Book 10

Sunday April 19, 1981
Easter

"WHAT EASTER CAN DO FOR YOU" John 20:1-10, Colossians 3:1-4

Someone recently said of modern physicists that most of them go home from the laboratory and live their lives as if Newton, not Einstein, were right. Many times we Christians are like that--we celebrate Easter, and then go home and continue to live our lives as if Easter never happened and as if Good Friday were the final fact.

That even happened to the original disciples for a short time. Peter and John went to see the empty tomb when told about it by the women who had gone there early Sunday morning. And then after experiencing the Easter event, the disciples went back to their homes as if nothing had happened or changed.

On the evening of the same day, Jesus came into the midst of the disciples where they were hiding in fear. They were glad to see him, but little else happened. Eight days later, according to the Gospel of John, all the disciples were again together, and Jesus appeared once more and they were happy to see him, but once he was gone, their lives reverted back to the old patterns as if Good Friday were the fact. Later of course, the truth of Easter did take hold for many of Jesus' followers and then all of life was changed for them.

Peter is just one example of what Easter can do for an individual once the truth of it is realized. Simon Peter was not always the tower of strength that we see in the Book of Acts. When we first meet Peter in the New Testament, he is anything but a strong and stable individual. A rather typical Galilean, he was emotional, impulsive, and erratic. No individual in the Bible was given to more violent extremes. Simon could rise higher and then fall lower about as rapidly as anyone you can imagine. At one moment he could be uttering words that were nothing short of a revelation from God and then the very next minute be sounding like Satan himself. He was the epitome of vacillation, forever proposing more than he could produce and venturing further than courage could follow. The old saying, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak," fit him very well.

The events of Holy Week preceding Easter show his instability more than any other period in his life. At the last supper, Jesus warned of the coming crisis and how all of his disciples would desert him. But Simon would not listen to such talk. He was totally confident that no matter what the others would do, he would not fail his master. Even after Jesus mentioned the crowing of the cock and the possibility of denial, Simon said even more confidently that he would never deny his Lord.

Yet not very many hours later in the courtyard of Caiaphas, the High Priest, the voice of Simon can be heard saying, "I do not know him. I am not one of his followers. I have never heard of this Nazarene."

But then Easter! And not long after we see Simon a totally new person. We discover that weak human beings can become strong in the right way. And what Easter did for Simon Peter and countless others, it can do for you.

Meeting the Risen Christ and being forgiven by him, caused several things to happen to Simon Peter which made him a different person. Up until the event of Easter, Simon had over-estimated his own power; he under-estimated the power of evil, and he ignored the power of God.

1. First, he over-estimated his own power. He didn't believe the warnings of Jesus that he, Simon, could ever deny him. He had not yet accepted the reality of his own limitations, or the fact that he was vulnerable to every sort of temptation. Simon placed himself in what has to be the most dangerous position in the world; namely, thinking that a certain act was impossible for him to commit. Many a person has found such pride to be the immediate prelude to disaster. Simon failed partly because he thought he could not fail.

We also over-estimate our own power in many ways. We believe that our technology can save us, and our technology is but an extension of ourselves. We believe that guns can save us. We worship the power of death which our weapons give us. People still believe that problems can be solved by killing someone or by killing many people. The people who killed Jesus thought they had solved their problems in this way.

As nations we over-estimate our power when we think of power almost totally in terms of armaments. We spend, the Russians spend, the Iraquis spend, the Israelis spend, the Libyans spend, the South Africans spend. We believe in military solutions. Estimates now are that the world will spend 4 trillion dollars for weapons of death in the next 10 years. That's worshipping the power of death!

For years now we've had an on-going debate in this country about the problem of hand-guns. There are people who oppose gun-control for many reasons, but one of the reasons always cited is the we need guns for our own protection. Again, it's an over-estimate of the power of weaponry and a worship of death. Killings others has never really solved any problems.

The argument for guns is that our freedom depends on our ultimate ability to protect ourselves against our fellow citizens. The cult of the gun in America, is that you cannot trust anyone with your own liberty. Only you can defend it in the end--you and your gun. Again, it's a worship of the power of death which too many believe to be the ultimate power. It's an over-estimate of our own power. But Easter says--the ultimate power is the power of God--the power of life, not death!

2. Secondly, Simon Peter, like many of us, under-estimated the power of evil. The power of evil is often under-estimated because it is so closely intertwined with the good. The worst evil is perverted good, and that's often hard to recognize. It's a power that sneaks up on us and catches us when we least expect it. Peter didn't plan to deny Christ. He was caught off-guard. And before he knew it, he had done what he said he would never do. But Easter changed all of that.

3. Thirdly, until the Easter event and what happened afterwards, Simon Peter ignored or neglected the power of God. That of course goes right along with over-estimating one's own power. We come to believe that we don't need the power of God.

Furthermore, we often ignore and neglect God's power because it works so differently than we expect. The Bible reminds us that God's ways are not our ways, and that the wisdom of God is foolishness to us. God's power works through

suffering and servanthood, whereas the power we usually believe in is made up of domination and violence. Jesus said, "The meek shall inherit the earth, not the powerful." "Blessed are the poor in spirit." "Blessed are the peace-makers," not the war-makers. "Blessed are the merciful." Blessed are the pure in heart." "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake." That's not the way we usually look at things.

We under-estimate God's power and ignore it because it's so different from the way in which we usually think of power. God's power works through events like Jesus' death on the cross. That doesn't make much sense to us in our normal way of doing things.

God's power says that we live in an Easter world, where the first shall be last and the last first. Easter can do for you what it did for Simon Peter and the other disciples. Through Easter we come to see God and the whole world in a new way.

Easter says that all that goodness which on Good Friday we saw scourged, buffeted, stretched out on a cross, that perfect love of God which alone can cast out fear, is again alive, as alive as any of us here today.

Ever since Christ burst the bonds of death and transformed that huddle of dispirited frightened people into a band ready to dare and do anything--ever since that first Easter, there has been a chain of saints, persuaded that the reign of fear is over.

Think of Simon Peter after the resurrection, ten times the person he was before. I think of Mother Teresa in India, spending all her days serving the outcasts of society and not judging them. I think of countless unsung heroes and heroines who knew that to be, meant to be vulnerable; who knew that human beings are as they love. Not that they are blind to the towerings problems, the awful facts. Someone like Mother Teresa knows the facts better than any of us. She has seen more suffering that we will ever see. But because she knows that Christ lives, she also knows that ultimately God and God's kind of power are in control.

Easter can do that for you! Every sensitive person here has known moments when life seemed pointless. But never, I submit, when contemplating the life of Jesus. That would be like listening to Beethoven's nine symphonies and concluding that the world might be a decent place if only there were some decent music around.

Easter proclaims that God's love can never be extinguished! We can persecute it, stamp on it, lynch it, turn our back on it, crucify it, and it only comes back stronger than before. God's love is like that--the more the world tries to get rid of it, the stronger it becomes.

Easter can do for you what it did for Simon Peter and countless others because this humble, honest, loving Messiah is still alive and calling to the cast-off's of the world--"Come unto me all you who are weary and are heavy laden and I will give you rest." In all of our turmoil and problems and worries, the Risen Christ says--"My peace I give to you; not as the world gives, give I unto you. Let not your hearts be troubled; neither let them be afraid." In God's Kingdom, no one is humiliated and no one humiliates another. That's what Easter can do for you.

One more thing Easter does for us. The resurrection of Christ brought into being a church, a community of believers. Salvation may be an individual thing, but it is a corporate responsibility. Human nature is too frail; we need to support one another. We cannot change human nature, that is true. But we can change the nature of human relationships.

Easter proclaims above all that there is no limit to what love can do. So on this Easter day, let's not limp back to business as before, but rather let Easter do for you what it did for Simon Peter and countless others. Then you can face any problems that come your way with joy and you can even face death without any fear at all. Easter is above all a celebration of God's power and victory. Amen.