

THE RADICAL RESURRECTION

by Ray C. Stedman

Someone has well said that Easter Sunday is the only time of the year when anyone can go to church without being accused of being religious! We are glad to welcome any who may be here this morning who do not ordinarily attend church. We are delighted that you came to be with us. We have been studying through the book of Acts in our morning services, this action book of the New Testament, where we are tracing once again the tremendous explosion of radical Christianity which burst out upon a decadent and weary world in the First Century, noting again the power and the excitement which prevailed because of this message, and discovering that the same thing can occur today, and is occurring whenever authentic Christianity is proclaimed.

In our last two studies we looked together at the third chapter of Acts, where we read the story of Peter and John, who went up to the temple to pray. There they found a cripple, a man who had been lame from his birth, who asked them for some money. But Peter said, "Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have I give unto you: in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, rise and walk," {cf, Acts 3:6}. Immediately strength came to this man's ankles, and he began to leap and to jump and to shout. All this drew a crowd, and Peter seized the occasion and began to preach to them in the name of Jesus, saying that it was by the power of Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, that this man was made whole. He gave a great message, which had tremendous effect. But in the midst of it, an interruption occurred. We pick up that story now as it is given to us by Luke, the author of the book of Acts, in the fourth chapter:

And as they 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 from the dead. And they arrested them and put them in custody until the morrow, for it was already evening. But many of those who heard the word believed; and the number of the men came to about five thousand. {Acts 4:1-4 RSV}

There is something strangely familiar to us about that, is there not? It sounds most contemporary. Here were the apostles, speaking to the people from the steps of the temple, and out in the crowd you can almost see banners and signs proclaiming: POWER TO THE PEOPLE! DOWN WITH THE ESTABLISHMENT! Here also was the presence of the police, and the representatives of the establishment. The captain of the temple guard was there, and the Sadducees, who were the ruling class in Jerusalem. And there was a tremendous popular response to the message of Peter on that day. We are told that five thousand men believed. (In that day they did not believe it was worth counting the women and children. This is one of the things Christianity has done for the world -- it has made women and children worth counting!) But there were women and children there too, undoubtedly, and at least five thousand men who believed the message on that day. In the midst of all this there was this sudden display of annoyed authority, of authoritative, iron-fisted power, when the temple guard suddenly elbowed their way through the crowd and, surrounding Peter and John, arrested them, dragged them off, and put them in jail until the morrow. That sounds very familiar to us.

But the most remarkable thing about this occasion was the message. The message was, as Luke tells us: They proclaimed in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. Now, they did not proclaim the overthrow of the Roman government. Such a reaction of authority might be expected if that were their message. But it was not. They were not advocating the violent overthrow of the establishment. Nor were they protesting against some of the social evils of the day. There is not a word of protest raised against the widespread practice of slavery throughout the empire. Half of

the Roman empire at this time were slaves -- every other person was a slave. But nothing is said about that. There is nothing said about the burdens of excessive taxation which the Romans had placed upon this people. There is no such protest. The message which was so threatening that the authorities regarded it as too radical to tolerate was nothing more than the proclamation of Jesus and the resurrection from the dead. For this, Peter and John were thrown into jail before they could even finish the message. And yet, because of this message, five thousand men in that great crowd in Jerusalem became believers in Jesus Christ.

Now, let me ask you: Do you think this could happen today? Would the authorities oppose a message like this today? Well, the clear answer of current history is: Yes, they would, and they do. As you well know there are several governments of great nations of earth that are so fearful of this message that they fight with every weapon at their command to keep this radical message from penetrating to their people. You need only read the book, *God's Smuggler*, the story of Brother Andrew and his attempts to smuggle Bibles behind the Iron Curtain, to see the hostility that can be raised against the simple proclamation of the truth as it is in Jesus. It is very rare that Christians are permitted in any of the countries behind the Iron Curtain today to proclaim the gospel.

The fact that Don Rood, a man from our congregation who is a missionary, is in Czechoslovakia today is testimony only to the overruling power of God, for it is a very rare occasion when men are permitted there with this message. As you know, the most populous nation in the world today, China, is utterly closed to this message. For nothing is more threatening to totalitarian forces, to the dictatorships and tyrannies of earth, than this radical message of Jesus and the resurrection. Even here in Palo Alto this message is sometimes opposed. Recently we have been having a wonderful spiritual awakening in our high schools. Scores of young high school students have come to know Jesus Christ. Last Sunday we had one of the most remarkable and unforgettable baptismal experiences I have ever attended, where more than thirty high school kids told of their new-found faith in Jesus Christ. And this was only a part of the number of kids who have become Christians. Yet that awakening, that power which has turned these kids from drugs and from emptiness and loneliness and a sense of inadequacy and futility, has been viewed with suspicion and distrust by many people. There have been half-subtle attempts to suppress and stifle the whole affair. Why is this? What are the elements of this proclamation that are so disturbing to authority? What did these apostles say when they proclaimed in Jesus the resurrection from the dead? Well, we can answer that. There are other passages which make clear what they meant by this -- in detail. There are at least three elements of the message Peter and John preached that day:

First, of course, they proclaimed the great and exciting fact that Jesus Christ had himself risen from the dead -- only seven weeks before this event took place -- and that they were witnesses to this fact. And not only Peter and John, but a band of a hundred and twenty disciples could bear sterling witness to the fact that they had seen the risen Lord -- not once, but many times. And so powerful was that testimony, so convicting was that witness, that not one voice in all this vast crowd is raised to protest or challenge it. Instead, five thousand are convinced of the truth of it, as three thousand had been just a few days before, on the day of Pentecost. They understand that this is true, that this dramatic event had occurred, that Jesus Christ, the man of Galilee, the prophet from Nazareth, had solved man's most difficult problem -- the problem of death.

Once in all history it had taken place. It had never occurred before; it has never occurred since. Oh, it is true that some have been brought back from the dead before by the power of God -- a handful or so in history. But they were only returned to the same life they had before, and they

died again. But here is One who comes back to a different level of life, who is resurrected, not merely resuscitated. He never dies again, and never will. This is the meaning of the resurrection of Jesus. Here is a whole new level of life, a whole new realm of possibility for humanity. This dramatic breakthrough, they declared, had occurred in their own city just a few weeks earlier. Second, they also preached the fact that the promise of the resurrection had been extended by Jesus to others as well, that he himself had said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He that believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live," {John 11:25}. He said, "Because I live, you shall live also," {John 14:19}. And out of that open tomb has arisen a blazingly radiant, flaming hope which has gripped and held the hearts of thousands and millions since, through the centuries, who have had to face the fact and the experience of death.

This last week I was at Mount Hermon, attending a Christian Writers' conference. Among other speakers, we were privileged to listen to Joe Bayly, that puckish, delightful author of the beautiful Christian satire, *The Gospel Blimp*, which you may have read. Joe Bayly has had three sons who have died. One died at eighteen days of age, one at five years, and one at eighteen years. He told us about the death of the five-year-old boy, a victim of leukemia. In a moving account, fighting back the tears, struggling to keep himself composed, he told us how, at about 5 a.m., the boy began to bleed. Nothing they could do could stop it. All they could do was to take Turkish towels and blot up the blood until the towels were sodden, wring them out, and blot again. There was nothing they could say and nothing they could do that would stop it. And at two o'clock that afternoon, his son died. He expressed to us the anguish, the agony, the blackness, the bleakness of that moment. He and his wife were not spared anything as they faced that together. And yet, as he told us of this, there came across his face a sense of joy, an expression of peace and trust, as he recounted how his faith could lay hold of the fact that, though his little boy was gone, he would see him again. There was a resurrection from the dead. This has been the central element in the celebration of Easter ever since as, all over the world, Christians everywhere express on this day the glory of this remarkable breakthrough: Jesus Christ has solved the problem of death.

Yet if that were all these apostles had to say, I do not think they would have created quite the stir they did. Because Judaism had a hope beyond death, as well. This crowd was made up mostly of Jews, and they already knew from the Old Testament Scriptures that there was a hope beyond death. Pagan Romans and others were not aware of this, but the Jews knew.

But there was a third element that Peter and John proclaimed on this day which made all the difference in the world. It is the most dramatic element of all about the truth of the resurrection of Jesus. They undoubtedly explained to these people that the death of the body, some day, is strangely linked, in a way that we do not fully comprehend, with the death which is at work in our inner lives, right now. That is, death is all one thing, whether it takes place and affects the physical body some day, or whether it is taking place within the spirit of man today. It is all of a piece. And that inner death is what we experience in a thousand ways -- sometimes as loneliness, sometimes as bitterness, sometimes as emptiness and despair, as depression of spirit. Sometimes it is a boredom, sometimes it is hate, sometimes it is malice and resentment and violence. Whatever it may be, it is not what God intended for man. It is an enemy which has seized man and lives with him, sleeps with him, and eats with him, and haunts him in everything he does. The glorious proclamation of the truth as it is in Jesus, is that Jesus Christ, in dying and rising from the dead, did something about this form of death as well, that he overcame it by his risen power. And the result can be, and is, peace instead of restlessness, acceptance rather than guilt,

love in place of lust or hate, power to replace weakness, joy for mourning, beauty for ashes, hope for despair, courage in place of cowardice, and cleansing from all dirt and filth of spirit.

So desperate were these people, so tired of emptiness and of sin, that five thousand of them leaped to believe, and they turned to Christ, risen from the dead -- a risen Lord alive and in their midst, able to impart to them this risen life. Five thousand on that day began a new life in Jesus Christ! Now, would you not think that the authorities would be pleased with such a development? Would you not think that the rulers of the city would be happy that men and women were finding the answer to their life-long search? Why are they so irritated? Why are they annoyed and threatened by this event? Well, it is clear that they sense something about it is a threat to them. They feel it in their bones. They stop the whole show till they can put their finger on what it is that is bothering them. All this is brought out in the next section, beginning with Verse 5:

On the morrow their rulers and elders and scribes were gathered together in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. And when they had set them in the midst, they inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people, and elders, if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a cripple, by what means this man has been healed, be it known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by him this man is standing before you well. This is the stone which was rejected by you builders, but which has become the head of the corner. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." {Acts 4:5-12 RSV}

A tremendous declaration! You can see how seriously the authorities took all this by Luke's careful list of those who were present. There was Annas, who was the honorary high priest, the father of Caiaphas. Then there was Caiaphas, who was the official high priest. And with them were gathered two of his brothers, John and Alexander -- all of one family. This confirms what we know from secular history -- that this family of the high priest intermarried with one another and constituted a ruling class in Jerusalem, controlling the vast wealth of the temple and certain profitable monopolies connected with the sacrifices. So here was the class that sat in power and authority in the city, who had great vested interests politically and economically throughout this city. And they are disturbed. They sense a threat to their power.

They are so disturbed, in fact, that without realizing what they are doing, they give Peter an open door for testimony such as he never had before. They ask him, "Tell us, by what power or what name have you done this thing?" This is just what Peter is waiting for. He is delighted to tell them. And look how bold he is: "By the name of the man whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead." What a contrast with that cringing disciple who was afraid of a little maid in the high priest's courtyard a few weeks earlier! When she asked if he were not part of the band of Galilean disciples of Jesus, he denied it, said he never knew the man. Three times he denied it before the cock crowed. Now there is a difference. He is filled with the Holy Spirit. The life of Jesus is being imparted to him by that Holy Spirit.

This is what the Holy Spirit does. When he comes into a human heart, his business is to take a risen Lord's life and give it to you, to empower you, to encourage you, to strengthen you, to do whatever you need have done to make you adequate to cope with life. This is the work of the Holy Spirit. So Peter, filled with the Spirit, is bold -- bold as a lion. He says, "We have done it in the name of the man whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. By him this man is standing before you well." Evidently the formerly lame man was right there with them, as well. In fact, later on the account says so. He was "Exhibit A" of the power and authority of the name of Jesus Christ. Then to drive the point home Peter quotes from Psalm 118: "This is the stone

which was rejected by your builders, but which has become the head of the corner," {cf, Psa 118:22}. This is the prediction of the resurrection in that amazing Psalm. It is where we get the verse we often quote:

**This is the day which the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it. {Psa 118:24 RSV}**

What day? Why, the day of Christ's resurrection, when God took that Stone which had been rejected by the builders, and made him the Head of the corner.

What both Peter and the Psalmist are referring to is the occasion of the building of Solomon's temple. The Bible tells us that when Solomon built his temple, on the place where the Dome of the Rock now stands in Jerusalem, there was no sound of hammer or saw. The temple was erected in silence. The stones that formed the temple were quarried from a rock quarry underneath where the temple stands. And to this day in Jerusalem you can go down there and see what they call "Solomon's stables," where Solomon kept his horses, and see that they were hewn from solid rock. And from the stones removed from there the temple was built. It was built to such exacting dimensions, according to blueprints provided, that the rock was fitted perfectly before it ever left the quarry. Then it was sent up and put in place without the sound of hammers or pounding of any kind.

And there is a Jewish tradition which says that during the building of the temple, a great rock was quarried out and shaped by the stone mason, and sent up, but the builders could find no place to put it. It did not seem to fit in any of the blueprints they were working from, and so they left it on the side. It sat there for some time. Then, as it seemed to be in the way, someone pushed it over the edge and it rolled down into the valley of the Kidron and was lost in the bushes. When the time came to put in the cornerstone, the great square rock that held everything else in place, they sent word for the cornerstone to be sent up. The quarrymen sent back word that it had already been sent up some time before. They looked around for it, and no one could find it. Then somebody remembered the great rock which had been pushed over the edge. Down they went to the valley of the Kidron and found it in the bushes. With great effort they raised it again and brought it to the top and fitted it into place. It fit perfectly -- the cornerstone of the temple.

That is what this Psalm meant, and that is what Peter means. God had designed that Jesus of Nazareth would be the cornerstone of his government on earth, the rock upon which all human government should rest, and from which it would take its authority. But the builders of various nations have rejected the Cornerstone. This is why no government can stand very long, why God's program through history has been one of overturning, overturning, overturning, as Ezekiel says, until he shall come whose right it is to reign. God has prepared a Cornerstone, and Peter's accusation is, "You have rejected him when he came. You had the chance to build the government of Jerusalem on the rock which God had ordained, but you rejected it; you crucified him. But God has raised him from the dead nevertheless, and has made him the head of the corner. Then he adds these amazing words:

And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. {Acts 4:12 RSV}

This is a startling declaration! It says that there is no other who can fulfill the place of being the cornerstone of authority in the world. No other name! None of the religious leaders, none of the political leaders of all time could possibly do this work. There is only One adequately equipped, qualified to be the foundation of human government, the basis of human authority. You take all the religious names of history -- Buddha, Mohammed, Confucius, Mahatma Gandhi, Ramakrishna, Joseph Smith, Mary Baker Eddy -- whoever and whatever. The most that can be

said of these men and women is that they are moral teachers. The best we can say of them is that they taught what is right. Many of them did. Christians are often accused of being bigoted, of being intolerant of other faiths. There is a sense in which that accusation is perfectly just. We are intolerant of other faiths, in the final analysis. But this does not mean that Christians do not recognize that there is much truth in other religions. Other great religious leaders have uttered fine moral teachings and precepts which have helped people. But there is one thing they could not do: They could tell us what was right; but they could not enable us to do it. That is the difference between Jesus of Nazareth and any other name that can be named in this world. That is why we can never consent to considering any other name to be equal with that of Jesus of Nazareth. No other has solved the problem of death. No other has broken through this ghastly terror that hangs over the human race -- only Jesus of Nazareth. God has made him the head of the corner, and there is no other name by which we can be saved.

You see, we do not need someone to tell us what to do; we know what to do. Most of us know better than we are doing! As Mark Twain said, "I don't need anyone to tell me what to do. I'm not doing half of what I know to do, now." This is exactly the truth. What we need is One who will change us, give us a new motivation, make us want to do what we ought to do, and make us over, give us a new heart, a new outlook, a new ability, a new capacity, a new life. This is what Jesus of Nazareth does again and again.

And this, my friends, is political heresy. Whenever this takes place it threatens all oppression and tyranny and totalitarianism, wherever it may be established. The life of Jesus Christ is never against government; but it is against oppressive government. It is the foundation of Christian liberties, everywhere. There has never been a force more powerful and more vital to assure the liberation of men and women from oppression than this dramatic power of the resurrection. This is why it is hated by the totalitarian forces of the day, wherever they may be.

But the glorious thing is: This is what God intends. This is what he is going to build his kingdom on. Christ is the head of the corner. God, through the course of history, behind the scenes, as it were, of all the tumultuous events of our own day, all the tyranny and heartbreak and tears and anguish and sorrow that is going on all around us in the world, behind that facade, God is working out his purposes. He is building a new humanity. And everywhere he is inviting men and women to become a part of it, by sharing in the risen life of Jesus Christ, and experiencing now the glory of a life of peace and joy and rest and strength and adequacy and power and meaning and fullness -- now. This is what the resurrection means. And not only did this take place this way two thousand years ago, where five thousand men responded to it, but it is taking place in our own day as well.

I think of Tom Skinner, that radical young black man, whose heart was filled with hatred -- head of one of the gangs of Harlam, veteran of numerous raids and wars and fights, filled with bitterness and rejection of society. Half-listening to a radio broadcast one day, he heard some words about Jesus that caught his attention. Though he had known all this, being the son of a minister, he had rejected it all his life. But these words somehow got through to him, and he faced the fact that Jesus Christ was indeed alive and could do something for him. He opened his life to Christ right there, alone by himself, listening to the radio. And there came a change in his life. He did not plan it, he did not direct it, but there it was. It forced him to go to his gang and confront them with what had happened to him, at the risk of his own life. It led him to become what he is now -- an evangelist to blacks and whites alike, telling of the changing, transforming power of Jesus Christ, risen from the dead.

I ran across a testimony this week of the chaplain of Santa Clara Valley Medical Center hospital, who says,

When I was nine months old the doctor said I had contracted muscular dystrophy, which had invaded my entire body. They told my parents I would never be able to walk. As I grew older and began to face life, I realized that I couldn't run and play and fight as the other boys of my age. I remember how my folks would comfort me with such thoughts as, "Some day you'll be able to run and play as other children do -- if not on earth, certainly in heaven."

This was good enough for me, and I was a happy, well-adjusted child. As I grew older -- twelve or thirteen years -- I had an electric cart to ride in. When the boys would play ball in the street, they would let me play first base. The rules were that if the ball were thrown to me or at me, if it fell anywhere within the cart, then the person was out. This acceptance and activity fulfilled a vacant place in my life, and was very satisfying.

But then there came a day when I became interested in added social activities. For the first time I found a real-life situation that no amount of conceptual thought could comfort. I realized I was undesirable by the standards of the normal sixteen-year-old girl. It was then, and only then, as I came to this crisis situation, that I realized I could not compete with the world around me. And yet it was then that all the concepts of Jesus Christ came into view. I was down, and I needed up. I was in despair, and I needed purpose. I went to prayer, remembering that Jesus said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." I had a genuine encounter with Christ. From that day forth he has given me purpose in life, and everything to live for.

And, still confined to a wheelchair, he is now the chaplain of this fine hospital, bringing comfort and spiritual therapy to all the damaged, wounded, broken patients who come in there. This is what Jesus can do. This is what overturns society -- when this message is released and acted upon. Things happen -- remarkable things, dramatic things, things that become the basis of human liberty, and which ultimately threaten all the ensconced authority of totalitarianism, and yet which set men free and able to be what God intended them to be.

Now, you will never know that kind of power, and that kind of joy and love and peace, until you come to grips with Jesus Christ personally, yourself, until there comes a time when you ask Jesus of Nazareth, risen from the dead, to come in and be Lord of your life. When you do that, earnestly and sincerely, he comes in, and you begin a new life in Jesus Christ. There is no other name -- there is no one else -- no other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, we thank you that you are here in our midst and ready to save any who will trust and believe in you, by this wonderful miracle that you have made possible -- that wherever a heart in emptiness and loneliness, in pain and despair, cries out to you and asks you to enter that life and dwell within, you take up residence there. You begin to work your miracle of restoring grace.

How we thank you for the truth of this. How many millions around the world, how many hundreds here this morning, could testify to the reality of this experience. We pray that any who are now hungry and thirsty, looking for life, wanting light in darkness, and joy and comfort in loneliness, will turn to you, will ask you now in their own stumbling way, "Lord Jesus, come into my heart. Be my Lord, my Savior. I accept you now." We know that you will fulfill that promise, as you have with millions before. Thank you, in your name, Amen.