EASTER SUNDAY, April 6, 1980

"THE EASTER BEATITUDE" Mark 16:1-8, Matthew 5:10-12

"He is risen!" No other words have meant as much to human history as these three words. The three words, "He is risen," are significant because of the one to whom they refer, rather than the fact to which they refer.

Throughout history there have been a number of stories of resucitations and spirit appearances. Ancient history is full of them. But such appearances have had little effect on religious faith or the history of the world. The significance of Easter is not in the fact that someone has been raised from the dead, but that Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead.

Suppose some different person had risen, just someone down the street. That fact would never have made an Easter. No one would have attached the slightest importance to such an event except as a wonder to marvel at. The significance of the risen Christ does not lie in its corroboration of immortality. That is not the central fact. The central fact is that it was Jesus Christ, the one who had taught forgiveness of sins, lived the love of God, accepted all people, showed us a new and better way to live.

The one who overcame death was the same person who said--"love your enemies; blessed are the poor in spirit; blessed are those who mourn; blessed are the meek; blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; blessed are the merciful; blessed are the pure in heart; blessed are the peacemakers."

The fact it is Christ who is risen means that these statements have God's signature on them. It means that nothing but our own decision can ever separate us from the love of God. It means, as Martin Luther put it in one of the verses of the hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," "Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also; the body they may kill, God's truth abideth still; His kingdom is forever."

That is the meaning of Easter! The resurrection shows that Jesus Christ and all the he taught and stood for and lived has God's backing. The resurrection shows again and again that Jesus' life and love was of the kind that evil and death cannot wipe out.

The resurrection shows, as the 8th Beatitude points out, that those people who are persecuted for righteousness' sake are blessed; that you are blessed when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely because you follow Jesus Christ.

But if you're wondering why you have not been blessed or happy because of all the persecution you think you've endured--note especially that the Easter Beatitude says--"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake and blessed are you who are reviled because you lead a Christian way of life. Jesus did not say that we are blessed for every trouble that comes our way. Some of our burdens, some of the crosses we claim that we carry, may come instead because of our unrighteousness, or our unChristlikeness.

In other words, Easter does not say, "blessed are the persecuted, no matter what the reason for their persecution," or blessed are the cantankerous. There are always a lot of people running around talking about the crosses they bear and wondering why they have not been blessed because of them; when what they are often talking about are self-inflicted wounds. Not all of our suffering comes because we are God's righteous ones.

To be persecuted for righteousness' sake, means to be persecuted because one stood up for the right; because one stood for justice against injustice; stood for love against hate; stood for peace instead of war; stood for mercy instead of revenge; stood for inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness.

The Easter Beatitude says, "Happy are those who have suffered persecution for the cause of goodness--the Kingdom of Heaven is yours." Or to put it into Easter language--you will experience Easter, the joy of the resurrection, if you have suffered like Christ on good Friday. Those who have suffered for the sake of the right, know the meaning of Easter.

It doesn't mean that one goes looking for suffering or persecution, but that sometimes it comes our way if we are on the side of righteousness.

We sometimes hear a parent bringing a child to Jesus with the words, "I want my child to go with you, because

you will keep him out of trouble." How might Jesus reply? He might say, "Trouble is one thing I can guarantee. If your child comes with me, he'd better be prepared for self-denial, suffering, persecution--yes, even death. If your child starts following my teachings and my example, it might get her into deep trouble because the world does not know how to handle that kind of righteousness and love." But Jesus would go on to say, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for standing up for the right, they will truly experience the Kingdom of God."

Again, lest we misunderstand Good Friday and Easter and this Easter beatitude, we are not serving Christ if we simply seek to generate hostility against ourselves. We all know what is meant by a martyr-complex. We can make ourselves miserable simply out of egotism.

But there is a persecution for the sake of the right which goes on all the time. People have endured bitter public ridicule because they defended civil liberties for others. Many men and women have gone to jail because they stood for inclusiveness and for the right of all persons of all races and backgrounds to have equal opportunities.

There are people who lose their jobs because they refuse to play the game in cheap ways. A politician loses an election rather than lie to the voters. But Easter comes to us in special and surprising ways when we suffer because we stand for the right.

Listen to this story. Recently a very unusual funeral was held in North St. Louis. It was a Christian service, but more than half the people present were Jews. A Rabbi gave the eulogy.

Some of you have been to Israel. If so, then one of the places you may have visited is Yad V'shem, the Israeli memorial to the 6 million who died in the Holocaust. If you've been there or if you ever go there, remember the entrance to Yad V'shem. You go through a garden called the Avenue of the Righteous. In that garden are a number of lovely trees, and at the foot of each one there is a plaque. These plaques carry the names of those persons who risked their lives in order to rescue Jews during the Holocaust. There are names of people from Belgium and Holland, from France and even Germany itself. And one of these plaques bears the name of Natalia Abramovitch.

In 1942, Natalia Abramovitch lived in the village of Radonsk in Southwestern Poland. The Nazis were rounding up Jews, putting them on railroad cars and shipping them east. There came to her home a Jew named Michael Steinlauf, asking for shelter for himself, his wife and their two small children and for his sister and her husband. Natalia took them all in and hid them in her attic. She kept them hidden there for over a year.

She needed more food now that she had six people living with her, but she was afraid to go to the grocery store and suddenly start buying so many extra supplies. And so she started a garden in her backyard and raised most of the food herself. Throughout all that year she seldom left the house and she never let anyone enter for fear that the family would be discovered.

Then the family became apprehensive, afraid that one of the children would cry out during a search or that something would give them away. And so they decided to separate and look for other hiding places. Michael Steinlauf stayed with Natalia; the others went elsewhere. Each of those who left was later found by the Nazis and killed. He alone survived.

A few weeks after the others had left, there came the inevitable knock on the door that had been expected and feared for so long. The Nazis had come. Quickly she locked the attic door and whispered to Michael to slip out the window and run for his life. Then she delayed the Nazis for as long as she could by rummaging in drawers to find the key to the attic.

Michael Steinlauf escaped, but Natalia Abramovitch was arrested and put on trial, accused of the crime of harboring Jews. She was found guilty and sentenced to be shot; then for some reason, perhaps because she was of German ancestry, her sentence was changed to life imprisonment. She was sent to one prison camp and then to another and finally she ended up in the Ravensbruk concentration camp where she stayed until she was released at the end of the war.

After living in a displaced persons camp near Hamburg for awhile, she somehow made her way to the United States and to St. Louis. She lived there in obscurity and poverty.

In 1971, the local Jewish Federation received a cable

from Israel, asking for help in locating Natalia Abramovitch. Michael Steinlauf had survived the war and had found his way to Australia. There he heard about the creation of Yad V'Shem in Israel and about the Avenue of the Righteous. He remembered the woman who had saved his life and nominated her to be included.

The Israeli government does not lightly grant such an honor. First the officials investigated. They searched the records and found witnesses who could corroborate Michael Steinlauf's testimony. After a long and thorough study, they determined that Natalia Abramovitch did indeed merit a place in the Avenue of the Righteous. After tracking her to St. Louis, they made contact with the local Jewish Federation.

Later that year, Michael Steinlauf came from Australia, a representative of the Israeli government came, and Natalia Abramovitch received the award that she so truly deserved. All those who were there that night, all those who saw Natalia Abramovitch and Michael Steinlauf embrace and kiss after their long separation, will always remember the scene.

From that day on, the Jews of St. Louis took care of her. They provided her with an apartment and some furniture and when it became necessary, with nursing care. When she was no longer able to live alone, they took her into the Jewish center for the aged. There she lived out her life in dignity and respect, greatly loved until she died last year. She had no relatives here in the United States, just one niece in East Germany, but the Jews of St. Louis became her family. On the day of her funeral, the Jewish Federation of St. Louis, announced that it was setting up a Natalia Abramovitch fund in her memory.

The Easter Beatitude says--"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of God. Natalia was truly blessed and God's kingdom is hers.

Hopefully the Easter words, "Christ is Risen" will give us the courage to do what is right like Natalia Abramovitch. Then we too shall be blessed. Amen.