

THE LIVING HOPE

by Ray C. Stedman

Once again we have come to Easter, the most joyous celebration of the Christian Church. We are uncertain as to when Jesus was born, but Easter is tied to the unchanging movements of the heavenly bodies and they have not varied one iota since our Lord first came from the grave, so there is no doubt about the date of Easter.

It is a fascinating fact that every religion on earth has some kind of a spring celebration. In fact, the very word, *Easter*, is the name of a pagan goddess who was associated with one of the spring festivals celebrated in Central Europe. I think it is only natural that these two celebrations -- the celebration of our Lord's resurrection and the celebration of the return of spring -- have merged, because in some respects the theme is the same: the emergence of life from death; the return of hope, warmth, joy, and color to a weary, worn, barren, and dreary world.

Now, perhaps, no writer in the New Testament captures so fully, in one short sentence, the glory of Easter than the Apostle Peter does in First Peter 1:3:

**Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,
{1 Pet 1:3 RSV}**

Surely no apostle felt the death of Jesus more agonizingly than Peter. He had boasted that he would not leave him or forsake him, that he would stay true and fight for him even unto death. He meant so well, but he failed so miserably. When the moment came, a little girl's question upset him, and melted all his bravado, and he denied his Lord. So to the appalling collapse of hope that all the apostles experienced in the death of Jesus, in Peter's case was added the shame and disgrace of his own denial. It is no wonder that the last view we have of Peter in the Gospels is his going out into the dark of the night, weeping bitterly.

I am sure there may be some like that here this morning whose hopes have been crushed, whose dreams have been unfulfilled. Maybe just a few years ago you had glorious dreams of what you would like to be, and what you would like to do, and now they are all faded away, or collapsed about you. You meant to do well, but you ended up wrong, somehow. We can even have bad days that make us feel that way. This last Friday was such a day for me. It is popularly known as Good Friday, but for me it was a Bad Friday. It started out wrong. I woke up in the morning feeling a sense of burden about problems that I had that I did not know any solution to, and then things seemed to go wrong through the day. I came over here to look for the little podium that I use on Sunday mornings. It has been missing for several weeks and I miss it. I had the whole staff looking all over for it. Now that was a small thing, but it upset me. In fact, I said to one young man of the staff, "If I don't get that back, I'm going to resign as pastor!" Do you know what that kid said? He looked at me and replied, "Well, it's been nice having you around!"

Then I got a phone call from another member of the staff in whom I was somewhat disappointed about a matter, and we had a little misunderstanding on the phone. I got a bit huffy with him, and I felt bad about that. Things just were not going right! I came here to get ready for the Good Friday service and people showed up late. One of the speakers forgot he was supposed to speak, and when it was time for the service to begin I looked for the choir and could not find them! Everything went wrong, so it was not a Good Friday at all but a bad one for me.

But it is those kinds of moments and that kind of day that the resurrection of Jesus is designed to relieve and to help. Have you ever thought of it that way? We celebrate Easter and the great triumph of Christ over the grave -- and it is a great triumph, a marvelous message and a great theme, justly celebrated -- but I think we often

forget that Easter also stands for the presence of Christ with us to meet the pressures of life as they come to us day by day. I am sure Peter had that in mind when he wrote this text, for you recall that after the resurrection of Jesus we are told in the Gospels that he appeared privately to Peter. We have no record of what he said or where it occurred, but evidently the sensitive heart of Jesus understood how Peter felt in the hour of his monumental failure and collapse of faith, and he sought him out, and appeared to him, and doubtless restored him to some sense of personal worth again.

We then have that wonderful scene in John's Gospel where, by the shores of Galilee, Jesus appears again to his disciples and prepares a meal for them. He calls them over to it, and, around the fire, Jesus asks Peter three times: "Do you love me, Peter?" "Do you love me?" "Do you love me?" Three times Peter affirms his love, and three times Jesus gives him back his ministry, "Feed my lambs; feed my sheep," {cf, John 21:15-18}. Surely Peter had that in mind when he wrote this word, "By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."

I want to take this from the Roman world of the 1st century up to our 20th century and the modern age in which we live, because if Christianity is true at all, then Jesus Christ is just as much able to meet our need for help in the hour of death or the pressures of life as he was in the 1st century. If that is not true, then this whole business of Christianity is a fraud. But I want to examine this for a moment and see if it is not true that Jesus is doing exactly the same today as he did then.

Peter speaks of the resurrection as giving us hope in the hour of death. It is a fashion today to explore what happens after death. A dozen books have come out recently that attempt to explore this area, and give the testimonies of certain people who have allegedly died, and come back to life. Usually the stories are somewhat similar. They all claim to have had an experience of passing through a dark tunnel to light beyond and being met by a "being of light" who says very kind and considerate things to them but always sends them back into this life to pick it up again and live a few more years. Now, I am totally unimpressed by those arguments. I find them seriously lacking in any credibility for two basic reasons.

1. First, I question whether these people who experience this (though I am sure they are very sincere in what they remember), really were dead at all. By definition, death is the end of all bodily functions; the mind, the brain, the heart, all cease functioning at death. I find myself at a loss to understand how an experience which is supposedly gone through outside the body can leave an impression on the brain so as to be retained as a memory. How can that be? No one has ever explained that to me.
2. The second reason is that physical weaknesses are notorious as times when our minds begin to wander, to hallucinate, to imagine, and to dream various things.

Ever since I was a little boy I have always been able to tell when I had a high fever because a certain dream recurs at those times. It is always the same dream, a very mixed-up, confused experience that I have, and I know it is the sign of a high fever. It is not the sign of a heightened mental ability; it is the sign of a lowered ability, a lowered bodily function.

So, as I read books like this, I am at a loss to understand how anybody can be sure that what they record is not simply the hallucinations and imaginings of a mind that is losing its grip on life and unable to function in the fullness that was intended for it. Whatever else you may think about it, I am sure it is clear that that kind of experience and testimonial leaves us with a very uncertain hope, a very flimsy and subjective experience, which can be no more than wishful thinking. But not so with this Christian hope.

The Scriptures everywhere assure us that when believers die there are three things that always are promised to them.

First, we are given the assurance that we will not be alone in the hour of death. There will be a divine companion with us; a hand will steady us through this time. Jesus said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you," {Heb 13:5b KJV}. We have that promise, whether we feel it or not, that we will not be left alone. He said to his disciples, "I will not leave you as orphans, I will not abandon you," {John 14:18 NIV}. Over and over we have this promise repeated in the Word, that Christ will be with us in the hour of death. Many of the martyrs and those who have died have borne testimony to that fact. When D. L. Moody, the great evangelist,

was dying, his last words were, "Earth is receding, heaven is approaching; this is my crowning day."

The second thing we are told is that we need have no fear about death. Christ promises to us that there is no ground for fear. I have been struck by the fact that in the Word of God there are 365 places where it says, "Fear not." (Did you ever wonder why that number?) And always the reason is, "For I am with you." Jesus said to his own disciples,

"Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also." (John 14:1-3 {RSV})

Those are strong words, and great assurance in the hour of death.

There are also many passages in the New Testament that give us assurance that beyond this life is the promise of greater functioning than we have ever known down here, passages that describe the glory to come, and picture for us beauty of life beyond as a great and marvelous experience where we will be more alive than we ever were here. Paul says, "The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us," {Rom 8:18b KJV}.

"Well," somebody says, "how do you know that is going to happen? Those are beautiful words, but do you have any proof?" The answer, of course, is the very event that we celebrate today. This is the proof. Jesus Christ returned from death and gave us an answer. One who clearly and definitely died returned in a different dimension of living to guarantee to us that those who trust him will be carried through the hour of death without fail.

Now, it is clear that Jesus was dead. I do not think we need to debate that, though some have tried to question it. When the Roman soldier pierced his side with a spear, John's Gospel tells us, "blood and water came out," {cf, John 19:34}. Any doctor will tell you that that indicates the circulation of the blood had long since ceased. He had been dead for some time, thus allowing the plasma and red corpuscles to separate so as to give the appearance of blood and water. Then he was taken down; his body was wrapped in grave clothes all around so he could not move, and a wrapping was bound around his head -- as in the oriental style of burial -- so tightly that it would have been impossible for him to breathe. He was laid in a tomb and sealed in with a rock, and left there for three days and three nights. So there is no question about death. And yet from that he returned.

Here is the difference between the resurrection of Jesus and the books we are reading about today. These people who supposedly died returned back to the same life they left, and they will die again some day. When Jesus Christ came back, he came back the same, but different. He identified himself to his disciples so that they had no doubt that it was he. Thomas was invited to put his hands in the wounds and see that it was the same body that was crucified, and yet it was not the same. There was a difference. He was glorified. He was living in a different dimension of life. When men are resuscitated they die, supposedly, and then come back, but it is said of Jesus that having died, he dies no more. He came back, not merely having resisted death and recovered from it, he came back having conquered death. He was the master of death and of Hades. This, therefore, is the guarantee upon which our hope rests as we must face, one of these days, our own death.

But that is not all. Peter speaks of this as a living hope, and *living* means it is something that comes to us every day; it is something that is available all the time. It is in that sense that I want to conclude this message this morning by showing you that Jesus Christ alive from the dead is the answer to all the broken dreams, the collapsed hopes of your life and mine, the pressures that we feel from day to day, the sense of our failure and the inability to perform as we would like to perform. In the New Testament you can see how these early Christians were filled with a constant sense of the presence of Jesus with them. Everywhere they went they did so with joy and optimism and expectation. When you read the book of Acts you see that from beginning to end it has a ring of triumph.

I have in my library a book called *The Empty Tomb*, and it is supposedly the letters (imaginary ones) of Caiaphas, the high priest, to Annas, his father-in-law, describing his reaction to the resurrection of Jesus. This

is an imaginary account, but it captures something of the surprise that the high priest must have felt as he observed the behavior of these early Christians:

How they could one day plan and carry through a gigantic hoax, and the next day be themselves taken in by it, is another thing that utterly defeats my understanding. But that is what happened, and it changed them almost out of recognition. You could practically see them becoming new men before your eyes. Instead of the frightened, dispirited, weak creatures they were on the day of their leader's crucifixion, they were all at once transformed men of boldness, confidence and strength. Instead of being in terror of us as they had been, they did not seem to care a rap for any threat we made or even for any action we took. They openly paraded their false doctrine in the very streets of the city and deliberately flouted our every effort to silence them. And still the perplexities continue to pile up.

There is no explanation of this strange behavior on the part of the disciples other than the fact that Jesus was risen and he was with them. Nobody could see him but he was there, and he was strengthening them, helping them, and ministering to them. You could take all these three promises that have to do with our death -- the promise of his companionship, the promise of an absence of fear, and the promise of a greater ability to function -- and you can apply them to every single hour of life if you know Jesus Christ. Now that is the great good news of Easter to me, that I am not left alone to face the problems of life without help.

A man said to me last week, "My marriage was about over and my wife and I were on the verge of divorce. I had given up all hope and didn't want to live anymore. Then I came to Christ. I met Jesus." Looking me in the eye, he said, "And he has given me a new reason to live." Now, that is the resurrected Christ at work.

Just yesterday a woman said, "For years I was on a guilt trip in my life. There was never a moment that I had any peace, never a moment that I was free from the condemnation of a guilty conscience. Then I began to understand how Jesus loved me and that he is with me, and that he has made ample provision for every failure of mine. All I need to do is to acknowledge that failure and I experience afresh the restoration of his forgiveness. What a peace that has brought into my heart and life!" When Christ is in your heart like that, he gives you the power to do things that you do not think you can do.

A few years ago I knew a young couple that had just recently married. Shortly afterwards the man came to me and said he had left his wife. I told him, "You can't do that," but he replied, "I have. I'll never go back to her, either. I hate that woman, and she hates me. We don't want to see each other again." I said, "But you're a Christian. You can't talk like that." He said, "That's the way it's going to be. I can't stand her, and I'll never go back." "Well, you talk to the Lord about that," I told him. That's your problem, between you and him." A few days later he came back and said, "Well, I decided to go back." I told him I knew he would, and I asked him what made him decide this. He replied, "Well, I read in the Scriptures where it says that Jesus will be with me to help me. If he's going to go with me, maybe he can make it different." He went back to his wife; he forgave her and she forgave him. I have been watching that marriage now for a number of years and it is a beautiful marriage. They have been going through some deep trials and discouragement, together, shoulder to shoulder. What that young man could not do, and did not think he could do, he found he had the ability to do when he obeyed and reckoned upon the power of Christ to help him. That has been the story of thousands of people today.

I call attention, in closing, to the gateway by which this experience comes to us. How do you find Christ like that? Peter's answer is, "By his great mercy we have been born again unto as a living hope." "Born again." Those are familiar words today. Everybody is talking about them. Chuck Colson has been born again; Eldridge Cleaver has been born again; Larry Flynt has been born again; Dean Jones has been born again. What does it mean? It simply means there came a time when, in their emptiness, in their loneliness or despair or whatever it may be, they responded to the invitation of Jesus Christ to come into their lives, and they invited him in. Jesus came in, and he began to make these changes. They were born again to a living hope by the resurrection of Christ from the dead.

Johnny Cash said, "A few years ago I was hooked on drugs. I dreaded to wake up in the morning. There was no joy, peace, or happiness in my life. Then one day in my helplessness I turned my life completely over to God. Now I can't wait to get up in the morning to study my Bible. Sometimes the words out of the Scriptures

leap into my heart. This does not mean that all my problems have been solved or that I've reached any state of perfection. However, my life has been turned around. I have been born again."

One of the men very influential in the conversion of Charles Colson was Tom Phillips, president of Raytheon Corporation. He said, "One night I was in New York on business and noticed that Billy Graham was having a crusade in Madison Square Garden. I went, curious, I guess, hoping maybe I'd find some answers. What Graham said that night put it all in place for me. I saw what had been missing in my life -- the personal relationship with Jesus Christ, the fact that I have never asked him into my life and had never turned my life over to him. So I did it that very night at the crusade, and I was born again."

John Naber, who is our neighbor in nearby Menlo Park, said, "After thinking about it for three days I realized I needed Jesus Christ, and I accepted him. Now that my life has been turned over to Christ, I can function with an extra power bestowed by God."

Now, those are living, up-to-date testimonials of men who have found the truth of this 2,000 year old document to be the same today. Christ is alive. He is ready to meet us in the hour of death, but more than that, he is ready to meet us in the pressures of life. If you do not know him, you are going to have to struggle all through the weary weeks that lie ahead, doing the same old thing -- hoping, and finding your hopes dashed, trying to be sincere, and finding it all come apart until you can put your life into the hands of the only One who is capable of handling it. That you can do in a moment of acceptance of his invitation to come into your life.

Prayer

We thank you Father for this great truth that Jesus Christ lives. He lives in many of our hearts this morning. He lives to forgive us, to sustain us, to encourage us, to strengthen us, to correct us. We thank you for his living life that guides us all the way through life to the end, and then does not leave us desolate, but takes us on through to that life beyond. For that we give grateful thanks, and pray that everyone here this morning may know him as a personal Lord and Savior. In his name we ask it, Amen.

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