Book X

Sunday March 30, 1975

"RESURRECTION: WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?"
Colossians 3:1-10, Luke 24:1-11

When a human being first walked on the moon, an exuberant President of the United States said, "This is the greatest day since the creation of the world." It certainly was a dramatic incident witnessed on television by millions of people. But to call it the greatest day since the creation of the world was overstating the case.

The fact is that often the most significant events when they happen are not noticed by many and may not be seen as being very important at the time. Their true significance is only seen later.

Such was the case with the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If there had been newspapers in that day and if the crucifixion and resurrection had been reported, the story might have read something like this:

Jerusalem, March 30, 33 A.D. Jesus Christ who was crucified this past Friday along with two other criminals, is reported to have been raised from the dead. Some women who were his followers when he was alive, went to the tomb early this morning to better prepare his body for burial. According to their report, when they arrived, they found the stone rolled away from the entrance of the tomb and going inside they found the tomb empty. Shortly after, they reported meeting the risen Christ in the garden near the tomb. However when they told the other disciples what they had found, they didn't believe them.

A typical citizen of Jerusalem would've read the story and probably not thought much more about it. A few might have asked, "So what?" or "What difference does it make anyway?"

Even the followers of Jesus did not grasp the significance or implications of the resurrection until many days later as they began to experience the living Christ in their lives. In fact, it wasn't until 50 days later on the day of Pentecost that they began to do anything about it and then only did the full implications of the resurrection begin to dawn on them.

But why is the resurrection of Jesus Christ so important to all of us? What difference does it make?

1. First of all, the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus Christ can make a difference in the way in which we look at life and at all of creation. The resurrection says that the unexpected and the unpredictable can and do happen. We do not live in a "surprise-free" world.

But you say, the Hebrew people had been predicting and expecting a Messiah for centuries. And they had! But they didn't expect this kind of Messiah. Their predictions and expectations were for the most part about an entirely different kind of Savior. Even Jesus's disciples misunderstood his ministry before the resurrection and they didn't expect the resurrection itself. They had gone to the tomb not to meet a risen Christ but to annoint a body for final burial.

Like the disciples before the resurrection, we human beings today and particularly in the past few decades like to believe that we pretty much know what's going to happen. There was a time in the 1960's in particular, when the science of "futurology" was quite popular. A book was published in 1967, by Herman Kahn and Anthony Wiener, entitled, "THE YEAR 2000", and it was full of graphs and charts and all kinds of projections about what the future would be.

But now not 10 years later, surprises have sprung up all over. A recent article in the New Yorker Magazine showed the many ways in which the self-confident futurologists of 1967 were all wrong. And one of the main reasons they were wrong is that most of their predictions were merely projections of what was going on in the present. They didn't allow for any surprises or unexpected events. No resurrections! In fact all of the predictions about economics were wrong. They did not anticipate oil shortages, embargoes, our kind of energy crisis, our economic recession. They even predicted "next-day" mail service anywhere in the United States.

Herod and Pilate and the chief Priests and almost everybody were sure that if Jesus were killed and buried, that would be the end of that.

The point is that Easter says the future is larger and more astounding than we think. In it are lines that do not

appear on our graphs, shapes that are not on our drawing boards. Who in his right mind or what computer would have predicted that a convicted itinerant preacher, crucified as a common criminal, would experience a resurrection and his small bewildered band of followers would carry on his work and it would become a world-wide movement. Easter defies the extrapolations, overturns the projections, bursts all the models and is unlike anything ever seen by human beings.

Sure it's all right to make plans and projections and we should. But we also need to be open to the surprises, the exceptions, the unpredictable, the resurrections--what the Bible calls the Holy Spirit.

Often the new is being born in us and in creation just when we least believe it or expect it. For us as persons, the resurrection makes a difference because it says that people can be born again. People can and do change. New life appears in them. It can happen to you. But it only happens when you are open to new possibilities, when you allow for the fact that resurrections can happen.

2. Secondly, the resurrection makes a difference because it continually judges our ordinary, everyday way of looking at things and people.

All of the events leading up to the crucifixion and the resurrection go against what we commonly believe to be true. Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday with love and in weakness. We place our money on the kind of power we understand. Rome was built on power. Our common sense says that Jesus should've entered on a white horse, not a donkey, leading an army, not a rag-tag group of followers who misunderstood him. We believe that order is established by force. But we forget that the Roman Empire is dead and Jesus and his movement are alive.

God's ways are not our ways! The crucifixion and the resurrection say that suffering in love is ultimately stronger than power with hate. Cruel law is no match for loving concern. The resurrection makes a difference because it says there is no stopping this Jesus who challenges the validity of power and law that do not serve and uplift the human spirit.

But it's so hard for us to believe. A few weeks ago I saw again on television the films of the civil rights march

in Selma, Alabama. Thousands of people were marching unarmed to secure voting rights for black people. And those in power still believed like Herod and Pilate and the chief priests that a movement for human rights and freedom could be stopped with guns and nightsticks and by putting the leaders and others in jail. But there is no stopping this resurrected Jesus as he takes on the powers that do not lift and serve the human spirit.

Yes, the resurrections makes a difference. It means that Christ's spirit is still very much alive and moving in the world. And Christ uses methods that continually judge our way of doing things. We still like to believe that justice can be dispensed out of the barrel of a gun. But the resurrected Christ moves unarmed and non-violently now just as he moved to the cross, and his movement lives while ours die.

We raise up crosses and brandish guns. God opens up tombs. We terminate life. God gives new 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 crucifixion and resurrection we see how non-violent God is.

Yes, the resurrection makes a difference because it judges our ways. The cross was a crushing defeat of righteousness and yet because of Easter it was one of the greatest victories righteousness every won.

In days like these, we can be grateful for this paradox at the center of the Gospel. If the future belonged only to the things that seem to succeed, then all of our hopes would be undone. The Resurrection says there is something in the world deeper and stronger than the things that succeed, namely the things that fail, the things that are everlastingly right and that honorably and sacrifically fail. They are the strongest elements in the world.

What a difference the crucifixion and resurrection make. What good would Christianity be to us today if it were centered and confined in the lovely stories of Bethlehem, with adoring wise men and sheperds and singing angels? That is no adequate representation of what life confronts us with. Life is mysterious, baffling, often tragic and the cross and death turned into life speaks to our experience.

The resurrection tells us that our past failures need not be the final story of our lives and that the future offers always a new choice.

Thus the resurrection does not speak simply of life after death or what we call immortality. It also speaks of new life here and now. At funerals and memorial services, I am sometimes surprised to hear people say, "She has gone to be with God," and I want to ask, "Where has she been all along?"

The resurrection can make a difference in your life. But remember, Christ showed himself after his resurrection only to those who loved him. He did not appear in Pilate's palace, for empire politics gave him no welcome; nor in the High Priest's court, for churchly pride leaves him no room, nor in the market-place, for money itch is not reverence. God never forces himself on us. God's beckonings are always by hint and gleam, lest we be coerced.

And because the resurrection cuts across our everyday common-sense way of looking at things, we can often believe it only momentarily and then we sink back into our ordinary self-confident world views. But if our eyes have beheld his glory only momentarily, then the resurrection will begin to make a difference for us. So open yourself to resurrection possibilities in your life, here, today! It can make a difference in how you see the present and the future, in how you see God and in how you go about your business. Amen.