Book 6

Sunday April 10, 1977

"EASTER CAN BE TERRIFYING!" Luke 24:1-11, Acts 4:1-4

There is one aspect of the Easter story which is seldom noticed. When the women came to the tomb and were told of the resurrection and then met the risen Christ, they were afraid, they were surprised, they were terrified. When the disciples got the news, they had the same reaction. They were just plain scared.

Later when the disciples had experienced the resurrection, and the power of it had changed their lives; the fact of the resurrection became the center, the main point of their preaching. But it wasn't long before the preaching of the resurrection got the disciples into trouble. It was upsetting to many who heard of it, particularly those in power.

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

Why should the Apostles be arrested for preaching the resurrection from the dead? What is there about Easter that can be terrifying or upsetting or threatening?

1. First of all, Easter can be terrifying because it has broken the power of death. That should be good news! And it is. But it can be perceived as bad news for those who rely so much on the threat and power of death. If the Easter story is true, then death is not the decisive moral power in history. If the Easter story is true, then death, killing people and the threat of death loses its power. If people begin to believe this and live accordingly, it upsets everything. Death, we believe, is our ultimate weapon over others. Threaten a person with death and we believe we have power over him or her.

The world is pre-occupied with death and likes to believe in its power rather than the power of the resurrection. The world wants to believe that the way to a just and orderly society is to kill those people we brand as trouble-makers or outcasts. We believe, like the Romans, that 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, or at least by holding the threat of death over people. Hitler called his mass murder of the Jews, the "final solution." Many in the world still see death as the final solution to a problem.

The Romans did not invent capital punishment, but they were among the early practitioners of the art of putting to death whatever seemed a threat to their society. As an alien, an outsider, who incurred the hate and fear of both the masses and the authorities, Jesus was executed because of who he was as much as for what he said and did.

Not long after the death of Jesus, his followers were being thrown to the lions in a more bizarre form of execution. When early Christians banded together to worship God, live in common, hold common property and refuse to take up arms, they were branded as misfits and public enemies and in many cases were put to death.

Every society has its particular class of outcasts, deemed for one reason or another unfit to live.

During the middle ages, a segment of the peasant population in Europe and Great Britain was singled out for execution on a massive scale. From the 14th to the 17th centuries, church and state cooperated in putting to death thousands of women accused of being witches. In the face of the growing rebellion against feudalism and the rise of Protestantism, witchhunts were designed to eliminate deviants and heretics. Citizens were compelled to report any known "servant of the devil," under threat of ex-communication and temporal punishments. Torture and public trials resulted in burnings at the stake of poor and working-class women viewed as symbols of rebellion against the ruling church. In certain German cities, executions occurred at an average of 600 a year or about two a day.

The earliest laws in the new world included witchcraft as one of the crimes punishable by death. The Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1636 ordained the death penalty for a large assortment of offenses. Along with witchcraft, they included idolatry, blasphemy, murder, sodomy, rape, man-stealing and rebellion.

The last public hanging in this country involved the execution of a black man. On August 15, 1936, 20,000 people

stood on rooftops and climbed telephone poles to watch the hanging in Owensboro, Kentucky.

We still worship death and see it as the final solution to many of the world's problems. But killing people has never solved anything.

Many people are still afraid of death, not only of their own dying, but afraid of being in the presence of death.

A recent news story in the local papers told of a visit of Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross in Kansas City. The first thing she did when she arrived at the UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS Medical Center was to visit the room of a dying young man. He thought she wanted to see his bedsore. That's the only thing all the other doctors and nurses wanted to see and treat. Instead she sat down, held his hand and talked with him about what everyone else could not talk about, his coming death.

Later Dr. Kubler-Ross told a class of medical students that they cannot understand or help a dying patient until they confront their own fears about death. When she asked the students their gut reactions when they enter a dying patient's room, they responded with words like "anger," "fear," "chilly," "helpless," "want to leave."

But death had no power over Jesus and it has no power over anyone who believes in the resurrection. We need not be afraid of death.

Some time ago I was reading about a soldier in a prisoner of war camp. He was being interrogated and tortured in an attempt to force information from him. Finally his interrogater in frustration said, "I'm going to kill you if you don't give me the information I want." The prisoner calmly replied, "You can't kill me because I'm already dead." At this answer, the interrogater dropped his weapons of torture and sent the prisoner back to his cell. The prisoner, who was a Christian was saying, "I'm already dead to this world. Because I believe in the resurrection, death has no power over me."

Easter, the resurrection proclaims that Christ is Lord and not death. It means that God exercises dominion in history and beyond history and over all creatures, principalities and powers, institutions and ideologies,

corporations and nations. Christ as Lord means we no longer need be enslaved to institutions, no longer a pawn of technologies, no mere servant of the state or any other authority. Christ as Lord means we can be free from bondage to ideologies and institutions, free from our worship and fear of the power of death, because death does not ultimately destroy us. But to those who believe in the power of death and would use it, Easter can be terrifying because it destroys their power.

2. In the second place, Easter can be terrifying because it confirms as Paul put it, that the "foolishness of God is wiser than our wisdom and the weakness of God is stronger than any strength we have. God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world to bring to nothing things that are. . "

Easter can be terrifying to those who trust the world's wisdom and the world's values because it confirms that the foolish things that Christ said are true. "Be of good cheer," said Jesus, "for I have overcome the world." But how can anyone overcome the world by dying a criminal's death on a cross? That's foolishness as far as the values we usually believe in. The way to overcome the world is by getting power and more power; by having the best security system possible; by having guns and bombers.

Jesus taught with words and with his life and death and resurrection that for a person to find life, he or she has to lose his life, give it away, let it go; and the person who seeks to save his or her life will ultimately lose it. As far as the world's values are concerned that's foolishness. The world says--the way to find life and meaning in life is to get all you can while you can--that having a new car, a CB radio, a boat, a higher and higher standard of living--these are what give life meaning.

Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the meek, blessed are the peacemakers; love your enemies; bless those persecute you." To the world, that's foolishness! Jesus said, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth. Do not be anxious about your life. Do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. The first shall be last and the last first. He who would be great among you must become the servant of all." To the world, that's all foolishness. But Easter

confirms that the foolishness of God is wiser than our wisdom.

Easter can be terrifying because it continually calls into question all of our usual worldly values, all of our usual way of doing things, all of our usual way of judging people.

We live in resurrected world! This means that the final outcome of life is not in the hands of the war-makers or the worldly powerful. The resurrection is the ultimate resolution of who's in charge. The surprise of the resurrection is that the people who seemed to be in charge on Friday turned out not to be in charge after all. That can be terrifying.

The resurrection is also mystery. God's creation is inexhaustibly rich in meaning and eternally resistant to simple explanations our simple wisdom. Easter tells us to relax too. We can begin to look on ultimate questions, not just as problems to be solved, but as mysteries which save us from despair.

Yes, Easter can be terrifying! My hope is that it will terrify all of us enough so that we stand in awe before the empty tomb and come more and more to trust the foolishness of God. Amen.