

THE NOTE OF CERTAINTY

by Ray C. Stedman

This year the Easter theme of resurrection is particularly meaningful to me. Immediately after this service I will go to the airport and leave for the Holy Land to visit areas about which I have long studied but have never been to myself. On this tour my family and I, along with others from this church, will be visiting many places of interest to Bible students: Rome, Athens, Jerusalem, Galilee, Nazareth -- these names are as familiar to our ears as those of the streets here in Palo Alto. But to me, the climax of all will be when we go outside the old walled city of Jerusalem to the place that is called *Gordon's Calvary*, a little hill that looks like a skull, with features resembling eye sockets and a mouth formed by shallow caves, and which fits the Biblical description of the place called *The Skull*, where Jesus was crucified {cf, Matt 27:33, Mark 15:22, Luke 23:33, John 19:17). I can hardly anticipate what my emotions will be as I stand on that spot and think that this is the place where the Son of God suffered, where my redemption was won.

And then to take a few steps away to the Garden Tomb, which very likely is the spot where his body lay, and to stand there before that tomb where Peter and John and Mary and all the others stood with uncomprehending minds that first Easter Sunday morning as they tried to make themselves face the incredible, glorious fact that he who was dead was risen again, as he had said (Matt 28:6). I do not know what my emotions will be, but one thing I do know: After this experience I will be no more certain that the resurrection occurred than I already am. I do not need to visit the site in order to be assured that this is an historic fact.

For many years, the resurrection of Jesus Christ has been the central certainty of my life, as it has for thousands and hundreds of thousands of Christians. To me the great value of Easter Sunday lies right here. Amid all the question marks of this questioning age in which we live, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is God's great exclamation point. And if you are aware of the questions, the doubts, and uncertainties that surround us today, I think you will agree with me that we are very much in need of exclamation marks in this day. The belief of Christians this Easter Sunday morning is an island of faith in the midst of an ocean of doubt and uncertainty.

With that doubt in our world goes what always accompanies doubt -- despair, and distress of mind and heart. I do not think I have seen a day in which despair was so widespread as it is today. It is not only among those who are older, but, also, amazingly enough, among the young, who are facing life but finding nothing of challenge in it, nothing of interest, who confess themselves to be bored and frightened and anxious and uncertain. This is borne out shockingly by the macabre fact that, in this country of ours, every two hours a college student takes his own life.

This last week over on the beaches at Santa Cruz our young people have been talking to other young people who were there for the annual frolic known as *Cruz Week*. Of the thousands of students who inhabited the beaches during the week, they have talked to hundreds and hundreds who confessed that they are drifting aimlessly in a dream world, out of touch with reality, unaware of anything interesting or challenging about life.

This very week I received a copy of a letter from a high school senior in Pennsylvania, who wrote those words:

Day after day and night after night I go around searching and trying to find the answer to peace, joy, and satisfaction. The way of meaning to life seems so blocked and hopeless to find I cannot help but view everything as Shakespeare viewed things. No matter how sincere people seem, everything seems like a big stage and everyone just players. A person just assumes a part and plays his part until the curtain goes up for a new scene. Life is a street without purpose, a car without meaning. Life seems like some big joke. It seems like everyone is lying to you, trying to pull a trick on you, and standing back in the shadows laughing at you.

It seems too black to realize that here we are, creatures who didn't ask to be born, but are put here on a seemingly forsaken planet. We are demanded to pay consequences for our deeds in a hereafter, we are told, but why should we be responsible for things we do when we didn't ask to be born? WHY? Is the big why in my life.

If that were only an isolated incident it would be distressing, but it is not isolated. It is widespread, and therefore it is tragic. Some time ago I clipped from our own local paper a little poem by a girl in the tenth grade here in Palo Alto. She says,

In emptiness.
All alone now,
Sitting in the darkness.
Where else could I be
But in emptiness?
Emptiness is nothing;
It is all its own.
There is no life in emptiness.
Where am I going?
To boredom, or to serenity?
The earth is turning,
As I am turning,
Forever in a circle
Of emptiness.

That is but a typical statement of some of the widespread despair today. Where does this come from? Why this vast tide of depression spreading across the world, not only in this country but everywhere? Why do young people lie in public parks for hours and hours like zombies because they have nothing to do, nothing to live for, and can't even think of anything to do? Well, most certainly, this is the product of a widespread view in our day the teaching that there are no absolutes in life, that everything is relative. There is no right or wrong, no blacks or whites. Bad is good and good is square. We are told that there are no final answers, there are no ultimate certainties. Everything is tentative, experimental. If someone has a problem, it is not because of his attitudes but it is more likely that something is wrong with his glands. The result of this teaching is that we are facing a generation that is cast adrift, literally that has lost its anchors, is drifting aimlessly. And the world is going mad with lust and crime and war.

In this context I want to turn to a passage which was written by an old man, chained in a dungeon, to a young man who was charged with the responsibility of nurturing an infant church in a hostile, pagan city with very much the same atmosphere as the world and generation in which we live. Paul's second letter to his son in the faith, Timothy, Chapter 2, Verses 3-8:

Take your share of suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier on service gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to satisfy the one who enlisted him. An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops. Think over what I say, for the Lord will grant you understanding in everything. Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descended from David, as preached in my gospel, {2 Tim 2:3-8 RSV}

It was a dark hour when this letter was written. Paul was in prison in Rome, this time not allowed to have his own hired house as he had during his first imprisonment, but instead thrust down into the squalid depths of what is called today the Mamertine dungeon, a dark, filthy hole which was cold and clammy. There he was isolated from all his friends. He says in this very letter that all of them have forsaken him except for one or two faithful ones who stood by. He is lonely, he is cold; he asks Timothy to bring his cloak to him quickly before winter comes. The cause which he serves seems to be struggling everywhere. It looks like a depressing hour. He is writing to Timothy, a young, inexperienced man all alone in the great city of Ephesus, in Asia Minor, living in the midst of a cynical, disillusioned generation, as the Roman Empire is beginning to fade from its centrality as queen of the earth. Yet, despite the circumstances, there is nothing of gloom or despair or defeat in Paul's words. "You need," he says, "the dedication of a soldier, the discipline of an athlete, the diligence of a farmer, but above everything else you need to remember Jesus Christ risen from the dead."

If this passage is to have any meaning for us today we need to ask two questions:

- 1) Why did Paul write this, and
- 2) How do we make the application of it to our own lives?

You notice that Paul uses these three figures to picture the requirements for confronting successfully the pressures and good problems that Timothy is facing.

- First, he says, you need to be like a good soldier; you need to be dedicated. Do not get mixed up with sidelines, with moonlighting, but stick to the point to the central issue at hand. "As a good soldier take your share of suffering for no soldier on service is entangled in civilian pursuits since his aim is to satisfy the one who enlisted him." The quality he emphasizes here is dedication; a dedication that is willing to endure suffering and hardship. Timothy was greatly in need of that in Ephesus.

The other day I watched two young marines in dress uniform walking down the street, heads erect, shoulders square. In every quiet, confident step they took was manifest their dedication and their pride in their outfit. Paul is saying to Timothy, you need that kind of dedication.

- And, further, you need the discipline of an athlete who cuts no corners and takes no unfair advantage of another, who drives hard toward the goal, but always competes within the rules.
- Finally, you need the diligence of a farmer who realizes that he will never harvest a crop unless he plants and cultivates, and does the work required. He will never reap unless he sows.

Paul is telling Timothy, you are called to a task so challenging, so difficult, so demanding, so dangerous, that you need the dedication of a soldier, the discipline of an athlete and the diligence of a farmer. In each requirement he lists you will notice that he is stressing one thing: You do not win without effort. You cannot have a crown without a cross. There is no gain without pain. The soldier who gets distracted, dabbling in peripheral pursuits, does not win the approval of his officer. The athlete who ignores the rules is never given a prize. The farmer who lazes away his days never gathers a harvest. And, aware of all these things, of the demands that life makes, the apostle says to this young man that the one thing that will make all this possible is to remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead.

So what do we say to our generation? Here we have much of an entire generation of youth cast adrift with no sense of purpose, with no sense of meaning in life, without any real excitement, without anything to challenge them, feeling that life lies ahead of them dark, black, forbidding, a drudgery. an unnecessary burden which, unconsulted, they are called to bear. How to stir them, how to move them, how to motivate them, how to bring them to vitality and life? Well, fundamentally, is there anything else that we could say, other than what Paul says? Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead.

Notice that he does not say to Timothy, remember Jesus Christ, period. There is a false form of Christianity in our day that tells us that the real message of Christianity to people is, "Remember Jesus Christ. He is the example; he is the moral teacher; he has given us the great example of his life and his teaching for us to follow. Now remember that and try to imitate him." But if that were all the Christian message is, then I would say that it is the greatest delusion, the greatest mistake ever, and the greatest tragedy would be that we should ever set it before people.

Think of the life of Jesus.

Think of his person.

Remember his life and you think of tenderness and strength, vigor and restraint, of courage and truth, humor and dignity, of light and love, justice and compassion, sweetness and delight all of these qualities that men admire and desire merging into one wonderful personality.

But when you come to the end of his life, what do you find? Blood and darkness, fear and death. At the end of

his life he was murdered, and that wonderful example of manhood to mankind, all that wonderful personality perished. The unforgettable voice was stilled; the great heart ceased to beat; the light in his eyes went out as the flame of his life flickered and died. Jesus Christ was dead, and faith and hope went out with him into hellish darkness.

But that is not the end. No, this Sunday morning we are gathered here to remember the greatest fact of history: Jesus Christ, risen from the dead.

Remember that, Paul says.

Remember that grace and truth cannot finally be crucified. Remember that all the high things that make humanity beautiful cannot be forever laid in the dust, spattered with blood. And most of all, remember that he who rose from the dead, rose to pour out his Holy Spirit into human lives, and, by that Spirit, to make available to any individual all the fullness of himself, twenty-four hours a day.

If that is true, if these words really have meaning, then I suggest that we are better off this morning than those disciples who stood at the tomb on that resurrection morning, or who grasped him by the feet, and worshipped him as they recognized that he was risen from the dead (Matt 28:9). Why? Because even in this there was limitation. Even then he was with them for awhile, then would disappear. And during the days of his ministry he could be in only one place at a time. But this morning he can be everywhere all at once.

All that he is can be available to anyone, any time that there is need. He can be with me as I stand here speaking, my heart inwardly crying out for God to give clarity and strength, purpose and blessing to this message (Jer 1:6-9, Luke 12:11, Acts 4:8). At the same time he can be with somebody on the other side of the earth -- some alcoholic, perhaps, who desires to turn from his drink, every pore of his body crying out for another drink and yet he knows that if he goes back to it, it will ruin him, destroy him, and so he cries out for help. The Son of God can be with him, and all that he is, is available to him (Tit 2:11-14, 1 Cor 10:13). He can be in the home anywhere with a mother who has a problem with her children, but does not know what the answer is (Matt 11:28-30, 15:28). Maybe someone is crushed and bewildered and so looks for comfort and asks it of him, and there he is. It may be some businessman in his office who does not know what to do or how to find a way out of a difficulty (Matt 6:25-34, Prov 16:3). He can bow his head and say, "Lord, show me the way." And there he is with him.

"Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead." That is what he came for. That is what this is all about.

This Easter message is not merely that we should recall some historical fact, great as that is, wonderful as that is. But the thing that the apostle is driving home to this young man in his desperate hour of need is that Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, is available any time, everywhere. In the days of hatred and persecution, remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead. When violence stalks the streets of our cities, or should nuclear missiles roar overhead, or when despair grips your own heart, remember that there is One who arose from the dead and who will one day, at the time of his choosing, cause wars to cease and sorrow to flee away (Isa 51:11). Men shall melt their swords into plowshares and beat their spears into pruning hooks, and never learn war any more (Micah 4:1-4). Then neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more (Rev 21:3-4). Meanwhile, remember that this One offers to be in you a well of living water, from which you can drink at any moment of need. You do not have to go back again and again to some place or person. Rather, he is in you, as he promised to be within the woman at the well, a well of living water springing up into abundant, eternal life (John 4:7-30).

If your days are full of difficulty and darkness, remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead. As it is put in Hebrews 12:3 {RSV}, "Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted." You will have to endure hardship? He endured hardship, and he makes his own courage and patience and victory available to you (John 16:33). Are you tempted to be ashamed? He despised the shame of the cross, was contemptuous of it, and he stands ready to pour his valor, his bravery and boldness into your heart so that you need not be ashamed (Heb 12:2). Are you weak and faltering? Remember that he is able also to save unto the uttermost all those who come unto God by him, seeing he ever lives to make intercession for them (Heb 7:25). Remember Jesus Christ, risen. He is available to you. He lives

to meet your need today, small or great, at any moment, all the time. Jesus Christ, risen from the dead. That is the note of certainty which must be sounded today. That is the Easter message.

How do you do this? How do you lay hold of this?

First, if you are going to remember something, you will have to have experienced it. You cannot remember something that you have not experienced.

At our house we sometimes talk about events that happened when our children were little, and once in awhile one will say "I remember that." But, tracing back, we find that it happened before she was born. She has just heard us talk about it so much she thinks she was there. I used to travel with Dr. H. A. Ironside; he had a most remarkable memory; he could read something just one or two times and he would have it committed to memory. He could recite great, long passages of Scripture verbatim. His wife used to say his memory was so good he could remember things that hadn't happened! But, of course, you cannot really do that. And you can never remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, in the way that Paul is talking about here, unless you have experienced the fact that he, the Risen Lord, is in you. That is the place to begin. Respond to his invitation: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me," (Rev 3:20{RSV}). We will live together. That is the place to start. Invite him to be your living Lord.

Then, of course, if you have done that, to remember something in this way requires the exercise of some vision. Envision his rising again and what it means to you. Even let your imagination work. Think about what this means, Christ in you. Realize who he is, this One in whom is vested all power in heaven and on earth (Matt 28:18), this One with whom it is possible to do all things (Phil 4:13), this One who is never limited by any circumstance, is never at a loss, who never makes mistakes. Think of it! This One in you, making all that he is available to you!

That is Jesus Christ, risen from the dead.

So let your imagination work a bit with these facts. Think of how he makes himself available to you, and of his presence with you, of his power to conquer evil within, and of his love, his concern for you, and his desire to meet you at any level of need, no matter what it might be (John 10:10). Reckon upon the certainty of his ability to impart to you his own resurrection life (John 10:27-30).

And then let your vision, your imagination, become inspiration. Take up the work that you have let drop. Buckle on your armor and go out to battle again, remembering that he in you is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that you could ask or think (Eph 3:20). So take up the task again, start to work again, relying upon him. Run the race with new vigor and patience, trusting in his adequacy, because he is the only resource that will meet the pressing demands of the day in which we live.

And when you discover that fact, and act upon it, avail yourself of his resurrection power, you discover that life becomes a continual challenge, a continual adventure of faith. Every day is a new mystery story in which you see the Son of God taking the problems before you and untangling them, working them out, changing hearts, touching lives, breathing upon the dead and the dull and the apathetic and bringing them to vitality and life and glory. That is the way life is intended to be.

So that is why Paul wrote to this young man, as to us, and said, "Above everything else, Timothy, remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead." Not dead, not lost, not gone, but alive forevermore, living in you, to work through you to make your life what it ought to be. And as he continually brings victory and blessing into your life remember to rejoice with him and thank him.

This is the value of this celebration "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead."

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