Jesus freaks are back home and broke! I told them it would come to nothing. Hey Pete, if you ever need a job, come and see me. Maybe you can till the fields or sweep the streets or mend somebody's nets."

Distasteful business it is eating crow, having to admit that you were as dumb as the younger brother who ran off and wasted his inheritance. Only his father threw a party when he came back, but nobody whipped a party up for the broken disciples. They had believed in their neighbor, Jesus. They had bet their lives that Jesus the carpenter's son would prove to be the One. They hoped to find a happy ending. But by God, it did not look that way the afternoon they came shuffling home, empty-handed and empty-hearted. The weight of carrying an emotional burden is one of the heaviest of all. And the condemnations that matter most are those ones we make on ourselves. You can be sure they were down on themselves and feeling stupid.

But I learned a long time ago—and maybe you did too—that the worst mistake of all is not taking a risk in the first place. You seldom look foolish staying home and playing it close to the vest. A recluse seldom makes a fool of himself chasing after the hucksters or the helpers of the world. Those who play it safe never have to crawl back and beg forgiveness from their families. The safe church which never takes a risk never

gets into trouble. “Those who are down need fear no fall,” the shepherd boy sings in Bunyan’s *Pilgrims Progress*.

For every risk, there is a corresponding loss. Old Zebediah, Judah, Elizabeth and every Tom, Dick and Harry in town must have looked pretty good that day when Peter, Andrew, James, John and Phillip came dragging home with Nathaniel and Thomas following behind. What to do next was the problem.

So, it is little wonder that volatile Simon Peter, whose heights were higher and depths were deeper than the rest, decided he was going to do something rather than sit around and ponder all the could-have-beens. Some people are that way. I call it the “Simon of Cyrene” complex, after the man who was forced to carry the cross. At least he had something to carry. All the others could do on the Via Dolorosa was watch and weep. When you are down on your luck or depressed, get up and do something. It’s good therapy.

Simon Peter knew that. He said, “I don’t know about the rest of you, but I am going fishing.”

Good choice, Simon. He was a fisherman by trade; he was born to the sea, bred to follow the path of any one of the 22 species that traversed the Jordan River Valley, dependent on it for his life and livelihood.

The tense of the Greek verb John uses here — *hupago*— and his sentence structure could allow us to believe that Simon Peter meant to have more than a momentary respite from his faltering patience and oppressive gloom. He could have meant to say, “It was three good years, but it’s over. Finito. Over and out!” Once a fisherman, always a fisherman and down on himself, he could have thought, “I am going back to my former life, fully determined never to allow my dreams to run away with me again. Now I’m going fishing.” The world does not reward

you for great adventures, unless you succeed. The ones who worship risk-taking are the ones who win, but oh dear, they often lose as well.

The six of them understood and said “We’ll go, too.” Nathaniel wasn’t even a fisherman, by the way, but he went along. Once they were out on the sea, they sailed all night long, but caught nothing. Doggone it all: they couldn’t even pull a little break with all they had been through.

But just as day was breaking through the morning mists along the Sea of Galilee, they saw a man on the shore, or rather heard him. His voice called out to them in a Greek idiom that translates something like, “Children, have you any fish?” or “Friends, have you caught anything?” When they said no, he said, “Then, cast your net on the other side of the boat, and you will find some.”

This has always puzzled me. I could never figure out how a Nazarean carpenter, even if he were the Son of God incarnate, would know more about how to fish the Galilean Sea than those four fishermen. No disrespect intended for our Lord. But then I read what Professor William Barclay wrote in his commentary on John. He said that it is not uncommon, due to the way the morning light strikes the water, for a man to stand on the shore and direct those in the boat. He can see what they are missing. It takes the miracle out of the story, but eliminates the jurisdictional dispute.

Either way, it says they followed his advice, and when they cast their net from the right-hand side of the boat, 153 good-sized fish were trapped in the net. That made it so heavy, they could hardly haul it in.

It was just about the time they were counting the fish, or just plain reveling in their good fortune, that John finally rec-

ognized the man on shore. “Oh, glory be, Peter, look! It’s him! It’s the Lord! It’s Jesus!” As far as they knew, Jesus was in Heaven, but there he was, standing on the shore.

Simon Peter, being the rambunctious one, sprang into the sea. He was better at responding to a good idea than at creating one. He must have looked foolish early that morning. But twenty-nine years later Peter would look far more foolish and stupid than he ever did that morning when he leapt, splashed, gulped and snorted his way to the shore, where the Lord was waiting. By 62 A.D. he would be hanging upside down on a cross on one of Rome’s seven hills, dying that way because he said he was not worthy to be crucified right side up, as Jesus had been, looking beaten and forsaken until he would arrive on that unnamed shore we obligingly call “the other side,” where Christ was waiting. He will be there when your days and mine are through. The dreamer dies, but not the dream.

When Peter got out on land, he saw a charcoal fire with fish cooking and bread warming alongside it right there by sea. Jesus said, “Bring me some of the fish you have caught,” and they did. “Come and have breakfast with me,” Jesus said, and they did that, too.



Now, there is a little problem here. I suppose this is as good a time as any to tell you that there is a lot of controversy among Biblical scholars surrounding this story in John 21. Many cannot believe it actually happened as the Gospel says it did. Hardly anyone who is serious about John believes that this story (John 21) is an original part of the Gospel. For one thing, John 20 says that Peter had already seen the Lord in Jerusalem.

A couple of days later, it seems unlikely that he would not recognize him. It could be the story of a first post-Resurrection encounter that was tacked on to John, say 70 years after the death of Christ.

The Gospel of John is a complete unit without it, ending naturally with the Resurrection and the appearance to Thomas and the others. To say that the story was added does not attack its verity, or the details of the breakfast by the Galilean Sea. My view is that John himself added it later. But some think this episode may be an allegory, whose purpose might have been to reinstate Peter as the leader of the Apostles. After all, he had fallen into disgrace around another charcoal fire, where the cock crowed at dawn after he had betrayed his Lord three times.

Without this story, the Gospel ends with Peter disgraced. So when he later becomes a prominent leader and the Bishop of Rome, such an ending would have seemed incongruous. John writes a happy ending for Peter, in which Jesus charges him to go and tend his sheep. Remember, I warned you that John likes happy endings.

So now, note the lovely touch John puts on the ending, as he remembers the conversation around the fire that morning. No one dared to ask who Jesus was, where he had been or what it was like to be dead. (Many times I have wished they would have asked him). In the latter part of John 21, Jesus asks Peter if he really loves Him. Peter replies “Yes,” three times (to match the denials, I guess), “you know that I love you.” Christ charges him to tend his sheep, to feed his lambs, to tend his sheep again—that is, to carry on his work of ministering to the sick and dying, the aged, the homeless, widows and orphans in Galilee, in all Judea and in the world beyond.

The world can be a lonely place, even when you are in the

middle of a crowd. In the city streets with the hungry and unemployed, out in the mission field fraught with dangers untold, in Nazareth or Jerusalem then or now, in Tel Aviv or Beirut or Gaza today, down the road in Jericho on the banks of the ancient Jordan River, in the ghettos, across the tracks, and all along the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates or any other sea or river, the world can get you down. What we should do about it is our next assignment.

I invite you to sit down to a quiet little chit-chat with our Risen Lord sometime after Easter, and watch him as he walks around the charcoal fire then, or around our private quarters now, serving us one by one. How nice to be in the presence of the Risen Lord! But as you watch his glorious presence, watch out for his command, you are welcome at the breakfast tent, but if you love me, show me by giving of your means and your time and your prayers and your energies to serve the least of my brethren.

“Enjoy the morning, but do not boast or revel in my resurrected glory. Its purpose was not and is not to impress you as much as to inspire you. Get up, go out and work like fools for my sake. You can live on love. . . love received, love shared and love redeemed.”



And you know, by golly, the Disciples did it. They carried on. And you and I can, too. Slave away all night long without success, or since tragedy visited last month, or since you lost your job, or your failing health snuffed out your hope, or your son, or your school, or your bad luck let you down. Slave away while you are still far out to sea. But now and again, look up

and over to the beach. You might not know who it is, but from the shores of Galilee, you will hear a voice calling out, “Are you having any luck?” When you hear it, be honest about your needs and do what he says. Tell him you need his help by saying, “Oh Lord, I cannot make it any farther by myself. Tell me what I need to do, and help me do it.”

Then spring right into the water and thrash your way to shore. When you finally arrive, he will be there waiting; the fire will still be warm, and breakfast will be ready. He will serve you and give you what you need, just as he did in John 21. After he had served them breakfast, he sent them off to save the world. Whatever else occurred—even another crucifixion and agonizing death—with just the memory of his words, they lived happily ever after. And so shall you and I, for now and evermore, Amen.



## II

### THE FIRST EASTER SERMON

*“Mary Magdalene went and said to the Disciples,  
‘I have seen the Lord.’”*

JOHN 20:18

Had it not been for that first Easter morning, the world would be a poorer place indeed. It is difficult to sort through the details of exactly what happened from reading the New Testament. Many have tried to find some kind of harmony in the various resurrection texts, but it is a stretch to try to edit it down to a consistent story. The four Gospel writers sing the same lovely song. But if you think of them as a Barbershop Quartet in which each one sings a different note, you will hear it all more clearly. Matthew, Mark and Luke are in a synoptic key - that is, they are similar - while John has his own unique and individual range.

Look at what the Gospels say happened when Mary Magdalene went up to the sepulcher. Luke says that Joanna went along, with the mother of James joining them. Matthew tells us there were only two: Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. Mark adds Salome to the group. John writes that Mary Magdalene was alone.

Anyway, Mary was carrying some spices for anointing the body of her departed Lord. But when she arrived, Mark and Luke tell us that the huge stone that had been guarding the entrance had been rolled away. It surprised her, of course; and when she looked or walked into the tomb, she found it empty. She was by now befuddled and dismayed: all she wanted to do was spread some precious preservative ointment on her friend, and she couldn't find his body. She thought someone had moved it, or even stolen it. Then she saw an angel sitting on the rolled-away stone, and he told her not to worry or be afraid, for Jesus had risen from the dead and was alive again.

When she went back out of the tomb, she saw a man standing there. It was Jesus, but she did not recognize him for reasons we do not know. She thought it was the gardener. He spoke to her, calling her by name. "Mary..." She looked up and saw him, and then she knew who it was. There was no doubt in her mind that Jesus was standing there. It was no ghost, no apparition, no ephemeral vision and no projection on her retina. It was The Lord.

She was so excited that she ran back to the disciples and delivered the first Easter sermon: the preacher was Mary; the congregation was the disciples and some others. The place was most likely an upper room in Jerusalem where the 11 Disciples (Judas had hanged himself; maybe 10, for it is not certain that Thomas was there.) and the others had crowded themselves in. The sermon was delightfully short: "I have seen the Lord!" she said.

I. The first thing to notice is that Mary Magdalene was preaching about something she knew first hand: "I" have seen him. It was not a rumor she picked up in the streets of Jerusalem. No one had heard the angel or seen the Risen

Christ over by the graveyard. She saw him, and heard him. She was an eyewitness. You cannot speak with authority about such a stupendous occurrence unless you have experienced it or until you have seen it. Mary was relaying what she knew.

Throughout the centuries, all doubts and arguments about the truthfulness of her words cannot change the power of her simple declaration: "I saw him." The Russian author Alexander Solzhenitsyn once wrote that a simple truth is more powerful than all the armies in the world. He discovered that himself in Stalin's Gulag concentration camps.

Now, you might want to quibble with what she said. Do so if you like. Some say that Mary Magdalene was biased, or that her grief overpowered her and she projected the presence of her Master. Others have said that the words were put into her mouth at a later date by some unknown compiler of the stories of Jesus, who was fabricating the Resurrection for future use. Some of the early Gnostic Gospel writers removed Mary from the story completely. They said that the Son of God would never have appeared to a woman. Other critics have pointed to the myriad of other ancient religions whose records also tell of a resurrected hero who came back from the dead (see The Uses of the Past by Herman J. Mueller).

Quibble if you must. But remember that you are up against someone who was there. She saw Jesus with her own eyes. The Bible does not try to prove that she was right; it just accepts it. St. Paul attempts some evidence later on to make his readers think about it, but he also rests his case with those who saw the risen Lord. He included his vision on the road to Damascus as a proof-positive eyewitness account. You might have your own private litmus test that you use to distinguish

truth from falsehood. Trot it out now and apply it to the task. Mine usually rests its case in the testimony of those I know and trust. I warn you: Mary is a friend of mine.

We will come back to the various proofs of the Gospel records later in this book. Just let me say here that there are many ways of seeing. Some see within their souls; some see without their eyes. Anyone can come to see that which has been there all the time. Some see with their eyes, but Jesus warned that some who see still do not see. Eyewitnesses often differ in their recollections of what happened. I have had that experience several times myself.

But not Mary. She had just rushed back from the tomb to say that the stone had been rolled away and the garden grave was empty. Something had happened to the body. She admitted that she was puzzled, but then she saw him. What's more, he spoke to her. She relied on the evidence of her own eyes and ears and soul. "I have seen the Lord!" Maybe she missed something, but it appears she did not.

In his novel *A Mass for the Dead*, William Gibson wrote about the day he was tidying up his parents' house after they had passed away. He picked up his mother's gold-rimmed spectacles to read her favorite Bible. He sat down in her comfy chair by the window, placed her tiny spectacles on his nose and tried to see what she saw in the Scripture. He reached out for some slender thread of her faith, once so alive and vibrant in her. It didn't work. Perhaps he was too preoccupied with the empty household, or with his grief, or with trying to figure it all out, but he could not recapture anything. He said he felt as silly as he must have looked wearing her little glasses. His mother's faith could not be borrowed. Another's faith can be an impetus for your own, but like a fragile summer plant, it cannot be transplanted. We can admire and envy it, but we can never possess it, unless

it becomes our own. Another's faith can be a good example, but each of us must walk that lonesome, individual valley by ourselves. It is not faith until it is your faith.

Neither can you borrow it from Mary Magdalene. "I have seen the Lord" worked for her, maybe because she strolled up to the empty tomb herself, walked in and came out to see the Lord. That could be the key to seeing the living Jesus—coming back out of the tomb and seeing him yourself. Until YOU see it, the truth belongs to someone else.

**II.** Now shift the emphasis a little to make the sentence read, "I have seen the Lord." Father Teilhard de Chardin, the French paleontologist and theologian, in the midst of all his heavy work, caught the gist of it when he wrote about what it means "to see." "We might say that the whole of life lies in that one verb. To see or to perish, is the very condition laid upon everything which makes up the universe," he writes in *The Phenomenon of Man*. I agree: our eyes have seen the coming of a lot of things, but we can miss them, too.

It was true in the rugged jungle, when those early creatures had to be able to see to escape from natural predators. It was true with Abraham and Sarah, who through the eyes of faith saw on down through the valley where God commanded them to go. It was true at the time of the Exile, when the Jewish people had to see through the Desert of Sinai to the time when their 40-year trek would end, and they could finally claim the Promised Land. It was also true when they endured their captivity in Babylon. Their eyes were focused on the route back home, which God had promised. "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth." (Psalm 137:5) Sometimes all you have are the

eyes of memory.

It was difficult to see God clearly when they were beaten and captured by successive powers who kept marching across the Fertile Crescent. It was hard to see the good when old King Herod decided to slaughter all their male children under the age of two. And it was most difficult to see how something good could arise from a dreadful crucifixion and tragedy, when the curtain of the Temple was torn in two and graves exploded open all over the city.

And on that first Easter morning, Mary Magdalene had to see beyond the moment. “It is not what you look at; it’s what you see,” Thoreau once wrote. Seeing is what matters, believing follows on the heels of what you see. What I see is what I end up believing is there.

“Only that day dawns to which we are awake.” (Thoreau) The only daybreak we see is the one we are up and prepared for. If you get so wound up in the events of the workaday world, or in the petty complaints that things are not done the way you want them, or if you try to keep within the boundaries of what you can define and describe and master on your own, you will miss it.

The morning looked sad and tragic to Mary Magdalene, and maybe to the other Mary and Salome and Joanna, as they came up to the sepulcher. The lonely little group was groping its way along, laden with funereal spices, sometime before the dawn when it was still too dark to see what was going on. Luke says their heads were bowed down. Maybe that is why they did not see him at first. You have to look up before your eyes can see who is there.

But he was there, standing beside them with the living message that all was well again. Dead men do not rise; but

there he was, alive and well, and they almost missed him. So wound up were they in what was going on in the corners of their own minds, so afraid and troubled, so angry and bewildered, their eyes so filled with tears that they did not allow themselves to see him—not at first, anyway.

In time he made himself known to them. Then they believed. His living message brought the news they needed. After that, they could face anything, just as he had. The ultimate enemy called death had been defeated. Victory was at hand. If that is not true, then this life is a hoax and the cynics win the day. Jean Paul Sartre would be your existential hero: “Every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself by weakness, and dies by chance,” he said. To Sartre, human life had no God-given purpose at all. But Sartre and his kin are wrong. Existentialism is as dead as they are. Easter shows us that the living God has conquered. Life does have meaning, and as Robert Browning said, “To find it is our meat and drink.” Family strife can never conquer all that is good and wholesome. A debilitating illness, albeit awful, can lead to inner joy. Job frustration can never quite destroy. Marriages can dip and sag. Old age can take its toll. But, then along comes Easter, and the upside down is turned right side up again.

Astrophysicists project that eternal darkness will be the fate of the universe. There will be no light and no one will see anything at all. Einstein knew that a static universe was impossible because gravity would never be powerful enough to hold it together. But what of it? If God made the world for his purpose, then its purpose does not end when it physically deteriorates or is swallowed up by the empty holes of outer space. Into the hollow of time beyond our time and space, Mary

Magdalene's little sermon echoes: "I have seen the Lord!" And nothing else will ever matter.

**III.** Third and last, make her statement to read: "I have seen the Lord!" It is a matter of emphasis. The Gospel story is clear about who and what she saw: it was not an image; it was not a projection of her bewildered psyche; it was not an imprint for a life-less hope. It was Jesus. When she saw the Lord, she was no longer at the eternal mercy of Rome or Herod. Life does not count its paces at the whim and accident of time. In the aftermath of Easter, the third day always comes. In the words of Tennyson:

Oh yet we trust that somehow good  
Will be the final goal of all. . .  
That nothing walks with aimless feet;  
That no one life shall be destroyed –  
Or cast as rubbish to the void –  
When God hath made the pile complete.

(In Memoriam)

We are not made to stare into darkness and uncertainty forever. Remember Nietzsche warned that if you stare into an abyss for too long, the abyss will begin to stare back. Then you will be a goner. In your loneliest moments you need to know that something, someone, is there, unbounded by the limitations of time and space, untouched by the unpredictable whim of chance. The soldiers tossed the dice on Good Friday afternoon, but the Lord God Almighty did not join them.

We need to know that however long we live, the angels of God's mercy will still be sitting on the huge stone that blocks the way. They will keep watch, and when the moment has

arrived, they will roll the stone away. Christ can turn your life around. The Easter message is a place to start. It is the most important one-line sermon you will ever hear: "I have seen the Lord."

I had a professor of Analytic Philosophy in college. He opened his introductory course by storming into the lecture hall and throwing a Bible across the room into the corner. Then he went over, picked it up and threw it down again. "Does this offend anyone?" he asked arrogantly. "I want you to know that we do not tolerate worship of the Bible around here. By enrolling in my course you agree to be grown-ups. In my class you will not lean on the accumulated folklore of your Grandmother's faith. You will use your brains."

It was daunting, especially because he was the one who would fill out the grade book. But I raised my hand anyway and said, "What you do does not offend me, Sir, as you might think. It is, however, a careless way to treat a book that is precious to me." My objection had nothing to do with religion. I thought a man who would throw the Bible across the room would be likely to throw anything else away, too.

I have always felt it was more than coincidence that the same professor threw himself out a seventh story window to his death a few years later. Poor man; he could never live up to a life that had no meaning. And he could never measure up to a life lived on its own. He never rejoiced with Isaiah who saw the Lord in His Temple, high and lifted up. That was my professor's choice, of course, but not a good one in the end.

Each of us needs two focal points: a home and a horizon. We need a place to hang our hat, rest our weary bones, and get our fill of food and sleep. But we also need a horizon, a beckoning vision, a goal, a destination, a land of hopes and dreams,

something that transcends the exigencies of this mortal vale. William Barclay said in my presence one day in Scotland, that there are two important moments in your life: the moment you are born and the moment you discover why.

In John Masefield's book, The Trial of Jesus, the character of Longinus was patterned after the centurion in command of the soldiers at the foot of the Cross. The Synoptic Gospels tell of a centurion who looked up and said, "Truly this man is the Son of God" (Matthew 27:54). In Masefield's account, Longinus had returned with his troops from Calvary. That evening, he was summoned to Pontius Pilate to give his daily report. When he finished, Pilate's wife begged him to tell her more about the crucifixion and how the prisoner had died. After Longinus told her, she said, "Longinis, do you think he is dead now? Is he dead and gone?" "No, ma'am," he replied. "Then, where is he?" she asked. "Let loose in the world, where neither Roman nor Jew will ever stop his truth," he replied.

I share Mary's sermon one more time: short and simple, pure and strong: "I have seen the Lord!" For now and forever more, Amen\_



# III

## SNOWFALL ON AN EASTER MORNING

*"Therefore, if anyone be in Christ, he is a new creation;  
old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new."*

II CORINTHIANS 5:17

One Easter Sunday, a freak snowstorm landed in the North Hills of Pittsburgh. When we awakened in the wee hours to make ready for the sunrise service in the park, our sleepy eyes were greeted by the awesome sight of eight inches of the wettest snow imaginable. I was crushed. Not that I am a stranger to the joys of winter, nor unappreciative of the glories of the snow. I thrive on the cold. Yet I believe that an Easter Sunday morning snowfall is a devilish kind of curse.

Any preacher worth his rock salt can recite from memory how unkind the skies have been on the first day of any week. We watch the weather forecasts with as wary an eye as a snow plow driver. While some men chart the movement of the stars or the fortunes of their favorite hockey team, ministers chart attendances at Sunday services, and bad weather is one of the most common excuses for missing worship. We live with the humbling knowledge that the church usually comes in second to a lot of other commitments. If the weather is slightly bad,