

The Rise of Easter Faith

From the series: Credo

Text: I Corinthians 15:8; Acts 26:13

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

For some reason or other (I suppose it is my age), I am beginning to reflect back over the way that I have come, and Easter brings me back to my European experience. I was very, very fortunate that, after seven years of pastoral ministry, I was able to take four years for study and reflection in the European setting. I had come here in 1960 and I had all the answers, and after seven years of pastoral experience, I began to learn what the questions were, and for the first time in my life I wanted really to know, I wanted to understand as best I could, wherever it might lead me or leave me. That European experience was precious, and it has continued to bear fruit in my life ever since.

When I got there in the late 60s, the theme was the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Everybody was talking about it; the scholarly world was abuzz with talk about the resurrection. There had not been much talk of resurrection for over one hundred years. The leadership of theological investigation was pretty much centered in Germany, Holland, England, and the Continent, and the impact of the Enlightenment had sent shockwaves through the Church and its academic establishment— that Enlightenment of the 18th century, the birth of critical thinking when our knowledge of the world exploded, when we entered what has been called the Age of Reason. One could do one of two things if one was a believing person in the light of that Enlightenment - one could either run for shelter in orthodox creed, batten down the hatches, build the walls high and refuse to allow the critical thinking and the knowledge that was coming to light to have any bearing on one's faith, or one could try to take it in and then see what kind of adjustment to faith or what kind of new understanding of Christian tradition might be forthcoming.

I grew up and was nurtured in a tradition which shut itself against critical thinking, critical rationality. There was a great liberal establishment that sought to come to terms with the new knowledge that was coming to the fore, trying to understand the Gospel in light of that new knowledge. That liberal establishment, in my experience was the enemy, very threatening. They had given up on God and the Gospel. But, when I got to Europe, there was a point of sufficient maturity

whereby I began to see that those who were trying to interpret the Gospel in light of emerging knowledge, were not enemies of the faith but, rather, were trying desperately to give testimony to the faith in an entirely new world situation, an entirely new world view. I came to see that, as a matter of fact, that is what every generation must do, because the world keeps changing, the situation changes, and so new knowledge coming to light calls for a new translation or a revisioning of the faith in light of the reality which everybody is living. There was a phrase I learned at that time, *the climate of opinion*, and I came to understand for the first time how every period and every epoch has a climate of opinion. It is that overwhelming sense of what is; it is that unquestioned view of reality which is conscious or unconscious, but shared generally, and I came to see that the great liberal attempt to articulate the Gospel was really an heroic attempt to speak the grace of God in a totally changed situation, and that these people were not to be scorned but to be respected and listened to, and valued for that attempt to move the Gospel into another key. It was not that in the rise of critical rationality we were becoming more intelligent than our forebears or those who formulated the early creeds or wrote the Gospels. I was thinking about that last evening. We still go back and read Plato and Aristotle. We still converse with Socrates and the Golden Age of Greek philosophical development. Five hundred years before Jesus Christ the Greeks were wrestling with ultimate human questions about the meaning of life and the human experience, and we still study them today. We still read with profit those discussions.

I got a depressing thought when I realized that 500 years from now, no one is going to be looking at my sermons. So, you get my point. It is not that suddenly we have become so brilliant in contrast to those earlier generations who were benighted. We probably have lost a dimension of depth which they possessed. But, as a matter of fact, the world has changed. Just the knowledge of the world in which we live has changed, the nature of our human experience has changed, the nature of the human person comes to light, the whole of reality breaks open in a new and fresh way, and now what does it mean to believe in Jesus Christ?

Such discussions had been going on in Europe. There was a great New Testament scholar, Rudolf Bultmann, who had a project of demythologizing the Gospels. He said if you turn a switch and the light goes on, if you turn a dial and you hear voices from the ether waves (and what would he say about the Internet), that experience of modernity demands of us some fresh understanding of the meaning of the Gospel, and so he suggested a program of demythologizing the stories of the Gospel. At the time I arrived, his students were around, as well as the students of Karl Barth, and about that time they were investigating again the centrality of the resurrection to the Gospel story, and it was becoming evident that you couldn't understand the New Testament witness without the resurrection. It was absolutely central. It was the resurrection that had created everything else, and so, there were attempts to explain and to understand the meaning of resurrection in those New Testament documents, particularly in the Gospels, and it was quite an enterprise. Understand that I was going over to

Europe ready to learn but still scared to death I would go home with nothing to preach. There was a contention at the time that Easter was the rise of faith in the hearts and minds of the disciples. Jesus didn't arise in terms of a body coming out of a tomb, but Jesus arose in the understanding of the disciples. That was rather threatening to me; I was trying to find somebody who was looking for at least a faint footprint of God's action in the sands of time.

Have you ever been there? Have you ever said to God, "If You'd just give me something tangible to hold unto?"

I desperately wanted to believe. I desperately wanted to preach good news, but I didn't know if I could, and that possibility of resurrection being the rise of faith in the minds and hearts of the disciples looked like a possibility, although it wasn't quite enough for me. But, I think I heard myself last Sunday on Easter Sunday suggest that very thing - that Easter was the rise of faith in the minds and hearts of that intimate circle around Jesus who were crushed in his crucifixion, but who came to realize in their community together that what he was could never die, and so they shouted, The Lord has risen!"

Now, what happened, I don't know. I did read I Corinthians 15 in which Paul deals not with a corpse coming out of a tomb, but with a vision of the living Christ. I even went to my Greek Bible and I made sure that the word he used in that second paragraph of I Corinthians 15 is the same word throughout. He says that "Jesus appeared to Peter, to Cephas, he appeared unto James, he appeared to the twelve, he appeared to 500 at one time and many of whom are still alive, and finally, as one born at the wrong time, he appeared also to me." That is the clue, of course. "He appeared also to me," and the same word is used, the same seeming substance as to the appearance to Peter and James and to the twelve and to the 500. We know when he appeared to Paul, according to Paul's own testimony. In the Book of Acts going on the way to Damascus to rub out any sign of the followers of the Way, he is confronted with a light and a voice and he's knocked off his horse and his life is transformed, inwardly transformed, turned around, according to his own expression.

And so, apparently, it wasn't necessary to have an Easter experience. It wasn't necessary to have an Easter experience by touching a corpse revived. It could happen inwardly in the imagination, in the mind, in the heart, in the being. It could happen in a visionary manner of one sort or another. In fact, if you would go on in that 15th chapter, you would find Paul trying so hard to figure out what in the world was going on. He talks about the physical body and then he talks about the spiritual body. Well, what is a spiritual body? Whatever it is, Paul contrasts the physical body, the flesh, with that spiritual body, and he goes on in another place in that same chapter to say, "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven." Obviously, he was saying it is not Jesus come back in flesh and blood that is present, that is appearing, that is experienced.

Probably my favorite Easter story is the story of the Emmaus Road: two companions making their way from Jerusalem to Emmaus, and another joins them along the way. They don't recognize him and, to make a long story short, they invite him to come because it is nearing eventide, to break bread with them and he comes into their home and instead of being their guest, he acts as the host. He blesses the bread, breaks it and gives it to them, and they say, "My God!" and he is gone. What kind of an experience is that? It is an experience of a presence, of a spirit, of a reality, experienced in conversation, in communion, at table, breaking bread. It is the experience of a presence, so they speak of a burning heart and suddenly their eyes are opened and, of course, when their eyes are opened to recognize him, he's not there because that is not the point.

Now, if you go on to the next paragraph, Luke is a bit nervous about the fact that we might get the impression that that is all there is and that is enough, and so he has them coming to the disciples that same night and he sits down with them and they look at him horrified and he says, "What's the matter? I'm not a ghost. Anybody got a boiled fish?" Well, that really runs counter to that earlier experience. I am sure Luke, the Gospel writer, is trying to say, "Look, this wasn't an hallucination. This was not just an illusory, momentary experience. This thing is real. Jesus lives. The God-presence that was present with us in Jesus is present with us still. He can still create a burning heart. Across the table, bread broken, something happens between us." In various ways, some contradictory, those gospel writers are trying to say that the one who was crucified is still present in conversation, in community, in the breaking of bread, God with us, Spirit with us, that which was present when we were with Jesus did not die, crucified though he was, for we are still the community of the burning heart, for we experience the reality in the presence from God.

What was the result? *Credo*. In Latin and Greek, it means "I believe." *Credo*, the first word of the Apostles Creed, the first word of the Nicene Creed. *Credo*. *Credo* in God. I believe in God. That was the consequence of the Easter experience, of the Easter faith. The Church went on to confess its faith. It did it in its own conceptuality, in its own world and life view, it did it in the only language and understanding available to it. But, it was trying to say there was something real here.

I believe in God.

What God?

God the Creator.

What God?

The God of whom Jesus spoke.

What God?

The God whose Spirit is here in the midst of us.

They said, "I believe."

For us, belief has become a difficult thing because we think post-Enlightenment, post-scientific method, post-empiricism. We think that belief has to do with the things that we can verify scientifically, and there is a lot that we cannot verify scientifically, and so belief comes into trouble. But, in its origin, initially, in the study of "to believe," it was "to love." In German, *Beleben*. The beloved. The creed also originally meant not that which I believe intellectually, but that which I give my heart to, that in which my heart rests. This is the trust of my life. I believe. I rest. I trust beyond anything that I intellectually can take apart or empirically verify. It is the tone quality of my life. It is who I am. I believe because I have experienced that which is beyond fathoming, and I continue to experience it now and again with another in conversation, in community, in the breaking of bread, with a companion along the way, the one who comes to dinner.

Last Tuesday night, Rabbi Sandy Sasso was here and I had the privilege of being at the table with her and breaking bread with her. She is the author of those marvelous children's books, and she was the guest of our Worship Center and some other supporting groups. A lovely person, a wonderful human being, this woman Jewish Rabbi who writes children's books about God. Nancy and I, after her wonderful lecture, bought one hundred dollars' worth of books for all the grandchildren. On the next morning, I took those up to my loft and I read them and I cried. One of them entitled, *In Between*, tells about a village where there are no streets, with rocks and weeds, and most of the houses have no windows. Only two houses have windows, and the man and the woman who have each a window in their house, are commissioned by this village, stumbling around, stammering, to go out and to search whether or not there is a God. And so, she goes and climbs the highest mountain and reaches for the clouds and searches in the depths of the ocean.

He goes across the desert, around the world. Each of them in search of God finally come back together. Neither of them has found God. She touches his sunburned arm and he wraps his blanket around her, and they return to the village where everything is the same, except they begin to build windows in all of the houses. The villagers say to them, "Did you find God in the desert?"

"No."

In the mountains?"

"No."

"In the ocean?"

"No."

"See? We told you there is not God."

"Oh," they said, "we found God."

"Where, then, is God?"

They looked at each other and they said, "God is in-between."

Now, if you can't cry at that, then you need to pray for eyes to see and ears to hear and a heart to understand, because, my God, I believe.