

Easter Sunday

April 24, 2011

O God, be in my mouth as I speak for you and fill this place with your great grace that we may leave this place less of what we used to be, and more of what we ought to be, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen

The 150th anniversary of the start of the Civil War passed with little notice a few weeks ago.

History buffs will know that it started on April 12, 1861 when the southern troops in Charleston started their bombardment of the federal troops occupying Fort Sumter.

My grandparents, born in the first decade of the 20th century, were probably the last generation that remembered meeting the veterans of that bloody conflict which, when it ended, had taken over 618,000 American lives.

I am as guilty as anyone else for not speaking to my own children about the war, or visiting the battlefields. They probably couldn't identify any of the figures on the side of Stone Mountain.

(In case you don't know, there are two Confederate Generals: Robert E. Lee, and Stonewall Jackson and the president of the confederacy, Jefferson Davis.) Hope that helps just in case you ever find yourself on Jeopardy.)

150 years is a long time, and while wars continue around the world, a war fought on our own soil, seems almost unreal today.

Of course in the case of Easter, even more time has passed; roughly 2,000 years.

And I suspect many of us can find the events of that first Easter morning similarly remote and irrelevant to daily life.

This is because we have forgotten the lessons of the past and how we as Christians should live today.

My story this morning concerns one of the General's pictured on Stone Mountain, Stonewall Jackson, and suggests what it means to live an Easter life that is not remote or irrelevant.

After the Battle of Bull Run, a young captain asked Stonewall, who had received a painful wound in battle, "General, how is it that you can keep so cool and appear so utterly insensible to danger, in such a storm of shell and bullets as it rained about you when your hand was hit."

"Captain" answered Jackson in a grave and reverential manner, "my religious belief teaches me to feel as safe in battle as in bed.

God has fixed the time for my death. I do not concern myself about that, but to be always ready, no matter when it may overtake me."

Then after a pause he added, "that is the way all men should live, and then all the world would be brave."

Ours is a timid age, of anxiety, we take every offense in life personally, always ready to contact our attorney and unlike Stonewall never grasp the truth that God is ultimately in charge.

Of course, some might argue that in the Civil War era, men and women were more courageous and accustomed to hardships that most of us would find unendurable.

And yet, given the events of Easter, I wonder if these men on both sides of the conflict would he have been disappointed in what Jesus did during Holy Week.

Would they have been surprised when Jesus stood before the high priest...and stood before Pontius Pilate and did not say a word in his own defense.

It is easy for us to say these Civil War folks would have been braver, we all have the gift of history on our side, we all know how the story ends.

However on that first Easter Sunday, Jesus looked like just another fallen American idol, deserted by his followers and left to die on a cross.

In fact, the Easter story reminds us of the dark side of human experience; the betrayal, the suffering, and finally a brutal death.

My God...My God why have you forsaken me????

This cry echoes through the centuries...

When we find ourselves experiencing that kind of pain in human life, it is so easy to bail out like the disciples and deny, like Peter, that we ever knew Jesus.

In fact, when things like that happen to me, I feel as if the all the breath has been sucked out of my lungs. I feel like the Cowardly Lion in *The Wizard of Oz*. I want to be talked out of my pretensions to be brave.

In these moments of human life, it can be hard to see God...

C. S. Lewis wrote in *A Grief Observed* about this kind of fear and seeming absence of God:

Meanwhile where is God? That is one of the most disquieting symptoms. When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing...you will be welcomed with open arms.

But go to him when your need is desperate, when all other help is in vain, and what do you find?

A door slammed in your face and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that silence....Why is he so present a commander in our time of prosperity and so very absent a help in time of trouble.

To fully grasp how the story of Easter works in human life we must put aside traditional notions of bravery and strength found on Civil War battlefields or in Hollywood movies.

We must acknowledge the reality of our human helplessness, the frustration of our weakness in the face of suffering, the poverty and violence that afflict our world.

We must have the courage to confront the very things we spend most of our lives trying to deny and avoid.

Most of us spend our time going to graveyards, burying the hopes and dreams we once held so dear.

We rarely have the experience of Peter or Mary on that first Easter morning.

Making the hard journey to that graveyard only to discover that their dreams have, through God's grace and power, miraculously have come back to life.

Coming to terms with Easter means coming to terms with death.

The death of our hopes, the death of our dreams, the death of friendships or marriages or other family relationships, the physical death of those we love, and finally the deterioration and death of our mortal bodies.

Of course, once you appreciate the more difficult components of the Easter story, the sense of despair, the absence of God, that people like C. S. Lewis capture, then you are faced with the miraculous part of Easter, the resurrection.

I know skeptics like Richard Dawkins tell us that Jesus didn't walk out of his tomb and that his disciples probably stole the body.

This kind of skepticism, however, fails to get to the heart of the matter.

What Christians need to remember is that the resurrection is not just a doctrine whose value is determined by our intellectual assent.

Instead, Jesus' resurrection as an event is a story that has the potential to transform your life and mine.

When Easter becomes only a creedal doctrine, it makes for an empty cross, a cross that denies the pain and suffering we share as God's people. It denies us our place in this powerful story of redemption. And in the end we are all in some way just stories, called to be part of that great story.

Easter is not for people who are trying to get right with God because they are scared of going to hell.

Easter is for people like the apostles, like Mary, like C. S. Lewis, like you and me who have already been there.

Easter is about living with the conviction that comes from knowing that the longer we try and control our lives the more likely they are going to fall apart.

It is only when we reach the end of our ropes, when we stop obsessing about our finances, our security, our relationships, our sins, when we step aside and say to the risen Jesus, "this is too much for me. I need your help to carry this cross".

This is precisely the moment that something miraculous and amazing begins to happen in our lives.

That is the moment that we roll away the stone and begin to live an Easter life. Confident that Jesus is alive and his triumph over death today gives us the strength and the courage to go on.

The good news is that the Easter story each year invites us, and frees us, to lose our lives in order to gain them.

It is when we turn to Jesus and remember that we too are called to give God that same kind of trust that Jesus gave to God in the Garden

of Gethsemane, and live with the kind of courage that Jesus took with him on the way to Calvary...

When we, like Mary and Peter, discover that the tomb is indeed empty... that Jesus is alive...I am convinced that we, like Stonewall, will say...

“That is the way that all people should live and then all the world would be brave”.

Alleluia! Christ is risen.