

**“Sometime Before The Dawn”**

**Text: Mark 16:1-8**

**Bethlehem Presbyterian Church  
Monroe, North Carolina  
Easter Sunday, April 16, 2006  
Rev. Richard M. Cromie**

**Imagine how tired and weary and frightened they were, Mary Magdalene, the other Mary, and Salome, as they made their way out to the sepulcher in the Garden where Jesus was buried. The worst tragedy they could think of had come upon them, the worst that any of them were likely to experience had just taken place two days before. And, they had most likely had been up all through the night, at the end of Sabbath, preparing the special spices with which they were to anoint the body, a sign that they loved him.**

**The Scripture says that while it was still dark, they came to the place where Jesus lay. So impatient, and so anxious to show their devotion to the Christ, they arrived sometime before the sun came up. So tragic, the way it ended; all their vaunted hope and glory, all that their nation and faith dreamed of being, was lost out there on the hill of Golgotha, and the one remaining symbol was there lying dead in the tomb, crucified. Imagine how lonely and how empty they felt, while it was still dark, sometime before the dawn.**

**For that is when it happened, when all of Jerusalem and the whole world around was still at rest. They missed it. No one was there to**

monitor it, no one to announce it to the world, no eye witnesses, no pretty Pepper Dennis to get the scoop. This belonged to no one in particular, for it belonged to everyone in general. It happened when they least expected it, when everybody was thinking or dreaming or planning something else. On the first day of the week, one Sunday morning, they when three women tip-toed out to the sepulcher, where, to their horror, they found that the stone had been rolled away and the body was gone.

Now don't get bogged down in all the hows and whys and whethers of it all. It won't do much good anyway, even if you could prove it all, one way or the other to the world. It is enough to say that something marvelous and magnificent happened, and that those who had known him the best and the longest, even poor old doubting Thomas, who held out for another week, came to believe it, and acted upon with such unbounded courage and devotion, that the course of the Western World, and all history to follow, was blessed by their embrace of that belief. It is enough to declare it! Let those who are prepared to believe something less believe and act upon whatever vision they have. If Christ is not raised, said St. Paul, your faith is in vain.

Others can admire the Christ and have, without accepting the risen Easter victory. Even cranky old Nietzsche, the reigning cynic and crowning pessimist of Western Philosophy, caught that. Whatever else he didn't know, Frederich did know of the excellence of Jesus, and that he died upon a cross. He wrote: "There was only one Christian, and he died upon a cross." Not much, to be sure, but a hint that more was coming. What he meant was that the rest of us cannot pretend to measure up to

**what Jesus was in his life, let alone in death. Our faith and courage won't go that far. In Him came man as he was supposed to be. The first Man Adam, did not measure up. The second Man, Jesus Christ did. If you want to see Human beings as they were meant to be, look not at yourself or at your neighbors, nor to anyone else on earth. Look to Jesus, the Pioneer and perfecter of the faith, who obeyed God to the end.**

**Nietzsche missed everything beyond that there was a living Jesus who was sort of super. Nietzsche's other "Superman" reigned in this life alone: a man of skill and power, not of integrity and peace. Christianity says that in Christ, we triumph in this life and in the life to come. "If it were not so, I would have told you. Nothing will separate us from the love of God, not now, not ever." Not contrarian philosophies, not comparative religions, not the vast wandering of our Post Modern world. The faithful say that Christ is Risen. It is no idle dream or vacant promise to get you through the night. "No", God whispers, "I have been there myself. I know what it is like. When the darkness falls, look for the light !**

**Years ago in the Holy seasons of the year back up in my hometown of Pittsburgh, the officials used to light up the four sides of the Cathedral of Learning in the shape of the Cross. They are not allowed to do that anymore. It was an impressive Christmas and Easter sight for miles around. You could sit up on Garfield Hill where I grew up and watch the dusk settle over the University area. There before our eyes, was the shining message that the love of Christ offers to us all. As the day begins to end and darkness falls, and night takes over, you can see the cross more clearly: the darker it gets around it, the brighter glows the shining cross.**

**More than a century ago, back when Professor John A. Brashear was beginning his pioneering work in Astronomy, investigating the starry heavens above the smoky skies of Pittsburgh's steel mills, he used to have to wait until Saturday night when the smoke and soot of the week had somewhat dissipated. On a night when the mills were working, his telescope couldn't find its way through the smog to find the stars. But find them he eventually did. His work is legendary. He became one of Pittsburgh's most famous and heroic men, just by gazing at the stars. And, to this day, if you go and visit, you will see on a plaque in the old crypt of the Allegheny Observatory, this marvelous tribute:**

**To: Phoebe S. Brashear, 1843 to 1910**

**and**

**John A. Brashear, 1840 to 1920**

**“We have loved the stars too fondly,  
To be fearful of the night.”**

**We have loved the stars too fondly, to be fearful of the night. You can say that with confidence, if you understand that to see them you have to wait until it is dark, and if you realize that darkness here is merely the absence of light as the lucky old sun rolls on around the world.**

**Easter, you see, is a time to rejoice, a time to acknowledge what God has done in His world. And, it is His world. Oh, not that he marshals each**

**tiny event into His own vindictive way, parceling out triumph to some and tragedy to others. We should never speak of the Will of God that way. God never promised that we would be saved from trouble. He promised that we will be saved from defeat. Not that he likes it the way it is or even that he causes it to happen the way it does.**

**God does not will fame and wealth to some while ignominy and poverty go to others. God does not reach down and snatch a child away, or send terminal illness to a young mother. He does not Will addiction to drugs and alcohol. “Sometimes”, Emerson wrote, “Things are in the saddle and ride mankind.” It sure looks that way sometimes. “Some days, Milton mused, “bring back the night.”**

**Whatever happens here must be seen and judged against the ultimate sense of what the world is intended to be. We can say only this much for sure: ultimately Good will triumph over Evil, justice over discrimination, Love over hate. Easter morning will always triumph over Good Friday afternoon. That much we can say for sure, the rest belongs to God. In His own good time, He will make it known. Sometimes it does not make sense and seems unfair.**

**And it looked that way to Mary Magdalene, and the other Mary, and to Salome as they came up to the sepulcher that First Easter morning. This lonely little trio, with all the rest of his followers, was left to sail the mighty, lonely sea; their boat was thrown adrift, tossed by the waves; the rudder broken and the Captain dead. All the strong brave men were in**

hiding, scared to death. Notice that only three women had the courage to come out of hiding to pay homage to the fallen King. How sad and tragic and hopeless it looked, as they sauntered up with their spices to the tomb. They wondered and worried about how life could be so cruel. What sudden twists and turnings this mortal life can take! Luke says they had their heads bowed down. .... I think they missed it at first. All they could see was that the tomb was empty. Imagine the cruelty: someone had stolen the body. That made it even worse: "Oh, please tell me where they have laid him, that I may go and see him one more time."

But there it was, right before their eyes. No, there He was, standing beside them with the living message that all was well again. But they were so sure of their worries, so wound up in what was happening in the small corners of their own wee worlds, so afraid and troubled, so angry perhaps at what was going on, so aware that the world can be a dreadful place, so limited in their view, their eyes were so filled with tears, they couldn't see it. They missed it ! The sun had risen. Dawn had come, and their heads were bowed so low in grief they never even noticed. Careful, I would not want you too, to miss it.

It was Father Teilhard, in the midst of all his heavy paleontology and philosophy, who caught it one day so explicitly when he wrote about "Seeing." "To see," he wrote, "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 that makes up the universe." It was true in the rugged jungle, when you had to be able to see to run away; it was true in the time of Abraham when you had to see down the valley which God commanded

him to enter. It was true at the time of the exile, when they had to see through the captivity of Babylon to the return back home which God had promised. It was true when Herod's fiendish men were slaughtering little children on their ugly rampage through the cities of Judah, trying to find the newborn King. It was true all through the agony of that terrifying scene last Friday afternoon at Golgotha.

But it was also true this Easter Sunday morning, just before dawn: "What couldn't be, was; what had to be, wasn't. Death had lost its hold. Jesus was standing there with them.

Thoreau said it first, or at least he was the first to teach it to me: "Only that day dawns to which we are awake." The only dawn we will ever see are the ones where we open up our eyes and are prepared to see. And if you get so wound up, or wound down, in all the ordinary events of your workaday world; or in the petty complaints that everything life is not being managed the way you thought it would, less the way you want it; if you make this faith a memory of what it once was to you and yours; if you try to keep it within the boundaries of what you yourself can describe and believe; or if you demand that it must be something which your brain can comprehend and understand, then you will miss it, too. Perhaps you already have.

Easter is a witness to Good over evil, to God over Satan, to life over death. It is an affirmation of what can be over what is: an affirmation of magnificence over meanness. This is the vision which will remain when every other has passed away, the affirmation that tomorrow will come, no,

**better it is already here.**

**You can kill the dreamer, but you cannot kill the dream. You can stop the messenger in his tracks, but the message hastens on. You can silence the singer, but the song will linger on and on, like a song you can't forget: Jesus Christ is risen today.**

**Oh, not that there won't be trouble, or sorrow, or wars and rumors of wars. Not that strife and sadness and worry and tragedy and hate will be gone; not that the telephone will stop ringing in the middle of the night; or that the headlines carry notice of what troops are fighting where, what innocent person was mugged, what innocent child abused. There will be plenty of that. As General Eisenhower warned half a century ago: "It will take another century before we can sort out these national and international problems." That seemed like a long time indeed, back then. It doesn't now. Darkness will intrude in between the times, between now and then. It will be a century of centuries at least, perhaps longer. The principalities and powers of this world will long have their sway. Ike was probably right; but meanwhile we can yearn and hope and pray and work that a newer world is coming sooner. And that In Christ it will arrive punctually on God's time.**

**A few years into my ministry back in Pittsburgh, we showed a film on the life and death and resurrection of Christ to our Sunday School classes on Easter Morning. It was not near as brutal as some, and a walk in the ancient park compared to Mel Gibson's more recent Passion. It was not the best of films, but it was suitable for children. "Suitable", until we**

realized that as the film neared its end that the brutality of the scenes where Jesus was beaten and scourged and nailed to a Cross were more than the younger children could manage. They liked the Christmas Nativity much better. So the Directress of Christian Education and I, realizing what was going on, sat down with some of the younger ones, and whispered words of comfort and cheer.

Then as Jesus was trying to make his way up to Calvary, and people were yelling at him, and he finally fell down under the weight of the Cross he was carrying, tensions began to mount inside the children the hall. One little girl moved over to Miss Mercer's lap, a few others snuggled up; a couple of the younger boys came over to me, and a few more cuddled up to the Assistant.

But there was one little lad at the end of the aisle, all by himself. Perhaps he was too proud to scoot over; maybe he was too manly to join the little girls in their distress. So Marjorie motioned for him to come over and sit with the rest of us. He refused, in a nice display of bravado. But, I shall never forget the words he called back. They have been a comfort to me many many times in the course of my own life and in the lives of others to whom I have been a pastor.

Eddie called back: "Oh, don't worry about me Miss Mercer, don't worry about me, I know how the story turns out !" I know how the story turns out. Grounded in the Easter faith of a life that conquers death for now and forever more, we could all call out the same: "Meanwhile, it is a little scary; sure there are things I do not understand; sure there are some

**anxious moments; sure there puzzles and problems and sadnesses. I have seen too many Good Friday afternoons. But don't worry about us, Miss Mercer, we know how the story ends. We follow the one who tells us to have no fear because he has overcome the world; for now and forever more. Amen**