Easter Sunday, April 14, 1974
THE SAVING POSSIBILITY
Luke 24:1-11; Acts 4:1-3a

There is nothing in all of history or in all of human experience that is more contrasting than the Good-Friday — Easter-Morning events. In one weekend our eyes and our lives move from the hilltop scene of a cross and death against a dark sky to a nearby tomb ablaze with light-from the early morning sun and the resurrection.

The scene runs counter to commonsense human experience. Death is turned into life! No doubt that's why the Apostles did not believe the story of the resurrection when they first heard it and even then, it took them awhile to get used to it.

As Luke reports it, when Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them told the Apostles that they had seen the risen Christ, "the words seemed to the Apostles an idle tale and they did not believe them."

But all that soon changed. The Apostles soon met the risen Christ themselves. And then not many months later as they were teaching and proclaiming the good news of the resur-rection they got into trouble because of it.

According to the book of Acts, "As the Apostles were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. And they arrested them and put them in custody..."

Now why should the Apostles be arrested for preaching the Easter message? What does the resurrection from the dead mean if proclaiming it is cause for arrest? It suggests that there is something about the Easter message which is upsetting and disturbing as well as it being good news.

1. To understand why it is disturbing and upsetting, we need first to look back to Good Friday. Good Friday and the three crosses on that hill show that we human beings always try to kill the worst and the best among us. Both are represented in that Good Friday drama. The thieves who were crucified with Jesus were a threat to the contentment of the social order and h.ad to be dealt with. What better way than to kill them? Even today we think we can get rid of what we see as the worst and as evil by shooting it down, putting it in a gas chamber or electric chair or bombing it to death. We still think we can use evil to cast our evil.

A few weeks ago, in the U.S. Senate in the debate on capital punishment, Senator Harold Hughes stripped bare the argument that the death penalty deters murder, rape and kidnapping.

To test the sincerity of his colleagues, he introduced an amendment which would have made possible public viewing of all state executions — at the execution site and over television. After all, he argued, if the rationale for the death penalty is to deter others from committing those crimes, then it follows that the widest possible audience ought to witness the horror of the punishment. Yet the Senate rejected the amendment and sanctimoniously approved the bill.

Hughes, who strongly opposed the bill, reminded his col- leagues that “man cannot make the world a better place to live by returning brutality for brutality. And that’s exactly what Jesus said over and over again. But we still want to believe the opposite. That’s what makes the res-urrect1on so upsetting.

And the cross of Jesus also reminds us that we human beings do not want our ways disturbed by the best among us either. Often those who bring into human life, as did Jesus, the highest quality and standard and seek to change our ways, accordingly, are too much for us. They upset our well-worn ways of thinking and acting and so we kill them, or put them in jail, or just ignore them. In fact, we even go farther, we choose Barabbas to be set free instead of Jesus.

Down through the years, there have been thousands of martyrs, good, decent people that we have gotten rid of because we couldn’t take their goodness. It challenged our well-worn ways. But we found in the end we couldn’t get rid of them and that’s what makes Easter so upsetting.

The Apostles, following the resurrection, with their teaching and preaching were upsetting the well-worn ways of the authorities by proclaiming the resurrection of the dead. If people began to believe this and to live accordingly, it would upset everything. We human beings enjoy playing God. Death, we believe, is our ultimate weapon over others. Threaten a person with death and we believe we have power over him. That power is. symbolized in the cross, or the noose or the gas chamber or the gun or the concentration camp or whatever is the most feared fate of the day.

But now here come these Apostles preaching the resurrection of the dead. They’re saying that death cannot stop the truth. Lynching, assassinations, or imprisonment cannot stop a freedom movement. In fact, it is the message of Easter that trying to kill such a movement or the persons who represent it, may only strengthen it. Before the death and resurrection of Jesus, the disciples saw Jesus only here and there. But after Easter he was everywhere!

The resurrection is upsetting and disturbing because it calls us to change our ways of thinking and acting. And that’s not easy. If we have always believed one thing and then discovered the opposite is true — we don’t want to accept it.

When people once believed the earth was flat and then dis-covered the opposite was true, they didn’t want to accept it. Later when it was discovered that the earth was not the center of the universe as people had believed for centuries, people found it difficult to accept.

Once we’ve made up our minds about something, we’re difficult to change. Not long ago the daily newspaper carried a story about a 14-year-old girl who had been born deaf and was considered retarded. The doctors had labeled her as being retarded and advised her parents to put her in an institution and forget about her.

The institution in which she was placed had no staff members who were trained to help the deaf, so Tania didn’t even learn to communicate for the first eight years of her life. Then Jim Pollard a technician just out of college, took a class in sign language and began to teach Tania. For the first time in her life, Tania could communicate with someone, and a few people began to wonder about the label retardation. Within four months, Tania was using a typewriter to communicate in three- and four-word sentences. Now staff members became convinced that she was not retarded and began to search for a foster home for her. The head of the insti-tution thought she was unplaceable, but the staff wouldn’t take no for an answer. They started knocking on doors.

Finally, a woman who was herself deaf gave Tania a home where people could communicate with her. She made such fast progress in learning that all doubts about her being retarded were ended. But it took years to convince people that Tania was not retarded once she had been given that label.

Easter says things may not always be what they first seem to be. That can be upsetting, but it is also good news! We raise up crosses and brandish guns. God opens up tombs. We terminate life. God revitalizes life. We believe death is our ultimate power over others. But God reigns over death. In the cross we see how violent we can be, but in the resurrection, we see that God is nonviolent! My ways are not your ways says the Lord. That's upsetting, but it's also good news. God answers the crucifixion with a resurrection.

Easter is filled with good news! It says evil cannot be used to cast out evil. Se1£ish people cannot destroy the selfless love of God no matter how much we torture it, spit upon it, make fun of it, imprison it, or crucify it.

God's truth, as upsetting as it might be to us at times, is irrepressible. It cannot be killed! It cannot be buried! Furthermore, God tells us that our past failures need not be the final story of our lives and that the future always offers a new choice. That cannot be buried. Neither can any grave contain the truth that all human beings are of equal worth in God's creation, no matter how we separate or label or segregate each other.

Easter is the saving possibility! Easter means that in spite of our own failures as well as the evil of ourselves and others, God is faithful, always giving back the life we thought we had lost, distorted, fouled up, or let slip away from us. We are the recipients of the saving possibility of a new future and all experience has this transcendent yet personal gift within it. Even the most impossible situ-ation contains the seeds of saving possibility.

To put it another way, Easter is the code word that God is always faithful in providing a saving possibility. It is given even amidst the crucifixion of our fondest hopes and our deepest expectations. The truth of God's gift of a saving possibility cannot be overcome and this truth can become the strength and motivation for our lives.

Easter is the festival of the new creation. Such a festival is certainly needed in our time since most of the signs and signals in the surrounding world often offer so little promise. Traditions are interrupted and in many cases at the point of dying. People are tired and exhausted, and hope is hard to come by.

But even amidst all this the saving possibility is present. For when the Easter message reaches into our lives, we find people who have new motives and new staying power in the midst of human discouragement.

Our Statement of Faith puts it this way -

God promises to all who trust him forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, his presence in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in his kingdom which has no end. Blessing and honor, Glory and power be unto him.

That's the saving possibility for all of us! Amen.