

RUNNING INTO A RESURRECTION

April 15, 2001

It happened a long time ago now, but it seems like only yesterday. We packed our two boys in the back of an old station wagon and started out on a family vacation to Florida. About 30 minutes into a 16-hour drive, the questions started. "Are we there yet?" "How much further?" Then it happened. Wes, our oldest son, leaned over the back seat, put his arms around my neck, and said "Dad, when we get to where we are going, where will we be?"

On this wonderful Easter Sunday morning, I want to raise that question with you. **When you get to where you are going, where will you be?** The Easter story opens with everybody on the run. Mary is running from grief. John begins his story of the resurrection with these words. Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. She came running to Peter and John. The first announcement of Easter was not, "He is risen." Mary shouts, "He is not here and I do not know where they have taken him." Grief is real. Grief is gripping. It gnaws at our days and disturbs our nights. It puts us in such turmoil that we cannot think clearly, nor love dearly, nor follow nearly the old familiar paths that have ordered our lives. Mary comes to the tomb early. She might as well; she couldn't sleep anyway. Here, adding insult to injury, she cannot find the body of her dead Lord. In desperation, she runs on Easter morning.

Ten years ago this past Christmas, I traveled to Washington, D.C. to bury Colonel Richard Higgins who was abducted and tortured to death while assigned to a U.N. peace keeping force in south Lebanon. His sister was a member of the congregation I served. For a family to grieve the loss of a loved one lost in military service is always hard. What made

this one almost unbearable was the fact that his captors had carried his body through the streets, broadcast tortured pictures of him around the world, and finally dumped his body beside the road in such pitiful shape that the authorities had great difficulty identifying his remains.

Life can be extremely cruel. Some of you come to church today with a heart so heavy you can hardly hold it together. Death, divorce, disappointment, and disease have stolen your joy. Even now, you feel like running.

Guilt has Peter on the run. “Will the rooster crow forever?” Peter wonders as he races John to the empty tomb. He’d bragged so much, boasted so often, dared so readily, but now denial is deafening and it continues to ring in every region of his mind. He examines the tomb and finds it empty. Even the word itself has a hollow ring. Empty! It’s the kind of feeling you have when you have messed up. It’s the emotion you feel when you have missed the mark of your high calling.

A woman shopping for groceries asked the stock boy if she could buy half a grapefruit. The kid said he would have to ask the manager. He made his way to the back of the store, found the manager and said, “There is some stupid woman out there who wants to buy half a grapefruit.” Then, discovering that the woman had followed him, the kid immediately added, “and this nice lady would like to buy the other half.”

Like the stock boy, Peter is usually pretty good on his feet. He knows how to survive all kinds of situations, but on Easter Sunday, he didn’t have a word. Speechless! He had no reason, no excuse, no explanation -- just sorrow and love mingled together in a broken heart. Peter is running on Easter Sunday. He’s running away from guilt.

It’s greatness that keeps John on the run in this story. He

paces Peter to the tomb and wins. It seems as if this disciple whom Jesus loved always wins. Verse 4 says, "He reaches the tomb first." Now I ask you, why did he have to put that in the gospel story? Is competition so deep and so intense that he can't even tell about the resurrection of Jesus without announcing that he beat Peter in a footrace to the empty tomb? What is this competition?

An American businessman was standing at the pier of a coastal Mexican village as a local man docked his small boat. Inside the boat were several large fin tuna. The tourist complimented the man on the quality of his fish. He said, "How long did it take you to catch them?" "Only a little while," said the fisherman. "Why didn't you stay longer?" asked the American businessman. "Well, I had all I needed to feed my family," replied the fisherman. "And what will you do with the rest of your time?" asked the American. "Well, since you asked," said the fisherman, "I sleep late, fish a little, play with the children, take a siesta with my wife Maria, then we stroll into the village each evening where we sip wine and play guitar with the amigos." The American responded, "I have an MBA from Harvard. I can really help you. If you'd catch more fish you could buy a bigger boat. Pretty soon you could own a whole fleet of boats. Instead of selling tuna to the middleman you could sell directly to the processor. Eventually you could own a cannery. In ten to fifteen years, you could control the product, the processing, and the distribution. Then you could move from this small village to L.A. or New York."

"What then," asked the fisherman? "When the time is right you can go public with your company, sell stock, and become very rich." "Then what," asked the fisherman? "Then you can retire, move to a small coastal fishing village, where you can sleep late, fish a little, play with your grandchildren, take a siesta in the afternoon with your wife, and go into the village in the evening where you can sip wine and play guitar with the amigos. Somebody said that the only problem with the rat

race is that even if you win, you are still a rat.

When you get to where you're going, where will you be?

Of course Easter is not about an empty tomb, is it? Easter is all about a resurrected Christ who's alive and present. I ask you another question today -- what if you ran into a resurrection this Easter? What if you encountered the living Christ today? What if you made some smart exchanges this very moment in worship? **What if you traded empty for eternal, guilt for grace, success for significance? What if you ran into the risen Lord face to face?** Isn't that what Easter is all about? Easter is not an argument -- Easter is an announcement. Easter is not illusion -- Easter is life. Easter is not chemistry -- it's mystery. Easter is not magic -- it's a miracle! Easter does not answer all our questions, nor cure all our doubts, solve all our problems or package life with a pretty bow. Easter does surprise us with joy and grip us with grace. Easter does make life worth living.

Because Christ lives, we have tomorrow. Eternity is in our midst. When Dwight D. Eisenhower was dying at Walter Reed Hospital, Billy Graham paid him a visit. They talked awhile, prayed, and then Billy started to leave. That's when the former President and Five Star General said, "Wait a minute, I want to ask you a question. Do you think an old sinner like me has any chance to get to Heaven?" Dr. Graham walked back to the President's bed, sat down in a chair, took his hand and said, "Mr. President, I know you are a man of faith and I know you have asked the Lord to forgive your sins. I have no doubt that you and I will meet again one day in Heaven." With that, the tears streamed down the old General's face.

You see, because of Easter, when you get to where you're going, you can know where you will be! Do you understand?

Because of Easter, when you get to where you are going, you can know where you are going to be!

*Life eternal, heaven rejoices, Jesus lives who once was dead.
Join we now the deathless voices, child of God lift up your
head.*

*All around the clouds are breaking; soon the storms of life will
cease,*

In God's likeness we awaking, know the everlasting peace.

Because Christ lives, we have tomorrow. Because Christ lives, all guilt is gone. Secular novelist Marg Laski once said, "What I envy most about you Christians is your forgiveness. I have nobody to forgive me."

It was News Year's Day, 1929. Georgia Tech was playing UCLA in the Rose Bowl. In that game a young man by the name of Ray Riegals recovered a fumble for UCLA, picked it up and ran 65 yards toward the wrong goal, before one of his own teammates tackled him. At half time, when the team gathered in the locker room, Riegals sat in the corner by himself with a towel over his head while the coach went over the plays of the game. When it was time for the second half, the coach stood up and said, "The same team who started the first half will start the second half." They filed out of the locker room, all except for Ray Riegals who was still sitting in the corner with a towel over his head. That's when the coach walked over to him, jerked the towel off his head, and said, "I said that the same team who started the first half is going to start the second half! Get out there and play the game!"

Well, somebody greater than a football coach says you have a second chance. In fact, you have a third chance, a fourth chance, and a tenth chance. You have as many chances as you need because the gospel says He wants us to keep coming back until we get it right. If He was merciful and gracious to Simon Peter, He will be merciful to us. The heart of the gospel tells me to get up from my sorry failures and get into the game. Your sins are already forgiven. Because He

lives, all guilt is gone.

Because Christ lives, life has significance. There is good reason to be born, save to consume the corn, eat the fish and leave behind a dirty dish. You were created and endowed with purpose and meaning. You were born to worship God and to enjoy God forever. Did you know that people who worship regularly live an average of seven years longer than those who don't? Worship not only puts years to your life, it will put life to your years. Don't try to live without it. You need it! You were born with purpose and meaning.

You were born to serve and not to be served. Albert Einstein at the end of his life removed the portraits of two scientists, Newton and Maxwell, from his wall and replaced them with portraits of Gandhi and Schweitzer. When his friends asked why, he said, "It's time to replace the image of success with the image of service." And I say to you on this Easter Sunday in America, it's time to replace the image of success with the image of service. That will redeem the world. You were born with purpose and meaning.

You were born to put in more than you take out. Do you understand? William Barclay used to say that when you boil it all down there are only two types of people in the world -- getters and givers. There are people who take out more than they put in and there are people who put in more than they take out. Which do you do? You see, on this Sunday all of us who have seen Jesus must rise to the occasion. It's time to stop hate and end violence. It's time to let go of greed and learn to help those in need. The risen Christ is counting on people like you and me.

Look up and see Jesus today with your own two eyes. Ring the bells! Ring them loud! If I ring them alone, they won't make much sound. Ring the bells! Ring them loud! Celebrate his resurrection and ours. Wesley was right when

he penned:

*Soar we now where Christ has led, alleluia, alleluia,
Following our exalted head, alleluia, alleluia,
Made like him, like him we rise, alleluia, alleluia,
Ours the cross, the grave, the skies.
Alleluia, Amen.*