Book 14 SUNDAY, APRIL 7, 1985

"EASTER IN THE PRESENT TENSE"

MARK 16:1-8

MOST OF US TEND TO THINK OF EASTER IN THE PAST TENSE. WE PICTURE IT AS AN EVENT THAT OCCURRED ALMOST 2000 YEARS AGO, AND THEREFORE AS SOMETHING WE COMMEMORATE EACH YEAR. THIS MORNING, HOWEVER, I WANT TO SUGGEST TO YOU THAT WE THINK OF EASTER ALSO IN THE PRESENT TENSE.

NOW TO SPEAK OF EASTER IN ANY KIND OF TENSE IS TO SAY THAT EASTER IS A VERB AND NOT A NOUN. EASTER IS NOT JUST A ONCE-FOR-ALL HAPPENING, BUT RATHER A CONTINUING ACTION THAT IS GOING ON. TO PUT IT ANOTHER WAY--EASTER IS A VERB WHICH DESCRIBES THE CONTINUING CREATIVE ENERGY OF GOD FLOWING THROUGH ALL THINGS, ALL TIME, ALL SPACE. WE ARE PART OF THAT FLOW.

IN THE BIBLE, WE FIRST ENCOUNTER GOD'S CREATIVE ENERGY IN THE CREATION STORIES IN GENESIS, WHERE WE ARE TOLD THAT GOD SPOKE AND THEN THE POWERFUL BEINGS OF CREATION--LIGHT AND DARKNESS, SUN AND

MOON--CAME INTO EXISTENCE.

IN THE OLD TESTAMENT OF THE BIBLE WE ALSO SEE THE SAME CREATIVE ENERGY IN THE PROPHETS. IT BREAKS OUT WHEN PART OF THE FLOW IS DAMMED UP BY GREED, CORRUPTION, BOREDOM, OR INJUSTICE. FOR GOD'S CREATIVE ENERGY CANNOT BE KEPT DOWN. GOD'S ENERGY WILL NOT BE ABORTED; CREATION WILL TAKE PLACE. MEISTER ECKHART PUTS IT THIS WAY: "GOD IS A GREAT UNDERGROUND RIVER THAT NO ONE CAN DAM UP AND NO ONE CAN STOP."

LEONARD BERNSTEIN CAPTURES THIS SENSE OF THE ONGOING FLOW OF GOD'S ENERGY IN HIS "MASS." HIS SONG FOLLOWS THE READING OF A LETTER FROM A YOUNG MAN WHO IS IN PRISON BECAUSE HE REFUSED TO TO TO WAR.

YOU CAN LOCK UP THE BOLD MEN
GO AND LOCK UP THE BOLD MEN
AND HOLD MEN IN TOW.
YOU CAN STIFLE ALL ADVENTURE
FOR A CENTURY OR SO.
SMOTHER HOPE BEFORE IT'S RISEN,
WATCH IT WIZEN LIKE A GOURD.
BUT YOU CANNOT IMPRISON
THE WORD OF THE LORD.
NO, YOU CANNOT IMPRISON
THE WORD OF THE LORD.

THE TRULY ENERGETIC CREATIVE ENERGY OF

GOD WILL NOT BE IMPRISONED, WILL NOT BE LOCKED UP FOR LONG. AND THE STORY OF EASTER IS BUT A CONTINUATION OF CREATION AS DESCRIBED IN THE OLD TESTAMENT. GOD'S ENERGY, GOD'S LOVE AS EXPRESSED MOST UNIQUELY IN JESUS CHRIST CANNOT BE KEPT IN A TOMB. DEATH WILL NOT STOP IT! IT ALWAYS BREAKS OUT WITH NEW FORCE AND NEW POWER AND IT CONTINUES TO BREAK OUT AND BE AT WORK IN THE WORLD TODAY AS MUCH AS ON THAT EASTER SUNDAY MORNING SO LONG AGO. EASTER IS ALWAYS A VERB IN THE PRESENT TENSE.

YOU MAY LOOK AT THE WORLD AROUND YOU AND SAY, "BUT DEATH, SIN, EVIL, AND BROKENESS STILL THRIVE, THEREFORE WHERE IS EASTER AT WORK? EASTER DID NOT PROMISE THAT THERE WOULD BE NO MORE SIN, EVIL OR DEATH--HOWEVER, THE ACTION OF EASTER ASSURES US THAT GOD'S CREATIVE ENERGY WILL ALWAYS, IN THE LONG, OVERCOME SIN, EVIL AND DEATH.

FURTHERMORE, AS HUMAN BEINGS WITH FREE WILL, YOU AND I CAN DECIDE TO LET EASTER WORK IN AND THROUGH US OR WE CAN BLOCK IT FOR A TIME. WE CAN LET GOD'S CREATIVE ENERGY FLOW THROUGH US AND IN US OR WE CAN TRY TO STOP IT. OR AS ST. PAUL PUTS IT, WE CAN LET CHRIST LIVE IN US.

SOME TRUE STORIES OF EASTER IN THE PRESENT

TENSE--OF RESURRECTION IN OUR TIME.

"I'M SORRY, HONEY, BUT YOU'RE ON YOUR OWN. I CAN'T TAKE CARE OF YOU ANYMORE." TOUGH WORDS FOR A FOURTEEN-YEAR-OLD BLACK GIRL TO HEAR. FOR BELLE COGDELL THEY MARKED THE BEGINNING OF A FORTY-YEAR SLIDE WHICH WOULD FIND HER MIGRATING FROM MISSISSIPPI TO NEW YORK AND RAISING ELEVEN FOSTER CHILDREN ONLY TO WATCH EVERY ONE OF THEM FALL VICTIM TO THE VICES OF THE STREET: DRUGS, PROSTITUTION AND HARD-CORE CRIME. AT LAST, THE KIND OLD WOMAN BOTTOMED OUT WHEN THE FINAL CHILD BECAME REBELLIOUSLY PREGNANT AND BROKE HER HEART.

FOR OVER A YEAR BELLE WEPT CONSTANTLY. SHE LOCKED HERSELF IN HER HARLEM APARTMENT AND STAYED THERE, COMING OUT ONLY TO GET ESSENTIAL SUPPLIES. THE WALLS WERE CLOSING IN. AS SHE PUT IT, "I THOUGHT I WAS GOING DOWN."

THEN THE MIRROR DID HER A FAVOR. ONE DAY, AS SHE STOOD STARING AT HER WRINKLED FACE, GNARLED HANDS, AND DEEP-SET EYES, SHE STARTED TALKING TO HERSELF. "OLD WOMAN, YOU ALWAYS BEEN OLD. YOU NEVER TRIED BEING YOUNG. WHEN YOU WERE A CHILD, YOU LIVED LIKE AN OLD PERSON. NOW YOU'RE OLD, WHY DON'T YOU TRY LIVING LIKE A

CHILD? WHY DON'T YOU TRY GETTING YOURSELF AWAY?"

SINCE THEN EASTER HAS BECOME PRESENT TENSE--BELLE COGDELL HAS BEEN RECLAIMED--RESURRECTED. HER COMMITMENT TO OTHERS HAS GIVEN HER A NEW LEASE ON LIFE. SHE ALSO HAS A NEW NAME. THEY CALL HER, "SENIOR HEALTH COORDINATOR AND LEADER OF THE SRO OUTREACH TEAM FOR THE EAST HARLEM COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTER."

GAIL SHEEHY, AUTHOR OF "PATHFINDERS," CALLS BELLE A "MOVING CHURCH." SHE WRITES--"WHEN BELLE WALKS THE UPPER WEST SIDE OF MANHATTAN, THE STREETS PART. THEY WAIT FOR HER, THE SWOLLEN-FOOTED DIABETICS AND THE FUGITIVE TEEN MOTHERS, THE DISCARDS WITH RHEUMY EYES OR A WHISKEY LIST. WORD PASSES AMONG THE WOBBLY-MINDED ONES EMPTIED OUT OF THE STATE'S HUGE MENTAL INSTITUTIONS, THOSE WHO HAVE NOT YET CRAWLED INTO A CORNER TO ROT. SHE LOOKS FOR THEM AND THEY LOOK FOR HER, THE ONE THEY CALL MA BELLE."

EASTER IS THE PRESENT TENSE!

NOT ALL "EASTERING" NEED BE, OR IS, SO DRAMATIC. EASTER IN THE PRESENT TENSE TAKES PLACE IN MANY DIFFERENT WAYS. EASTER CAN BE IN THE LITTLE EVENTS OF LIFE AS

WELL AS IN THE BIG.

AND AS I MENTIONED EARLIER, WE CAN BE A BLOCK TO GOD'S CREATIVE ENERGY; TO EASTER IN THE PRESENT TENSE, OR WE CAN BE A CONDUIT--HERE'S AN EXAMPLE OF EACH.

TWO GAS STATION ATTENDANTS: ONE MET AT A SELF-SERVICE PUMP, THE OTHER AT HER DESK. THE FIRST IN RAIN ON A CHILLY NIGHT. THE SECOND IN THE AFTERNOON, BUT THERE WAS NO SUN IN THAT BUILDING. WHAT CAUSED THEIR DIFFERENT ATTITUDES--WHO KNOWS--BUT ONE WAS A CONDUIT, A CONNECTOR, AN EDIFER, ONE LET THE SPIRIT OF GOD "EASTER" IN HIM, THE OTHER DID NOT.

THE CUSTOMER HAD HIS COLLAR UP AGAINST THE RAIN. HE HUNCHED AT THE REAR OF HIS AUTO, HAD SCREWED THE GAS CAP OFF AND WAS RUNNING GAS INTO THE TANK. HIS HAND WAS NUMB. BESIDE HIM SUDDENLY STOOD THE ATTENDANT, HIS HANDS IN HIS POCKETS. HIS PRESENCE DID NOT RUSH THE CUSTOMER--HE SAID "HELLO" AND A SMILE FLICKED ACROSS HIS FACE. HE WAS FRIENDLY IN A PEACEFUL MANNER.

THE CUSTOMER FILLED THE TANK--SEVENTEEN DOLLARS WORTH, PUT BACK THE GAS CAP, PAID THE ATTENDANT AND WATCHED WHILE HE FOLDED THE BILLS ONTO HIS ROLL. THE ATTENDANT

DID NOT SOLVE SOME TERRIBLE TROUBLE FOR THE CUSTOMER, NOR SAVE HIM FROM DISASTER, OR FIX SOME THING HE COULDN'T FIX. NEVERTHELESS, THIS ATTENDANT DID THE EXTRAORDINARY. HE SHOOK THE CUSTOMER'S HAND. HE SMILED ONE MORE TIME AND SAID, "THANK YOU!"

PERHAPS THIS SOUNDS LIKE A MINOR AND NEARLY FORGETTABLE INCIDENT--BUT THE GAS STATION ATTENDANT HAD ADDED SOMETHING TO SOMEONE'S LIFE, HOWEVER SIMPLE.

THE SAME CUSTOMER NOT LONG AFTER STOPPED AT ANOTHER GAS STATION. THIS ATTENDANT KEPT HER SEPARATED SEAT WHILE HE FILLED HIS CAR. NO MATTER TO THAT. MOST ATTENDANTS DON'T POP OUT OF THE STATION FOR EVERY CUSTOMER. BUT WHEN THE CUSTOMER ENTERED TO PAY, STILL SHE KEPT HER SEAT AND HER EYES SHE KEPT DOWNWARD, GAZING AT THE TOP OF HER DESK. THERE WAS NO BOOK THERE. SHE WAS NOT READING. SHE WAS SIMPLY STARING.

THE CUSTOMER HELD OUT HIS MONEY. "WHADDA YA WANT ME TO DO WITH THAT?" SHE SAID. "I'M PAYING FOR MY GAS," SAID THE CUSTOMER. "SO, HOW MUCH WAS IT?" "SEVENTEEN."

THERE WERE LINES FROM HER NOSE TO THE CORNERS OF HER MOUTH. SULLEN LINES. ANGER, FOR SOME REASON OR OTHER. AND

THE CUSTOMER WAS, IT SEEMED, SOME INTRUSION IN HER LIFE. SHE SNAPPED THE BILLS FROM HIS HAND AND BEDDED THEM IN THE SLOTS OF HER REGISTER. SHE WAS CHEWING GUM. IT CRACKED LIKE "BIDDY-WHIPS." SHE WAS TWIRLING HER HAIR WITH A FOREFINGER.

THE CUSTOMER STOOD THERE FOR A MOMENT. "YOUR CAR STUCK? YOU WAITING FOR SOMETHING?" SHE SAID. "NO," THE CUSTOMER SAID. HE SLID DISQUIETED INTO HIS CAR AND SAT AWHILE.

NO EASTER HERE IN THE PRESENT TENSE, OR EVEN IN THE PAST TENSE.

EASTER CAN BE A DRAMATIC, HIGH POINT, A SHATTERING RESURRECTION, BUT IT CAN ALSO BE A QUIET, SIMPLE, UNDRAMATIC VERB AS WELL. EVERY TIME YOU MEET ANOTHER HUMAN BEING YOU HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY. IT'S A CHANCE AT HOLINESS. IT'S AN OPPORTUNITY FOR "EASTERING." FOR YOU WILL DO ONE OF TWO THINGS. YOU WILL BUILD THEM UP, OR YOU WILL TEAR THEM DOWN. YOU WILL CREATE, OR YOU WILL DESTROY.

THERE ARE NO USELESS MINOR MEETINGS. SWALLOW YOUR SORROWS, FORGET YOUR GRIEVANCES AND ALL THE HURT YOUR POOR LIFE HAS SUSTAINED. CHRIST IS RISEN! CHRIST LIVES IN YOU AND IN ME. THE

EVIDENCE OF THE RESURRECTION IS NOT SOMEWHERE IN THE MISTY PAST, BUT HERE IN THE PRESENT FOR THOSE WHO RECEIVE AND LIVE IT AND PASS IT ON.

EASTER IS THE VERB THAT TELLS US THAT GOD IS ALWAYS FAITHFUL IN PROVIDING A SAVING POSSIBILITY. IT IS GIVEN AMIDST THE CRUCIFIXION OF OUR FONDEST HOPES AND OUR DEEPEST EXPECTATIONS.

EASTER SAYS THAT DEATH HAS NO POWER OVER THE LOVE OF GOD. THAT WHICH IS OF GOD CAN NEVER BE ELIMINATED. IT ALWAYS COMES BACK TO LIFE, TO LIVE ON IN A NEW WAY AND EVEN STRONGER THAN BEFORE. WE CANNOT BUILD A JAIL OR PRISON OR GRAVE STRONG ENOUGH TO LOCK UP THE LOVE OF GOD.

MY FRIENDS, I COULD NOT SPEAK TO YOU ON EASTER SUNDAY WITHOUT ALSO TALKING ABOUT PEACE-MAKING, BECAUSE I BELIEVE THAT IN OUR TIME PEACE-MAKING IS MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE A SPIRITUAL STRUGGLE. PEACE-MAKING IS EASTER IN THE PRESENT TENSE. ON THE ONE SIDE WE HEAR IT SAID THAT OUR ONLY SECURITY IS THAT WHICH IS BUILT ON THE EXISTENCE OF A WHOLE SERIES OF LETHAL APPARATUS AND WEAPONS--ON SUBMARINES AT THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA, MISSILES IN THE GROUND THAT VERY FEW OF US HAVE EVER SEEN, AND NOW ON "STAR WARS."

MOST OF US HAVE ONLY A PERIPHERAL CONNECTION WITH ANY OF THIS AND WE NEVER SEE IT. BUT SOMEHOW AT A VERY DEEP LEVEL, WE BELIEVE IN IT. WE BELIEVE THAT OUR SECURITY IS TO BE DERIVED FROM INTIMIDATING OTHERS, BY ALLOWING THE MASSIVE THREAT OF DEATH TO BE COMMUNICATED IN OUR NAME. WE BELIEVE IN THE WORSHIP, THE POWER OF DEATH AND DESTRUCTION. THAT'S A FAITH SYSTEM! IT'S WHAT ROME BELIEVED IN AT THE TIME OF JESUS DEATH. TODAY JESUS LIVES AND THE ROMAN EMPIRE IS DEAD.

THE EASTER FAITH, IS AN ULTIMATE FAITH IN THE POWER OF GOD AND NOT IN THE POWER OF DEATH AND DESTRUCTION. AND FAITH IN THE POWER OF GOD IS A FAITH THAT IS INSEPARABLE FROM A FAITH IN HUMAN BEINGS AND IN THE POWER OF LOVE.

EASTER SAYS THE POWER OF LIFE WHICH COMES FROM GOD IS ALWAYS STRONGER THAN THE POWER OF DEATH. EASTER SAYS THAT THE NEW IS ALWAYS BEING BORN WITHIN US AND AMONG US WHEN WE LEAST EXPECT IT. THE TOMBS WE CONSTRUCT AND TRY TO SEAL TIGHT ARE OPENED! THAT WHICH IS OF GOD CAN NEVER BE ELIMINATED! CHRIST IS RISEN! BELIEVE IT! LIVE IT! AMEN.