

THE MAN WHO MISSED EASTER!

**Text: "Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples,
'I have seen the Lord', and she told them that
he had said these things to her." John 20:18**

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Easter, 2008**

I felt sorry for him really, my neighbor Jim. I don't think he ever had a happy day, least not since the day his wife died suddenly and the children did not come home for the funeral. That was the day I had met him a few years before. We struck up a mini-friendship anyway. Jim was a tough man to love. He hardly ever spoke to anyone, and when he did it was a series of low mumbled grunts and growls. And as Dickens said of Scrooge, "Children, dogs and ladies crossed over to the other side" when Jim came passing by.

But, one Easter evening, as I was ambling home from a little walk around the Northwood Acres neighborhood, trying to shake the day away, I arrived at my driveway, just as Jim was pulling his trusty Oldsmobile into his. I waved and called over:

"Hi, neighbor,"

"Hullo, Rev.,"

"How are you, Jimmy boy?"

"Fine, how ya do?"

I said, "I'm tired . . . had a busy day." (It was Easter Sunday, after all.)

"Oh?" he said.

"Yeah, I said, I was up at 5:00 AM to get ready for the Sunrise Service. Then I preached at 9:00 and 11:00, visited some shut-ins to share the Sacrament with them; then my wife and I entertained both of our families for Easter dinner. I'm bushed. Time to call it a day."

Jim looked at me astonished; his glasses slipped a little down his nose and he asked gingerly,

"R-r-rev, w-w-was this E-e-aster?" I smiled and nodded

"Yes." He said, "This was Easter?"

Oh my God, I missed it. What a darn dumb thing to do! I could have used an Easter this year."

It turned out that he had driven over to Ohio, had a little lunch, walked around a lake they used to know, and came back home, just like it was any other Sunday. Poor Jim. He needed to hear the Good News of Easter, and he missed it!

My goal today is that not one person within the sound of my voice will miss the blessing of Easter. It might happen, if you are not careful; not as blatantly as Jim perhaps, but people walk right by

Easter every year, even though they come to Church. Their minds and hopes and memories and brains can be fixed on something else.

The Biblical backdrop to this sermon, as it should always be, is the scene outside Joseph's garden tomb where Mary Magdalene came sometime before the dawn, (according to John) while it was still dark, to anoint the body of her Lord and friend. Mark makes you think a little when he writes that the sun had already risen. Matthew and Luke say that "the day was dawning." But, I like John the best.

For there is something of a mystery there, and there well should be. It happened under the cover of darkness, with no one there to see how Jesus rose. Some of the non-canonical gospels which survive create some detail, for they could not abide the silence; but not the four gospel writers in the New Testament. That is a nice way to say it. We should never try to be too sure of what took place that first Easter morning. There are differences in the four accounts, and when St. Paul adds his resurrection recitation, the variance becomes all the greater. But do not let that alarm you. The Gospel writers were not preparing a legal brief to make their case. They were passing along what they had seen and heard. And anyway, we live by faith and not by sight.

Be careful though; there is something unique and authentic about it as they share the variations of the most significant and central event in all of history. A Judge friend of mine told me that to him the composite story reads as if some credible witnesses are speaking the variety of detail only seems to make it all the more reliable. It is certain that they had not conspired to tell an identical tale, nor were they coached on how to make it appear to be consistent. The Gospel writers were trying to describe an astounding, singular and never to be repeated event. I think John said it was still dark on purpose; that made it difficult to see, not only with the eyes but with the soul and psyche.

There are some other differences in the four stories: John says Mary Magdalene arrived alone. Matthew writes that "the other Mary" joined her. Luke says that Joanna was there and the mother of James, as well as some other un-named women. Mark adds Salome's name to the group. There are other variants as to what they saw and who else was there to greet them.

What most likely happened is the question we should try to answer. What is essential in the Easter message that we need to carry home?

It is simply that Christ was raised from the dead. The one who came back to life was the same person who lived on earth as Jesus of Nazareth. At times the Bible seems to say that he rose in a spiritual form, not a physical body. For example, he told Mary not to touch him; and his followers on the road to Emmaus did not recognize him, even though he was walking beside them and talking to them. He seems to have been able to walk through doors and to appear and disappear at will.

Yet he was the same person, recognizable in the same body. He told Thomas to touch his side and to feel the nail-prints in his hands. He had supper with Cleopas and the unnamed disciple at Emmaus. In Luke he asked them to give him some broiled fish and he ate it. And of course the Gospel of John ends with a breakfast meal the Risen Jesus shared with seven of the disciples on the Galilean shore.

What is essential to the message is that we affirm our belief in the Resurrected Jesus. He came back. And, he was in a recognizable form. When the day comes that we meet him face to face, our bodies will be changed, but we will still be the persons that we are. Some Christians believe in reincarnation, as if there were some eternal spirit which inhabited one body in this generation and then flew away at death to inhabit another in the next. The spirit of Jesus Christ did not come down in an earthly body then leave it for another; the earthly body they saw was Jesus the man, who was combined with the presence of God.

What kind of body was it? St. Paul was already wrestling with this concept when he wrote to the Corinthians, who were also puzzled and seeking answers. Paul wrote, "Some will ask, 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?' You foolish Corinthians! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body which is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or some other grain.... "

Then, Paul concludes: "Lo! I tell you mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet...For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality ... then shall come to pass what is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.' O Grave, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?" ... Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through Jesus Christ our Lord" (I Corinthians 15: 35-56 RSV).

Over the years I have fielded many questions about the resurrection of the body. What kind of body is it? What age will I be in heaven? What will happen to my infant child, will he be a three-months-old

forever? Will my husband be waiting there for me? Especially as we grow older, we can all understand what Liston Pope meant when he wrote, "The idea that I might go on being me forever is too dreadful to contemplate."

St. Paul understood that we will not have the same body after we are gone as the one we live it here and now. It will be transformed to the imperishable but it will still be recognizable. Beyond that, we can rest with St. Paul's images and metaphors. If you get all bogged down in the details, you will miss the victory of Easter, just as surely as my neighbor Jim did that Sunday when he drove over to Ohio.

The earliest Gospels tell how the women and the Disciples found an empty tomb. They agreed that Jesus was no longer there in the grave. But beyond that, they did not know much about the details. He had risen, as he said he would. In Mark, the ascension into heaven seems to have taken place immediately. There is not a single post-resurrection appearance of Jesus in the original Mark.

In Matthew it seems that Jesus ascended into heaven on Easter night. In the Gospel of Luke it seems to say that Jesus ascended immediately after he appeared to the disciples on Sunday night after the walk to Emmaus. In Acts 1, also written by Luke, Jesus clearly ascended 40 days later. John does not mention the ascension at all.

It could get confusing. If you try to attach your faith to the varying details, it will elude your grasp. You will drawn off into the side eddies, and you will miss the main flow of truth. People have tried to explain it all away by various theories. Some assume the Gospel writers were naïve or superstitious, or that their time was a more superstition era. Their culture and presuppositions were different of course, but, on the whole, they were just as intelligent and inquisitive as those who try to dissect their stories now, probably more so.

The Disciples were not pre-conditioned to believe that it was possible for a human being to come back from death and live again on earth. Most of them believed in an after-life of heaven; but as we do, it was some place you went to in the presence of God after you died.

The Four Gospel writers lived within the limitations of their own time and cultural predispositions. But they were not dumb, far from it. And with all of their individual emphases, they did not vary in the affirmation that God raised Jesus from the dead. I do not want any of you to miss it.

Most all of Jerusalem missed it that first morning. They were up and about with their daily chores. "Ho, hum, another Passover over and done." The money changers at the Temple missed it. They had been peeved earlier that week when a fanatic evangelist from Galilee stomped onto the temple grounds and kicked over their tables, screaming his fool head off and driving their customers away. But that was merely a brief and awkward interlude, by the first day of the week they were busy again counting up their money from a busy holiday season.

Pilate and the Roman garrison missed it, too. The soldiers were off to some other post that morning. Pilate was preoccupied with his political ambition, that in spite of his wife's predilection; he had no time to follow it through. He washed his hands of it all, and he missed Easter. He was so close and yet so far away. Like Festus in Acts told Paul, "You almost persuaded me to become a Christian." He added, "I will think over what you said but withhold my decision until a convenient time arises." But the convenient season never came.

And the good regular church-going people missed it, too. The leaders of the band of believers—Caiaphas and Annas and their fellow ecclesiastics were relieved. "Thank Yahweh, that's the end of that! It was a close call, but we showed him." They were alarmed in the morning when they heard that the body of Jesus had disappeared, so they paid off the guards and told them to tell the people that Jesus' disciples had stolen the body. "And" Matthew adds, "this story is spread among the people to this day" (Matthew 28:15).

But, come on now. How reasonable would it be to believe that their new devotion was based on a lie? How do you think they could have faced Nero and the Lions in the Arena if they had stolen the body and hid it somewhere? No, something magnificent happened to that little group of broken hearted wanderers; and you can be sure, it did not arise out of a hoax!

The huge Passover crowd missed it, too. By Easter morning, they were packing up to get their goods and family back home. Oh they had a nice inspiring Passover Meal in Jerusalem which they were supposed to have once in a while. But that was over now and they could brush off the emotion of the spirit of the occasion and get back to the routine of making ends meet. They missed it.

Even the small company of fellow pilgrims who had followed Jesus down from Galilee missed it too. They got lost in the valley of grief, and in their remorse and second guessing, they were wondering how the authorities could have been so cruel to one so good and holy; or

alternatively, how they could have been so stupid to have been duped by a would-be savior. They thought he was the one they had been looking for all their lives. They were bewildered and let down, and the Bible says they were also afraid and puzzled. Most of them fled, or hid or gave up hope. On the Road to Emmaus, Cleopas and his friend lamented to Jesus: "We had hoped that he was the one; we had hoped." But he was; he was walking along the road with them and they missed it.

Incredibly, some of his closest confidants, including the remnants of the twelve, missed it, too. Matthew writes, "The eleven disciples went out with him to the mount of Galilee and when they saw him"--the Risen Lord that is --"they worshipped him, but (Listen) it says, quote end quote: some of them doubted." Can you believe it? His very own. He was standing right there in front of them. And while some of them worshipped him; others doubted: they could not believe their eyes and ears. If it seems a phenomenal reach for us to get all the way to the resurrection, it was equally far-fetched to them.

So many missed it then, and I have known a million more who have missed it since. Maybe it's too familiar. Maybe it has become a ritual. "Oh, it's Easter Tom, we better go to Church. One mother told me her son ask his father one Easter at lunch,"How was the sermon Dad?" His father nonchalantly replied, "Oh same old stuff, my boy, same old stuff." We get so busy in our routine ways of doing God's work, carefully delineating what and where we will serve, mediating God's grace through the narrow channels of our own personal preferences that we miss it.

We get weary or miffed because we cannot get everything we want. Why does this happen, and why that? Why can't I freeze my life at its happiest moment and save it for all of my days? And in our self inflicted pettiness, we can close our eyes to what God on earth is doing, and walk right by our Easter! Thoreau warned that "Only that day dawns to which you are awake."

When I was growing up in the East End of Pittsburgh, we could see the tall Cathedral of Learning at the University from our attic window. In those days they arranged the lights on the various floors and rooms so that they formed the shape of a cross. I often watched it way past bed time. (By the way, in a nation wide reversal, they aren't allowed to light the Cathedral Cross anymore; for fear that somebody or other will be offended. Pity.) But as night grew on and the darkness deepened, the lighted cross grew brighter. The darker was the night, the brighter was the light. At first you could barely make it out but by nightfall, it dominated the darkened

sky. That's the way it is with the Easter message. God did not make a mistake even if we fail to open our eyes.

Oh dear, the things that can happen: I have watched Church people miss it. I know of one couple years ago who had a horrible fight on the way home from Easter services and they never spoke a kind word to each other again. In one congregation I served, two devoted church officers got into a fist-fight in the parking lot over who had arrived at the open parking place first. Another year a member of the Altar Guild ruined Easter for herself and her family and the whole Woman's Guild, because she didn't like the way the Easter lilies were arranged on the altar. Some miss it because they are pre-occupied.

Others miss it because they choose not to believe it. They are such everlasting smarties, just ask them. They close the door on new ideas years ago. They think they are so bright and logical that they can sit in judgment on matters of the faith. They say, "Dead men do not rise again. Give us proof, not the meager testimony of the biased." They wonder why The Risen Christ appeared only to those who believed in him. Was it their reward? Why didn't he go over to Rome and rap on Caesar's front door? Why didn't he drop by the palace of Pontius Pilate and show him the Truth in person?" (I wonder it sometimes, too.) Jesus could have scared Caiaphas and Annas half to death. Some cannot linger around the empty tomb for too long; they fear someone or something might penetrate the shell of their intellectual excellence.

Some refuse to surrender to it, lest they lose their control of things. They would never get emotional, lest someone think them weak. They would never want to look foolish. St. Paul wrote, "We are fools for Christ's sake, while you are such sensible Christians." And Bill Coffin added up at Yale before he died, "The church which takes a risk is sometimes wrong. But the church which never takes a risk, is always wrong."

I will say it softly, but if you listen carefully, you will hear a thunderous challenge: Turn it loose. Walk the misty mountains which can take your breath away, up where you can see the past and the future and the present all together. You're not so tough, just because you're bright and so "open minded". Confucius warned his followers that it was honorable to keep an open mind, "But, don't let your brains fall out." You need some kind of decision and commitment. We need to be open to the surprises of the Lord. Don't let your big brain get in the way of what you need. You have to close the door on some matters of what you believe sometime. It really is quite easy to let go and let God govern your life. For in the

end, and I am often there, as theologian J. H. Snowden finally found out: "It's a child-like faith that matters in the end."

John wrote that it happened while it was still dark. Before the sun rises, you have to stare hard and squint your eyes to see what's going on there in front of you. Professor Donald Baillie at St. Andrews once said that "It is like the haar (the sea fog) which sweeps in off the North Sea, through which you cannot see clearly, but you can see. You have to keep on looking."

Or, like Mary, in John: when she first arrived it was still dark and all she could see was that the stone had been rolled away from the tomb. But then in a little while she returned with Peter and John. She probably did not realize it but the light of dawn was coming on. By the time the two disciples left her alone in the garden, the sun had risen and the light of day had come. And, when she looked over at the one who was standing there, and when he called her name, "Mary", she knew who it was, and she was able to go back and share the loveliest, sweetest, finest little Easter sermon that the world has ever known: "I have seen the Lord." It's up to you and me to do that, to see and then share the story of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Everybody needs an Easter morning, a time to say that all is well - A time to bow before God's eternal truth and purposes. We need the message that good still triumphs over evil, that life will triumph over death. We need to know that all is right with the world, not so much because God is in his heaven, but that he is down here on the earth in the form of the Risen Christ. I would not want you to miss it.

Let me close with a story. A long time ago Peggy and I went out to Pasadena, California to attend a Super Bowl football game. The Pittsburgh Steelers were there to play against the Los Angeles Rams. If you have ever lived in Pittsburgh, you will know its unbounded devotion. Or, if you have a favorite team anywhere, say like one of those involved this year in the March Madness of the NCAA play-offs, you will know how fortunate we were to be there, the envy of practically everyone we knew.

But, a not-so-funny thing happened while we were there. A young man of 25 or so, who had also journeyed to the Rose Bowl from McKeesport PA, had a ticket for the seat just in front of us. But by the time he arrived, the merry-making of the previous hours had taken its toll. He must have been up early that Sunday and he had not been in Church! He stumbled into his row, flopped down and

immediately fell asleep. He bobbed and weaved and snored throughout the entire game. He never saw a single play. He missed the whole event. His team won, but he never knew it. He missed the whole show!

I beg you: please do not miss this Easter Morning. Take a moment here and now to open up your eyes and hearts to the presence of the Risen Lord, who loves you and cares for you forever. Ask him to come into your heart and stay there forever. My hope is that everyone on earth would do it, and embrace it and cherish it forever.

That way, Jim, my neighbor from Northwood Acres, and the young man out in Pasadena, and your neighbor down the street, and you and me and all God's children everywhere will hear and absorb the Good News that Jesus Christ defeated the last enemy called death. He is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. Then we can Lift high the Cross and sing out the Easter Message, for now and forevermore. Amen.