Book 5

Easter Sunday April 18, 1976

"RESURRECTION NOW!" Colossians 3:1-10, Luke 24:1-11

A few weeks ago as I was driving to an appointment I saw a bumper sticker on an old car which read, "Honk, if you believe in anything." Then a few days later I came across a cartoon in a magazine which showed a solitary drinker talking to another solitary bar tender in a lonely tavern. The drinker was saying--It was a very bleak period in my life, Louie. Martinis didn't help. Religion didn't help. Yoga didn't help. But martinis helped a little. . . "

Not long after I heard a story about a millionaire who told his minister that despite all h is big contributions to the church he was still worried whether he would even-tually go to heaven or hell. "Since you are closer to God that I am," he said to his minister, "could you pray for some signal as to where I will end up?" The minister said he would try. In a few days he phoned the man and said, "Well, I have some good news for you and some bad news. The good news is that you will go to heaven." "Wonderful," said the man. "But what is the bad news?" "The bad news is," said the minister, "can you be ready on Thursday."

As I came across these items, I had been at the same time thinking about this Sunday's Easter sermon. Is there any connection, I kept asking myself. What does Easter, the resurrection, have to say to people who are worried, or who are in trouble, or who have difficulty in believing in anything? How does the resurrection relate to the many problems, personal problems and world problems which we face now?

During this same period of time, while I was thinking about the meaning of the resurrection for us here and now, a man that I met downtown began telling me about all the problems he had been having during the past several years. He had just found out that he had some severe health deficiencies. It was as if his world had come to an end. Added to this were family difficulties. I knew that the fellow to whom I was talking was an active church member so finally I asked him, "How, if at all, has your religion been a help to you in all of this?" He thought for a moment and then said, "It really hasn't been much of a help at all. I guess I never even tried to relate my life's problems to my Christian faith."

This morning, then, on Easter Sunday 1976, let's try to relate some of the inner meanings of the resurrection to the problems that we all face. First, on the personal level.

Recently I read about a man whose daughter had a mental breakdown at age 21, and was institutionalized for probably the rest of her life. When he was asked what it meant, he said, "I do not know. But never again will I ever say an unkind word about anybody." And he was keeping to that vow. Here was kindness arising out of tragedy. Life out of death. That person was experiencing the inner meaning of the resurrection.

There was a woman who husband died in a automobile accident. When she was asked what it meant, she replied, "I do not know. But my heart goes out to everyone who has a burden and I have simply got to be a more responsible citizen than I ever was." A new integrity arising out of bereavement. New life out of death. That's resurrection.

A marriage is dying. Alienation is growing, getting worse and worse. Adultery takes place. The one who does not commit adultery says to the other: "I am sorry. Forgive me." No finding of fault. That costs. Reconciliation. A marriage raised from the dead. A new life out of pain. A great mystery.

Some years ago a close friend of mine had a severe heart attack. After a long period of convelesence, he recovered, and yet he died. He died to his old way of life. His life and habits changed. He learned to pace himself, to watch his diet, to get the right amount of exercise. He learned to spend more time at home relaxing with his wife and children. He came to see all of life differently. He re-arranged his priorities, as we like to say. At one point he said to me, "I now know at least part of the meaning of the resurrection. I never knew so much good would come out of that illness." He went on to say, "I've learned that the ultimate criterion of a satisfying life is not ease, comfort, or absence of suffering. I now know that some who have dealt with hardships and disappointments have more internal peace, self-understanding and more concern for others than those who have had a comparatively easy and comfortable life.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ proclaims that even the most impossible situations contain the seeds of a saving possibility.

There is no adequate explanation for such mysteries. Why should a girl suddenly break down or a man suddenly die or a marriage head for the rocks or a person have a serious heart attack?

All we know is that love accepts, and the first step from death to resurrection is to accept the breaking, accept the death, accept the pain, accept the adultery. To accept--that is a cross. Out of that acceptance comes the beginning of a new life. Resurrection happens now, again and again. If you have really engaged life and not given up, you have experienced resurrection, and will experience it again.

It's not always easy. Yet the recurring meaning of the resurrection story is clear. Our life is in and through God who offers us himself as the saving possibility in all situations.

In the Apostle's creed we say, "He was crucified, dead and buried. He descended into hell." That is very cheerful news. There is nothing less than hell unknown to God. There is nothing that we have known this side of hell that is unfamiliar to God. So in our deepest trouble, in our pain, wherever we are, God is there and will bring resurrection into our lives if we allow it.

In other words the death and resurrection of Christ says that God participates in our history, even in hell, in your life and my life. Our history, all our anxieties, have become the scene of His presence and the matter of His care. We are safe. We are free. Wherever we turn we shall discover that God is already there.

Resurrection now means that God is embracing you in all ups and downs, all yes's and no's, and that in the deepest and most ultimate sense you are taken care of.

II. In addition to resurrection being a part of our personal lives, resurrection now also has to do with the saving possibilities present in the world at large, throughout all creation. There too, even the most impossible situation contains the seeds of a saving possibility. An example!

The afflictions of the 14th century were the classic riders of the Apocalypse -- famine, plague, war, and death. The 14th century opened with a series of famines brought on when population growth outstripped the techniques of food pro-

duction. The precarious balance was tipped by a series of heavy rains and floods and by a chilling of the climate in what has been called the Little Ice Age. Upon a people thus weakened fell the century's central disaster, the Black Death, an eruption of bubonic plague which swept the known world and carried off an estimated one-third of the population in two and a half years.

All this combined to produce violence, bad government, oppressive taxes, an accelerated breakdown of feudal bonds, working class insurrection, monetary crisis, decline of morals and rise in crime, and above all corruption of society's central institution, the Church, whose loss of authority and prestige deprived human beings of their accustomed guide in a darkening world.

Yet amid the disintegration were sprouting, invisible to contemporaries, the green shoots of the Renaissance to come. In human affairs, as in nature, death can lead to the new life of resurrection.

On a larger scale, Dr. Loren Eiseley's book, the "Unexpected Universe," has also within it the inner meaning of Easter. Eiseley is saying that what often happens is not what we necessarily expect. God's universe is filled with surprises.

Some years ago, we thought we had wrapped up the universe in a neat package of law and order; the scientists of the Victorian period were almost all convinced of this. Everything was quite rational and predictable.

Now,says Eiseley, we are beginning to discover the surprises in the universe, the resurrections, the things we had not expected, things we had no way of predicting or foreseeing. Who would've thought, for example, that human beings would first appear when ice covered most of the planet? You wouldn't choose that as the most auspicious time for the beginning of a new race.

In the same way, the Resurrection suggests that there is something about the universe, about life, that slips through the fingers of the mind. There is something beyond the rational, another plane, that points toward the unexpected, unforseeable future; and which offers saving possibilities in the present. There are resurrections when we sometimes least expect them, in our personal lives and in the world at large.

III. A third inner meaning of the resurrection for us here and now is that it contains a message about the power of God.

As you read the New Testament, you will find that the great message of the first Apostles was not a message about the early life of Jesus, the tender things he did and the wonderful things he said. It was a message about the resurrection. It was a message that behind all, there is a power in whom human beings could put their trust which will never allow evil finally to triumph or us to perish. There is a Power which exists on a level in which the dead live again and a level from which God acts.

Once Jesus was buried, some of his enemies demanded that maximum security be placed around the tomb. But there is no security against the power of God. How foolish to think we could shut up the love of God or his judgment with soldiers and guns and swords. The inner meaning of the resurrection proclaims that God's truth is irrepressible. It cannot be buried. Maximum security cannot hold it--not even atomic weapons or B-1 bombers or hydrogen bombs.

So the resurrection now proclaims that our past failures need not be the final story of our lives. The future offers always a new choice. God is faithful, always ready to give back the life we thought we had lost. We are the recipients of the saving possibility of a new future. Resurrection is the good news that a saving possibility is given even amidst the crucifixion of our fondest hopes and our deepest expectations.