

Easter Sunday, B

Easter is primarily a festival of immortality, of life beyond the grave. But the great majority of us are far more interested in this life than we are in the life to come. If we are to deal with immortality in any real sense, we had better start with that fact. We cannot treat this life as if it were just a waiting room for the next one. Most of our immediate concerns lay in this world and are centered in this life. How are we doing with it? What are we making of it? Where are we going in it? These are the real questions with which we deal on a daily basis.

This is not to say that life beyond the grave is of no vital interest to a healthy minded person. Far from it, there is one fact in this life that keeps an intelligent person vitally interested in the next, and that fact is death. No one can come to terms with life and its meaning, here and now, without coming to terms with death. Death is not another worldly pipe dream. It is one of the few absolutes about life. And this is the place at which Easter becomes a relevant part of this present world.

Today's Gospel reading sets the stage for our thinking. It is Mark's account of the first Easter morning, when a group of people who were deeply absorbed in this present life found themselves confronted with life beyond the grave. If we look at their

experience, I think we will discover that their interests and concerns were very much like our own.

One similarity was a love for people. The burden of their heartbreak at Calvary was their love for the man on the central cross. When the women went to the tomb that Sunday morning, they were grieving for the one who was buried there. The most important thing in life for them, the one event that overshadowed all others was the tragic death of this one whom they loved so dearly.

By the same token the most important thing in our lives is personal relationship with the people we love. Say what you will for the world of nature - the glory of a sunrise, the beauty of a sunset, the majesty of the mountains. All of these natural wonders would leave us terribly lonely, if we had no one with whom to share them. We love and need people. That is a basic reality about life here and now.

This involves not only emotional attachment but also intellectual conviction. People are the most marvelous things that we know. The space ship that carried men to the moon and back again is not nearly as magnificent as the human brains that conceived it, the human hands that made it, and the people who rode in it. Personality is the miracle of the universe. The mind that

ponders the distant stars is far more marvelous than the stars themselves.

But these human personalities that we so highly value are temporary. They are with us for a while, and then they are gone. The psalmist said, “Seventy is the sum of our years, or eighty if we are strong.” Some people live on this earth longer than that; many do not live that long. But compared to the stars, none of us is here very long. What is this invisible spirit, this conscious center of thought and love that no eye has ever seen? My conviction is that this is the real person for which the body is only a temporary house.

The Easter message is a confirmation of that conviction about this present life. It tells us that personality, which we value above all other things, is not destroyed by death. That is not so much an affirmation about life beyond the grave as it is about life here and now. In the words of Longfellow, Easter assures us that “Life is real, life is earnest; and the grave is not its goal.”

Another place where Easter speaks to this present life is concerning the matter of open doors. By that I mean this: Our lives on this earth seem to be going somewhere, at least for a while. We come into this world a little bundle of possibilities. We learn to walk. We learn to talk. We develop relationships. We start going to school. We train our minds. We learn vocations. We dream dreams

and then, with hard work, turn those dreams into realities. All the while, we are passing through one open door after another. Opportunities lay before us. Possibilities become actualities. Can it be that after all of that, out there at the end of this life, we run straight into a closed door?

After the disciples saw Jesus die, they had to be struggling with that same question. He seemed, at one time, to be going somewhere; and they were going with him. He was proclaiming the reign of God. He was building his church, of which he said, “death shall not prevail against it.” Could it be that all of his dreams, and all of his plans, and all of his work had led to nothing but a closed door?

That is a vital question, not for life beyond the grave, but for life here and now. William James of Harvard once said, “This life feels like a real fight in which something is eternally gained for the universe by success.” All of us, in our finest hours, have shared that feeling. We know that life on this earth is dangerous and difficult; and sometimes it can be downright cruel. But we can handle all of that so long as we believe it is a real fight that something is coming of it, that out ahead of us forever and ever are open doors.

If the Easter message is true, then this life is indeed a real fight. We are going somewhere. We are building something permanent. But if it is not true, then the ultimate symbol of this universe is a closed door.

Finally, everyone in every generation runs into a closed door that will not open; and everything comes to an end right there. I, for one, find such a thought utterly incredible. Look at this amazing, creative universe. How could anyone believe that its ultimate symbol is a closed door?

Consider with me now one other point - that the true glory of this present life is triumph over hardship. At our very best, we do not ask for ease, but the challenge of a task and the opportunity to win a victory.

Jesus had done that many times, and his disciples had seen him do it. He was hated, but he did not give way to hating. He was discouraged, but he never threw in the towel. He was disappointed, but he did not turn to cynicism. He was tempted, yet without sin. Victory after victory - now at last, could it be that death had defeated him?

In the early part of this century, Helen Keller went to the University of Glasgow where she was presented with an honorary degree. There she stood, both blind and deaf, while the president of the university read the citation, and her teacher spelled into her

hand what was being said. Then she was led to the podium for a brief speech, the closing words of which were these: “Darkness and silence need not bar the progress of the immortal spirit.” A Scottish reporter telling the story wrote: “Then there was thunderous applause which only she could not hear.”

My concern this Easter morning is not life beyond the grave. What I want to know is whether that scene represents the real truth about life here and forever. Victory over hardship, victory over handicap, victory over sin - does the story end there? Does it not go on to include victory over death?

The angel said, “He is not here for he is risen.” He was victorious in death as in life and invites us all to share in his victory. **Amen.**