Easter Sunday, April 3, 1983

"RESURRECTION IS AGAINST THE LAW"

Matthew 27:62 - 28:7; 28:11 - 15

According to the Gospel of Matthew and his telling of the Easter story, some Roman soldiers were among the first witnesses of the resurrection. How ironic! They had been put under orders to guard the tomb, after the seal of the government had been placed upon it. As a result, they had a front row seat at the Easter event.

Even more ironic is the fact that the chief priests and scribes, Jesus' enemies, remembered what his closest followers and friends had forgotten: the promise of Jesus that he would be raised. In all the Gospel accounts, the friends of Jesus were totally surprised by the resurrection. It caught them entirely off guard.

The authorities and powers of Jerusalem, of both temple and state, are not caught off guard. They are quite literally on guard. They are sure they have been in control, and they want to stay in control. They want to make sure that the dead body of Jesus stays where it is supposed to stay -- in the tomb. They don't believe that Jesus will come back from the dead, but they want to make sure that some of his followers do not steal the body and say that he has overcome death.

Where is the authority? Who has the ultimate power? Who's in control? Those are the questions of the hour! Later, when the disciples met with Jesus, he told them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations."

The chief priests and other religious leaders of the day, however, look in a different direction and bow to another authority. They ask Pilate for some troops to guard the tomb, and Pilate authorizes them and sets the seal.

Incidentally, I think the sealing of the tomb is often misunderstood. I used to think, for example, that to seal the tomb was a matter of pushing a big stone in front of the opening and cementing it tight. The

seal I pictured was something like first century caulking -- puttying up the cracks to keep it air tight.

Not so. This is the official governmental seal; in all likelihood the imperial seal. Wax or something pliable would be impressed with the governor's stamp. To move the stone would break the seal. It is a legal lock on the tomb door. Not air tight, put politically tight. To move the stone and break the seal is a civil crime. The resurrection is against the law!

Earlier, Pilate had set his seal of approval on Jesus' death, and now he guarantees it with troops -- secured by security forces. However, when the seal is broken in the resurrection, it stands among the signs that the power of powers (death in all its forms) has been broken.

But notice what happens next. When the Roman soldiers report the resurrection to the chief priests and religious leaders, they bribe the soldiers to give them a false report. They are to tell others that Jesus' followers came by night and stole the body while they were asleep. And they promised the soldiers that if this story of their sleeping got to the governor's ears, they would keep them out of trouble.

It's revealing to see how cool and calculating the leaders are. They are neither astonished nor converted by the surprising news of the resurrection. They simply hatch another phase of the cover-up. The truth is a matter of indifference to them. It is merely a factor to be controlled in the battle for people's minds. These friends of the law manage a cover-up. Official sources will have a censored and carefully worded version of events. Confusion will be encouraged. The credibility of the women and the other disciples will be impugned. Resurrection is against the law!

It wasn't the only time that the authorities, those in power, tried to stop the resurrection. Later, as the disciples began to tell the story of Easter, they got in trouble because of it. According to the book of Acts in the New Testament, "As the Apostles were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming

in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. And they arrested them and put them in custody."

Why is it that those in power are so worried about Easter, about the resurrection? Because Easter challenges their view of the way the world operates. It challenges their power and control.

Now let's look at us in our time. In what ways is the resurrection, the Easter event, against our laws? I do not mean that it is literally against any state laws on the book, or local laws, or laws that Congress has passed.

Rather, it is against our laws in that it challenges the way we ordinarily believe and act. The resurrection challenges our view of the way the world operates and the way God operates, or the way we think God should operate. The resurrection is against the law in the sense that it goes against some commonly accepted rules and unwritten laws that we tend to live by.

How often do we hear it said that "basically people do not change." And we even treat people in that fashion. Once we make up our minds about something, we don't like to consider new evidence.

Some time ago the newspapers carried a story about a 14-year-old girl who had been born deaf and was considered retarded. The experts who were supposed to know had labeled her as being retarded and advised her parents to put her in an institution and forget about her.

The institution in which she was placed had no staff members who were trained to help the deaf, so Tania didn't even learn to communicate for the first eight years of her life.

Then Jim Pollard, a technician just out of college, took a class in sign language and began to teach Tania. For the first time in her life, she could communicate with someone, and a few people began to wonder about the label "retarded." Within four months, Tania was using a typewriter to communicate in three and four word sentences. Now staff members became convinced that she was not retarded and began to search for a foster home for her. The head of the institution thought she was unplaceable, but the staff wouldn't

take no for an answer. They started knocking on doors. Finally, a woman who was herself deaf gave Tania a home where people could communicate with her. She made such fast progress in learning that all doubts about her being retarded were ended. But it took years to convince people that Tania was not retarded, once she had been given that label.

Every time we say to someone, "You can't change," we are saying that the resurrection is against the law.

Every time we say to a movement for freedom, "Wait! Don't rush things! These things take time," or we say to a colonial people, "You can't have your freedom. We know what's best for you. Let us make your decisions and control you," we are saying the resurrection is against the law -- against our law, against the law of "we know what's best for you!"

That black people could rise above their slave status, many said, "It's against the law." Some people even tried to say that it was against the law of God, because some races are inferior to others.

That women are equal to men, "It's against the law." So often we have tried to keep people from coming out of their tombs where we have placed them by saying, "It's against the law," or, "It can't be done."

The British Empire said to Gandhi, "You can't lead the people of India to freedom -- it's against the law." And Gandhi led his people on a 200-mile walk to the sea and there he defied the government by breaking the "salt law." Thousands joined him in a non-violent protest, and thousands more swarmed to the beaches of India's lengthy coast to defy the government by making salt. India was later granted independence.

In Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955, a bus driver told Rosa Parks she would have to give up her seat to a white man. That was the law. And she refused to move. She was arrested for breaking the law -- but she was also resurrected as she claimed the freedom which belonged to her, and it touched off the Montgomery bus boycott which later gave black people the same rights as white people. Rosa Parks was called out of her tomb of fear, and thousands of others were also

called out of their tombs of fear and prejudice to discover new life. But those in power said, "It is against the law."

Easter means we are called to a new life, but because that new life is not always well defined, we hold on to the past. We are afraid of the unknown, of what the new can bring us. We want everything neat and ordered with all the answers in advance. We want to keep things within our own rules.

New ideas, new ways of looking at things, are resisted by all of us, even scientists. Recently I was reading a conversation that had taken place between Dr. Thomas Kuhn, one-time physicist and now professor of philosophy at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Dr. Joshua Lederberg, a Nobel laureate in biology and president of Rockefeller University.

Dr. Lederberg noted that at age 21, he was startled to have made a surprising discovery that involved merging bacteriology and genetics. That was contrary to the wisdom of the time, which held that bacteria could not be crossed, since they had no genetics. Dr. Lederberg said that he has been puzzling about this ever since, because he felt the discovery should have been made 20 years before he was born.

He discovered that the reason the discovery hadn't been made earlier was that there was an unspoken dictum which said that bacteria do not have a genetics. This view was held onto tenaciously by bacteriologists in particular. It was an unwritten law. In the scale of nature it was one of the distinctions by which bacteria were differentiated from more complex organisms. It had been a philosophy of the distribution of life, deeply ingrained. In fact, it had become almost a canon of faith that if you were a pure bacteriologist working with uncontaminated cultures, they didn't do anything interesting from a genetic point of view.

In a sense, bacteriologists were taught to stop bacteria from changing, because by definition that's what was meant by bacterial cultures being pure. So at an early stage, built into the scientists' notion of a pure bacterial culture was the notion that it doesn't change. And the first thing you did when you saw changes was to assume impurity. That type of assumption made it

hard to discover that there are genetically borne changes in bacteria.

Oftentimes it's so difficult for us to be open to new possibilities. Yet beneath what we have always seen and expect to see, there are new meanings and new realities waiting to be born. Easter occurs over and over again as the seals on tombs are boken and new life appears, and often when we least expect it.

Christ is risen! Easter proclaims that the love of God cannot be buried or contained in any tomb or sealed tight by any power or authority on earth. The love of God always comes back to life, and it lives on in a new way! Amen.