

FOLLOW THE LEADER

by Ray C. Stedman

I was thinking about Easter this past week and I realized that since I had become a Christian, as a boy, that this is my fifty-fifth Easter celebration -- yet they never grow old! If we take the date of the crucifixion as 30 A. D. (as I think it probably was), then this is the one thousand nine hundredth and fifty-third celebration of Easter for the church.

Our Jewish friends are also celebrating a great event at this time, the Passover season. Both Easter and Passover are celebrations of historical events, things that actually happened. They are not mere legends or philosophies, but real events that happened in time and space. The Passover, of course, goes back another fifteen hundred years. It occurred on the night when the Israelites were delivered from Egypt, under the leadership of Moses. At Easter time we celebrate the breakthrough of our Lord Jesus from the bonds of death on an early Sunday morning one thousand nine hundred and fifty-three years ago.

But as I thought about those two celebrations, one great difference between them became obvious to me: though Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, there is no Jew today, nor has there ever been one, who has claimed to be in contact with the living Moses! But Christians claim that they live day-by-day in close contact with the very same Jesus who arose from the dead nineteen hundred and fifty-three years ago. That, it seems to me, constitutes the greatest message of Easter. The most wonderful privilege any human being can have is that he should be given the honor of having a Divine Companion all the way through life, day after day.

Yet it seems to be one of the most neglected privileges today. I do not understand it, except that I have done it so often myself. The greatest provision ever made by God to handle pressure, problems, dangers, and disappointments seems to be the last resort for many Christians. They apparently prefer to spend thousands of dollars in counseling and psychiatry bills, or battle with fears and worries for years on end, or even blow out their brains, rather than to follow the simple advice given by the Apostle Paul in his last letter to young Timothy. Paul was writing from a prison cell in Rome to a young man who had been left alone in a great pagan city to face the battles of the Christian life. Here are the apostle's words of advice:

Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descended from David, as preached in my gospel. (2 Tim 2:8 {RSV})

That one verse is a pattern for handling difficulty in life: "Remember Jesus Christ risen from the dead. Jesus the Messiah, the Jesus of the Gospels, the One we read about in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John; the One who walked among men and said such marvelous words, who showed such wonderful compassion, who understood the mysteries of life. Jesus of Nazareth, risen from the dead, the One who stood by the Sea of Galilee after the resurrection and said to his disciples, "All power in heaven and on earth is given unto me," {cf, Matt 28:18b KJV}. Jesus, Lord of life, Lord of history, Lord of nature, Lord of all the rolling centuries yet to come, even past our own day. "Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descended from David": the very human Christ, one of us, part of mankind, with a history, an ancestry and a genealogy that he could trace. That is the gospel that Paul preached, the good news for today. I suggest that that is the message we need to hear again on Easter Sunday (and indeed on many other days, but especially today), because it is a message we seem to forget so easily.

Last fall I spoke at a pastors' conference in Washington State. I enjoy going to pastors' conferences if for no other reason than to hear them sing. No one sings like pastors! They know all the hymns by heart because they have sung them hundreds of times. There was a wonderful song leader at this conference, who led in one of the great hymns: J. Wilbur Chapman's beautiful, "One Day":

One day when heaven was filled with His praises,
One day when sin was black as could be,
Jesus came forth to be born of a virgin,
dwelt among men -- my example is He!

The hymn goes on to recite the various events of Jesus' life, every verse focusing on a single event, and then gathering it all up in the chorus in five great proclamations:

Living, He loved me!
Dying, He saved me!
Buried, He carried my sins far away!
Rising, He justified freely, forever!
One day He's coming -- Oh glorious day!

After we had sung the hymn, the song leader said, "I love that hymn. To me it is the greatest hymn ever written because it incorporates all the truth about Jesus, all the great themes of Christian faith, in one song. I would like to have you all stand and sing it again." Then he led us again in a great singing of the hymn. After it was over, I was introduced to speak, and I had to say, "I am sorry to have to disagree with our song-leading brother. Although I believe that is a great hymn -- it is indeed a marvel of condensation of the great themes of Christian faith and I have sung it since I was a boy -- I have to tell you that there is one theme that has been left out; and the exclusion of that one theme explains the weakness of the church today." Then I said, "I wonder if any of you can tell me what it is?"

It took those pastors quite a while, but eventually one of them raised his hand and said, "There is no mention of Pentecost." I said, "You are right. There is no mention of the time when the Spirit came to do what Jesus had said to his disciples, after he was risen from the dead, he would do. Remember that he said to them, 'It is to your advantage that I go away.' They could not believe that. The thought of his going away made their hearts sink. But he meant it. 'It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I go I will send the Spirit.' And what would the Spirit do? 'He will take of the things of mine and make them real unto you.' It is through that companion experience of Pentecost that the resurrection has meaning for us today; for in that event Jesus came again to be our Divine Companion to accompany us through life, to minister to our needs, our pressures and our problems. That is what we are singing about today."

If Christians took seriously Paul's advice, "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead," some wonderful things would happen: First, most of the need for counseling among Christians today would be eliminated. Here at this church, as in almost every church, many Christians come with problems and wanting help. Most of them are seeking some gimmick to deliver them from their problems. They do not want problems. Or they want to find some kind of comfort to make them feel a little better. But most of the Christian counseling that is done here, as in every other church, would be eliminated if people took seriously this great truth, "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead."

Jesus is the Divine Counselor, the Divine Companion who is available to meet our need. If we took that truth seriously it would enable us to experience immediate victories over lust, over alcoholism, over drug and tobacco addiction, over explosive tempers, over sharp, caustic words, over morbid fears, guilty feelings, and smug, self-righteous complacency. We would be delivered from so much if at the moment of pressure and temptation we would "remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead." We would be delivered from loneliness, greed, jealousy, emptiness and restlessness. We would become wholesome, well-adjusted, well-balanced, loving people, able to cope with life no matter what it brought. That is what Christ came into this world to do.

Are all these exaggerations? Not if we judge from the testimony of Christians in the Scriptures, and through history. Remember that Paul wrote to the Philippians, "I have learned, in whatever state I am, therewith to be content," {cf, Phil 4:11}. Paul had learned the secret of contentment. What kind of contentment? "I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound," {Phil 4:12 RSV}. Whether he had what he needed or had nothing at all, he knew how to be content. He tells us what the secret is: "I can do all things through him who strengthens me," {Phil 4:13 RSV}.

I wonder why we so quickly forget that there is One who is given to strengthen us?

Paul wrote to the Colossians about his work, "For this I toil, striving with all the energy which he mightily inspires within me," {Col 1:29 RSV}. Did you ever think of that, when you were weary, tired, and subjected to heavy demand? Jesus supplies energy to do what you have to do. When you feel like you cannot do any more, you can "remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead," and find a supply of strength to do what you have to do. Have you found that?

John the Apostle wrote, "As he is, so are we in this world," {1 Jn 4:17b}. What he is, we can be.

The Apostle Peter wrote, "His divine power has granted us all things that pertain to life and godliness," {2 Pet 1:3 RSV}.

The writer of Hebrews says, "Let us run with patience the race that is set before us (that is the race of life itself, day after day after day, step after step after step), looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of faith," {Heb 12:1b-2a KJV}. Do you need faith to motivate you, to strengthen you to do what must be done? That is what Jesus is here for: "looking unto Jesus, the author (the originator) and the completer of faith."

David Livingstone, in the last century, said, "I go through the jungles of Africa and Jesus is by my side."

Savonarola, that great evangelist of the 12th century in Florence, said, "They may kill me, they may tear me in pieces, but never, never, never shall they tear from my heart the living Jesus."

Samuel Rutherford, one of the great Scottish Covenanters, put in jail for his faith, in the 17th century said, "Jesus Christ came into my cell yesterday and every stone shone like a jewel."

Those are men who have learned to "remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead." They faced problems with an inner impartation of strength, grace, truth and life that they would never have had without his presence.

It is very important for us to see that Jesus is there, not to do what we think needs to be done, but what he thinks needs to be done. Many Christians fail to lay hold of this promise because they want to use Jesus to accomplish their program; they want to use him to work things out according to their plan. Those who watched *The Thorn Birds* on television this past week saw the heartbreaking folly of trying to get God to do something one's own way instead of recognizing the wisdom he has in doing things his way. The first creates havoc in lives, and that is what that book and movie said to us.

Some people think that Jesus is a genie in the magic lamp of our desire which we can rub and there he is, bowing and genuflecting, and saying, "Yes, master, what do you want?" No, Jesus is there to toughen us, to motivate us, to strengthen us, to stabilize us so we do not panic, we do not give up, we do not in anger flip out, throw it all overboard, and try to run and hide. Jesus is there to strengthen us to live. That is the secret that Paul is talking about: "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead."

I have been conducting a one-man research experiment this past week: I have been listening to the way Christians talk. I did not warn them what I was listening for, I did not let them know anything that I expected of them. I sought to learn how many Christians in the normal experiences of life would reflect, in my hearing, the truth that they were counting on Jesus Christ risen from the dead. I have been greatly encouraged by the results. There are many Christians here who are learning that secret. You can tell it by the way they live. They are different.

- I talked last week with a young man who needed guidance in his life. As we talked together he said, "I decided that the Lord was big enough to know how to show me what he wanted, and I'm willing to wait for it." I realized that that young man was learning to "remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead."
- I talked with a mother who had just had her first baby, and it was a difficult and dangerous birth. There was a moment of crisis when she could have lost her own life or that of her baby. As she told me the story, she said that when that moment came she said to the Lord, "Lord, this is your body, and

you can do with it whatever you want with it." As she held her baby, this young woman, healthy, whole, with radiant face, I knew that here was a mother who had learned to "remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead."

- I talked with my barber last week. He loves bowling, but he said that when he bowls he gets tense at times. He is trying to do better and thereby help his team, but he gets so tense and uptight that he cannot bowl very well. But he told me he has learned what to do. He said, "I say to myself, 'I know who I am; I know who my Father is; I know who my Lord is; I know what he can do, and I just decide to let him do it.'" I realized that there is a man who, even in bowling, has learned to "remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead."
- A businessman called me last week and told me that his business had been in desperate financial straits for several years, that it was almost ready to collapse, and his associates and he have been praying that God would show them a way out. It looked as though they had lost, that the whole thing was about to go, when suddenly God opened a door and a fantastic supply of money was provided for their need. He said to me, "I know that the Lord knew our need, and he knew when to supply it." There is a man who is learning to reckon on Jesus Christ, risen from the dead!
- Just last night a woman excitedly told me, "Oh, let me tell you what the Lord did for me this month. I had the great privilege of hearing my one hundred-and-one-year old father pray for the first time in his life."

Those are people who have learned that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, descended from David; and that is the good news for today!

There is great truth that gathers around the resurrection. It is indeed the answer to the hopelessness of death. It is the breakthrough that has brought us out of grief and terror, and fear and despair in the face of death, into hope and joy and peace in the moment of our dying. Many can testify to that; we witness to it every Easter. It is, as the Apostle Paul says in First Corinthians 15, the guarantee of our faith. When moments of doubt seize us and we wonder if we have been tricked, that this whole Christian thing is a psychological gimmick designed to make us feel good while we pass through life, if we go back to the inescapable fact that Jesus rose from the dead, and did it in the presence of many witnesses so that it was established beyond a doubt so that even his enemies could not deny it, we can work our way out again to peace and rest about our faith. Everything rests on that great fact. The resurrection is a great comfort in times of bereavement when we have had to say good-bye to a loved one; we can walk away from a grave, reminding ourselves that we shall see our loved one again. That is one of the greatest comforts of life.

But surely one of the greatest truths of all to gather around the resurrection is this great word, "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead." When you are confronted with a problem, with a struggle, with a difficulty you do not know how to solve, one you can do nothing about, "remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead." That is what he is there for. Remember that God has provided a Divine Companion, a wise Leader who has been down the path ahead of you so he knows the way; a faithful Friend who understands how you feel and what you are going through; a divine, omnipotent Companion who can take you through the trial and the testing and work it out to your ultimate benefit and good.

Easter is a time when many people take the opportunity to receive Christ. Just before the last service I was told of someone who had come to Christ a few minutes earlier. Easter is a great time to come to know the Lord. But I want to say to you this: Easter is also a great time for Christians to begin to lean upon the great provision which God has made in Christ, risen from the dead. Stop running to every human counselor for help! Learn to reckon on the presence of Christ in your difficulty, and watch him, lean on him, to work it out according to his will.

Prayer

"Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in you that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen." {Heb 13:20-21 RSV}

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