Book 2

Sunday April 22, 1973

"THE SURPRISE OF EASTER"

Three women picked their way along a rocky path in the early dawn. The sun was beginning to come up as one of them spoke and said, "You know it's risky coming here this morning. The chief priests and elders will stop at nothing to destroy us all." And the second woman said, "Suppose the tomb is guarded and we cannot get near it." "Well, we'll just have to do our best to persuade the guards that because of our devotion and love for Jesus, we have come to annoint his body in burial," said the older woman with a very tired face." "But who will roll the stone away from the opening of the tomb?" asked the youngest woman. This was the scene as that first Easter morning began.

But now let's switch the scene to Easter 1973. The alarm clock went off and John Doe pulled the pillow tightly around his ears. This was the same futile gesture that he went through every morning. He struck out blindly with his arm and sent the clock crashing to the floor where it continued to ring under the bed. He leaned over and groped aimlessly until he found it and shut it off.

John tried to get back to sleep but he couldn't. He got up, looked for his slippers, finally put on his old shoes without the laces and stumbled toward the front door. He opened the door and picked up the Sunday paper and as he did the dog scooted in. He went into the living room, found one cigarette left in a crumpled pack and settled back to read the sports page.

"Before you go getting too comfortable, remember this is Easter and we're going to church together," said his wife from the kitchen. John slumped back into his chair as he listened to the voice of doom. "I'm sick and tired of making excuses for you all year long, John Doe," said his wife again. "You can go to church with me at least one Sunday out of the year."

Reluctantly, John shaved, dressed, gulped down a cup of coffee, and backed the car out of the garage. This was Easter 1973.

Now despite some obvious differences, the three women on the way to the tomb at the scene of the First Easter and the John Doe's of Easter 1973, have a lot in common.

In the first place, neither the women nor John expected anything unusual to happen on Easter. As we know of course, the women were wrong. Something startling and surprising had happened. The stone was rolled away, the tomb was empty and they were told that Christ had risen. And later that day and throughout the coming weeks, the women's lives were changed.

Well, it won't happen in quite the same way for John Doe in 1973, but he will be told that Christ is risen.

Secondly, even though the women on that first Easter saw that the tomb was empty and accepted the fact that Christ was risen, they were not quite sure what difference this would make in their lives and in the world, if any. Even the disciples who later met the Risen Christ were at first not sure what all this meant for them and the world. We are told in the Gospel of John, that Peter at one point after the resurrection decided to go back to his fishing business. So at first he was evidently not much impressed by the resurrection.

So it is with John Doe. Like the women who went to the tomb and like the first disciples, he may even believe that something unusual did happen on that first Easter. He may believe that Christ did somehow overcome death. But what's all this that happened so long ago got to do with him in his world? What does Easter say to John Doe at this point in his life?

→ Well, look again at what happened with the early followers of Jesus. It was only as the women and the other disciples and the members of the early church began to live with the resurrection that they discovered that it made all the difference in the world.

In other words, Easter was not only what happened early Sunday morning but also what happened during the rest of the day and the days which followed. The events of rebirth were not only in the morning but in the afternoon and evening as well. Easter happens again and again in many ways and usually in surprising ways.

The Gospel of Luke tells about two followers of Jesus who were walking along the road to the village of Emmaus on Easter Sunday evening. They were trying to get away from Jerusalem where the crucifixion had taken place. They had

heard about the empty tomb and were puzzled. They were trying to get it all out of their minds, but they talked of little else. And as they walked a stranger caught up with them. They didn't recognize it was Jesus. He asked them what they were talking about and they stood still, looking sad.

After chiding the stranger for not knowing what was going on in the world, one of them, with a great rush and pell-mell of testimony told of the trial, the death, the amazing events of the morning, including their own witness that the tomb was empty. "We had hoped," he said, "We had hoped. . .!"

The stranger grew impatient with them, called them foolish and slow to believe and proceeded to tell God's plan for the Christ, including the vocation of suffering.

At last they were in Emmaus. The two offered the stranger hospitality, and while they were at the table, the stranger took up bread and broke it, and suddenly they saw--their eyes were opened--and almost as suddenly as they saw, they saw no more.

This story tells where the hidden Christ is--the surprise of Easter. It is so artful and profound in its simplicity that we may miss its point entirely. The Christ of God is walking with people along the highway of the sad. He is part of the conversation of persons as they ponder life's deepest questions and mysteries. That's where he is! He is taking supper with people at the end of the day. That's where he is!

The story confirms and strengthens the amazing clue to the resurrection that we find elsewhere--so risen to dwell among persons that when Mary met him she thought he was the gardner, and when Peter and the disciples saw him on the beach in Galilee they thought it was a friendly fisherman.

And so it has often been ever since that first Easter. Not before the blazing, blinding mystery of the empty tomb did the resurrection really occur for those first disciples, but as they turned from it and there in the first person she met, Mary found the risen Christ, there along the road with its strangers coming up behind, there where people talk and eat and fish and suffer and celebrate.

Christ is risen means the absolutely undefeatable presence of God in the here and now life of people on earth. Risen

means that life is shot through and through with a strange and wonderful victory -- that God is not defeated by any of our defeats, nor, by his grace are we.

Easter speaks to the John Doe's of the world. Is there anyone to whom it does not speak. We've all met each other, one day or another, on the highway of the sad. Time and time again we have felt and said, "We had hoped. . . We had hoped.

Perhaps you had hoped for strong and vibrant health to a ripe age, but you found yourself troubled and frightened by illness in the younger and middle years. Perhaps you had hoped for the companionship of a loved one until the golden years, but you have been left alone. Perhaps you had hoped that your life could be spent in the development of a first love and interest, but the years have gone by and your commitments put you in bonds. Perhaps you had hoped for children, but they did not come. Perhaps you had hoped for a quality in your life that would win the respect of others and satisfy your own self-respect, but the buffetings and the pressures and the pressures and the hard days have made you something shoddy--if not always in the eyes of others, at least in your own. Perhaps life finds you like those two on the road to Emmaus, standing still, looking sad.

I declare to you today in the joy of faith, hope for your sad eyes. I declare to you no dogma or doctrine, no theory or theology of the resurrection. I simply say to you that the Easter story -- a story that blows your mind if anything does -- means that you can trust that there is a Stranger on the road with you every minute and that Stranger is God, you can trust that that fleeting moment of tenderness at the supper table is the living Christ in our midst and no other, that you can really trust the peace that came over you one day when you felt that the death of a beloved person was held in ultimate hands.

Easter is no abstruse doctrine to struggle with intellectually. Easter is a message--that this earth is occupied territory, that God is here, that death which is very real is nevertheless swallowed up in a victory, that again and again and again we are given signs and glimpses and hints of that victory, and to the extent that we trust those signs and glimpses we have hope--hope has come to our sadness.

The surprise of Easter comes again and again in those immortal moments with persons or nature or art or music or literature, those breakthrough moments of compassion and insight and joy, those moments of doxology and "glad to be alive," those moments when, in an experience of love or trust or peace, you are living beyond death--death has no dominion.

It was this to which a woman I met in the hospital was referring when she described how she felt when, during very painful treatments, she felt an at-homeness in the universe as she treasured a branch outside her window against a blue or gray sky, in the tints of morning or evening.

Well, John Doe, maybe you think that isn't much. Maybe you are a hold-out for a rounder, a firmer, a more fully packed doctrine of the resurrection, but I can only say to you that the more that I look at the center of Christianity, and the resurrection is at its center, the more I am certain in my own mind and faith that there is a message to people here about what God is actually doing in daily life as people walk and talk, eat and fish and live and die. He stands among us. Easter is the story of how disheartened, unnerved, existing people became hopeful, creative, committed living people.

I join you this morning before the blinding mystery of Easter. I join you this afternoon on the highway of the sad, where now and again our eyes are opened to see the Stranger who brings an answer to the corruption of despair. That Stranger, the Risen Christ, brings to eyes deep with sadness an even deeper hope. Glory, Halielujah!