Sunday April 2, 1972
EASTER

Book 1

"THE MIRACLE OF RESURRECTION" Matthew 28:1-11

One of the most significant points about the resurrection stories as recorded in the Bible, is that no one, not even Jesus's closest disciples expected it to happen.

The women had gone to the tomb on early Sunday morning to take a little better care of the body. Since Jesus had been crucified on a Friday and was buried late Friday afternoon and since the Jewish Sabbath began at sundown on the same day, in all of the hurry, the close friends of Jesus had not had time to properly prepare the body for burial.

So on early Sunday morning, the first day of the week, they had returned to the tomb to take care of the body. They arrived at the tomb, expecting death, but found instead, life.

Each account in the New Testament tells a similar story. Faithful people expecting to find death on that morning were surprised by life. The Gospel according to John tells how Mary Magdalene wept at the doorway of the tomb when she discovered it was empty. She cried because she assumed that someone had stolen the body. She didn't expect a resurrection. Thus when Jesus himself talked to her near the tomb, at first she thought he was the gardener. She didn't recognize him.

So unexpected was Easter that a little later when some of the disciples were told by some of the women that Jesus had risen, they didn't believe it.

In the gospel of Luke, there is the story of the two followers of Jesus who were walking along the road to Emmaus. As they walked a stranger joined them and they unburdened their sad feelings to him. They were talking of the death of Jesus and how all their hopes had been dashed. Evening came. They went into a lodging and invited the stranger to stay with them. Then when the stranger was at table with them, in the breaking of the bread, their eyes were opened and they recognized Jesus. Who would've expected it?

The Gospel of John tells how on Easter Sunday night a frightened huddle of Christians were gathered together

behind locked doors because they were afraid. And here in their fear, the unpredictable happened. They met the risen Christ.

Even days later, evidently the resurrection of Jesus was not really understood or expected by some of the closest disciples. They thought they knew the future. Perhaps they had met Jesus after his death in some strange ways, but what did it mean? It was still all over now. We are told that Peter at one point after the resurrection decided to go back into the fishing business. Then while he and his friends were fishing, Jesus stood on the shore and called to them. Again, at first they didn't recognize him and mostly because they simply were not expecting him.

So you see, an important part of the miracle of the resurrection, an important part of its message, is its unexpectedness, its unpredictability. The resurrection says that we cannot judge life, people, the world or God, always by what they first appear to be. Yet we often do just that! But we cannot and do not always know the outcome of waht is happening. In the shrouded darkness of Good Friday, the disciples judged all of life to be dark and hopeless. But again, we cannot always accurately predict where God will break in our world or in what way he may do so.

Thus the miracle of the resurrection says that things are not always as they first appear to be. Events do not always turn out the way we predict they will. Let's look at this more closely in several ways.

1. First, people are not always what they first appear to be, or what we expect them to be, and many times they make startling changes which surprise all of us.

A few years ago in Tulsa, Oklahoma, doctors discovered a 17 year old boy with the I.Q. of a genius who had spent two thirds of his life in a school for the mentally retarded. There was nothing wrong with the boy's mind a routine examination quickly revealed, but he did have an undisclosed handicap. He was deaf. The child had been sent to a state institution in Enid, at the age of five, but recently had been transferred to another institution near Tulsa, a modern school emphasizing remedial rather than custodial care. The boy's true mental

state was revealed when an employee left a transistor radio kit on a work table and the young genius, after studying intricate wiring diagrams which he could not read, assembled the radio which played perfectly.

What had happened was that the boy had been so bright all of his life that he had learned how he thought he was supposed to act--like the mentally retarded children around him. He had no other models to follow. Being deaf and alone, he got along as best he knew how--by pretending to be stupid, by adjusting to his environment. He is now attending a school for the deaf where he had to being instruction at the primary level. But before long, he's expected to be studying at a level which his I.Q. long ago fitted him for.

So it is with much of life. Sometimes because we do not see the whole picture we misjudge what we do see. Most of us have heard the story of the three blind men who examined an elephant. One touched a leg and said, "It's a tree." Another touched the tail and said, "It's a rope." The third touched an ear and said, "It's a leaf." All were wrong. They were judging the whole elephant by a part of it. It's a frequent mistake! We do it with life. We judge a year by a day, and a day by an hour. We judge an entire race or group of people by a few. One day we think the whole world is like good Friday--that death is the end. If we have a particularly bad day we may conclude that all of life is futile and always will be.

Parents have a child who is never well in infancy. They do their best. They lose hope. The child will never be strong, they think. They may judge his whole life by his infancy and thus misjudge it. Students in the second year of college bog down in a kind of sophomore slump. For two cents they would throw the books in a waste can. They are sick of classes. The search for truth, they conclude, is a foolish waste of time. They quit.

Or people have a bad experience with a church and so they become disillusioned with the church as a whole and they judge all churches and all Christians by their one or more unhappy experiences. The disciples followed their Lord until he approached the crucifixion. As the soldiers took him away they ran. They judged all to be lost. Their hopes were dashed. Their joy was gone. It was

all over. They judged too much by too little.

But wait a minute! The miracle of the resurrection says, wait a minute! The child that never seems to be strong, may grow up to be a rough-riding Theodore Roosevelt. The child in Oklahoma, who was thought to be retarded, turns out to be a genius. The student who is disgusted with study may suddenly be lifted by a renewing vision of truth. The young person who rebelled against the church find a new and personal faith in Jesus Christ and his or her life is changed. The cold and pallid darkness may turn into the most brilliant sunrise this old world has ever seen. The disappointed and depressed disciples became full of life and literally turned the world upside-down.

For that matter, where will you be and what will you be doing ten or twenty years from now? Nothing is more surprising than the rise of the new within ourselves. We do not always forsee or observe its growth.

Often the new is being born in us just when we least believe it or expect it. It appears in remote corners of our souls which we have neglected for a long time. It opens up deep levels of our personality which had been shut out by old decisions and old exclusions. The miracle of resurrection appears in unpredictable and surprising places. It says that people can be born again; lives are changed, right in this life.

Resurrection is the story of life appearing in an unpredictable way, in the middle of death. It wasn't the empty tomb that convinced the disciples that Jesus was alive. Luke says, "He was known to them in the breaking of the bread," that is to say, they experienced Jesus being alive with them and among them when they did what he had commanded them to do.

2. What is true about people as far as the resurrection is concerned is also true about our whole world. Easter often still appears in strange and surprising places. It may appear in some dark corner of the world. It may appear in a social group where it was least expected. It may appear in the pursuit of activities which seem utterly insignificant. It may appear in the depth of a national catastrophe. The new in history, the Easters in history often come when people least believe they will.

The miracle of the resurrection says that the world is not just some kind of large machine which runs in the same/olds ways and ruts. The world, creation, is not fixed or static or unchanging. Rather all of creation is to be seen as open, expanding, evolving, and it is only partly predictable. The unexpected can and does occur. Just when we think all things are going one way, something completely new, the resurrection breaks in. Easter is the confirmation that even the most impossible situation contains the seeds of a saving possibility.

The resurrection says that creation and the world are full of deep mystery and at the same time in all of the mystery there is purpose. Our worship of God is a recognition of the deep mystery beyond all that is and is to be. Worship in the best sense of the word, in addition to being celebration, is a recognition and admission that we do not know all there is to know. That's why the cocky, know-it-all persons finds it difficult to worship.

The resurrection says that we do not know everything there is to know and that there will always be in life as we know it, an element of the miraculous, unpredicability and mystery.

The miracle of the Resurrection prolaims that just as there are always possibilities of evil and destruction inherent in our world, so there are also indeterminite possibilities for a greater good beyond the present existing situation. There is something eternal and significant about life, about your life and mine and about creation. We do not live in a senseless universe!

3. Thirdly, the miracle of the resurrection not only tells us something about people, and about the world, but it also tells us something about God.

Just as people have sometimes seen the world and themselves as fixed, static, limited and determinted, so people have also seen God in the same way. Easter, however tells us that there are some surprising things about God.

The miracle of the resurrection tells us that we live in a world in which God cannot be eliminated. Just when we think we have God in a box, or in a tomb, or on a

cross, then God breaks out in a resurrection and in a new and often unpredictable way, in a way we would not have forseen.

Everytime people kill that which is of God, it comes back and lives on. And even more strangely, after we've killed it and it comes to new life, it is often stronger than before. That's the miracle of resurrection.

Following the crucifixion and resurrection, the disciples saw Jesus in a new way. Instead of not seeing him anywhere, they began to see him everywhere. Instead of his absolute absence, they began to perceive his total presence. . . .in the breaking of bread, on the road, at their work.

Jesus was set free to be the authentic, universal eternal Christ. His truth was irrepressible. It could not be buried. He told us that our past failures need not be the final story of our lives and that the future offered a new choice. Can that be buried? Can any grave contain the truth that all people are of equal worth in the eyes of God and thus deserve to be treated as human beings?

Is it any wonder that Christian symbols of resurrection include the imager of being set free? In short, what was revealed to the disciples was that what Jesus was, what he taught, the way he lived, were the very truths of creation re-presented for all people.

The resurrection not only meant that the disciples and us now see Jesus and God in a new way, but they also saw themselves in a new way and so can we. They saw through the miracle of the resurrection that God is always giving back the life we have distorted, fouled up, or let slip away from us. They saw themselves as recipients of the Saving Possibility of a new future. The miracle of the resurrection is the Good News that a Saving Possibility is given, even amidst the crucifixion of our fondest hopes and our deepest expectations.

Too often in the past we Christians have talked about Resurrection and Easter only in terms of life after death. But the miracle of the resurrection also peaks of new life for people here and now. It speaks of God being present in the world and among people. It says that God -is alive and working in the world today.

We meet this alive God in some unpredictable places. God is in the restlessness that compels the most impoverished, oppressed human being to know that he has the right to demand freedom and dignity. God is in the discomfort we feel when the society we have created is built on injustice and our appetites are satisfied through the sweat of others.

The risen Christ is in the holiness which we experience when we have given love and received it in return. He is in the exultation that transforms the moment when we have used all of our being to bless the living. God cannot be eliminated. He continually breaks out in fresh ways.

One person put it this way. "I did not see Christ at the tomb and I never touched his side, but I have seen him in many other ways and know that he is alive. I saw him lasw week and Easter had not eve arrived. I saw him on the subway. There were these children whose hands kept moving as I looked up from my book past the sea of faces. They were deaf mutes, but they were joyously talking to teach other. Someone had had enough concern and compassion to teach them how to speak and be a part of life.

I saw him in a smile from a kindly gentle woman of 93 years in a hospital room. A pin had been inserted in her hip during an operation; she knew that she would walk again. I saw him late one night in the tender love shown by a husband as he comforted his wife after the death of their infant child. I saw him as a widow, after having spent long days in nursing her husband while his life ebbed away, packed away the past and invested herself in the life around her.

I see the risen Christ moving among the black people of this nation and among the American Indians as they and others like them press for their dignity and liberation.

Easter is unpredictable, but the miracle of the resurrection is now and in the future as well as in the past. God's breakthroughs continue to happen. His revelation occurs in life, anywhere, anytime. It has no limits or preordained propriety.

You, too, can see and experience the miracle of the resurrection. As you go from this place, look for Christ in the world. Look for him in the ordinary and the extraordinary.