EXPERIENCING EASTER

"And Thomas said unto him, My Lord and my God." John 20:28

Here is a man who has entered into the experience of Easter. To the vast majority of our world this morning, in spite of its pomp and pageantry, Easter is not an experience. It is only a date in the almanac. To celebrate Easter as merely a date is, generally speaking, sheer futility. But to experience Easter is to have all life made over. It is to be able to shout with St. Paul, "Old things are passed away, Behold, they are become new."

As we come to this greatest day in the history of the church and of the world, we naturally thank God for the evidences of the resurrection of our Lord. I believe that the resurrection of Jesus is one of the best proven facts in all history. The change of Jewish Sabbath into the Christian Sunday is an evidence. The church that today encircles the globe is an evidence. The triumphant lives of countless saints also proclaim that Jesus really did rise from the dead. But while evidences are very helpful in themselves, they are not enough. With only evidences of water, we would all die of thirst. When I was a boy we had sometimes far more company than expected. When they had all eaten I have gone into the dining room to find ample evidence of fried chicken, but if there were only evidence, I went hungry. No amount of evidence is a substitute for reality.

On the other hand, if we enter into the experience of this man, if we can really say in our hearts "My Lord, and my God", then evidences will cease to be necessary. Suppose you were to come to me tomorrow with a new gleam in your eyes and say, "I have found something
that I know will gladden you because it will give you a new sense of certainty.

In looking through an old attic back among the hills of Tennessee, I discovered the family Bible that was in your family before you were born. In looking through the records of that old Bible, I found written testimony that you were born at a certain time. Such written testimony would be very convincing, but I don't need it. I don't need it because right now I am conscious of life. Even those who experience Easter may appreciate evidence from the intellectual standpoint, but they have an inner certainty that is independent of evidence.

Who was this man who thus came to spiritual certainty?

He was not one for whom faith was easy. His name is Thomas. That name has become a veritable synonym for doubt. Thomas was the rankest of pessimists. He clung to the gloomy side of life as ivy clings about old ruins. Offered the choice between two tragic views, he always chose the more tragic. Everything good was for Thomas too good to be true.

For instance when Jesus, on the last night of his earthly life, undertook to comfort his friends, he gave them this word: "Let not your hearts be troubled, Ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions, I go to prepare a place for you.... and whither I go you know and the way you know." That ought to have brought a radiance into the sky of Thomas that all storms of this world could not put out. But it brought him no radiance at all. Instead, he turned to the Master and said bitterly, "Lord, we know not whither thou goest and how can we know the way?" He virtually telling the Master that what he has said is not worth saying, that it has brought him no comfort at all.
For days before the tragedy struck, Thomas was sure that it was going to strike. When at last it did come and the Master was crucified, the whole world crashed for Thomas - absolutely nothing was left. There was not even a horizon in his life where he might hope for a dawn. Every disciple was filled with despair and brokenness of heart, but the bitterest and most despairing of all was this man Thomas. His fellow disciples were still held together by the bonds of precious memories and by the bonds of a common heartache. Thus bound together, they went for a little service on this Easter Sunday evening into the Upper Room. "But Thomas, one of the twelve called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came."

Why, I wonder, did Thomas refuse to attend this little service with the ten?

1. Had Thomas been a modern churchman, I should answer "Because it was a night service." These ten apostles met at night. That would have excluded most of the membership of the modern church. A vast majority of professing Christians today are voting for darkened churches in our cities instead of for churches that are radiant. The only way to keep a light in the church is through human instrumentality.

2. A modern Thomas might have been absent because he was simply not interested in the values for which the church stands. But this was not true of Thomas of the long ago. He was deeply interested. He was interested to the point of utter heartache. He longed for the fellowship of his Lord. I wonder sometimes how we expect to enjoy Heaven when we are so intensely bored by Heavenly things in the here and now. In that land where the spiritual alone matters, how can we expect to fall at home if we have concerned ourselves about the spiritual
here only enough to attend one service a year? Thomas was not absent because he did not care.

3. Nor was Thomas absent because he had found satisfaction elsewhere. He had not. Neither have you. God has made us for himself and there is no rest for us until we rest in him. We know that Paul spoke sober truth when he said, "The things that are seen are temporal, but the things that are not seen are eternal." In our hearts of hearts, I say, we know this. Yet multitudes act as if the opposite were true. We believe that the things that are seen are what really count—that the things that are not seen are hardly worthy of our interest. But broken-hearted Thomas was not satisfied with such...

4. Why, I repeat, was Thomas absent? He was absent because he saw no point in attending. He did not believe that the service could possibly contribute anything to his own life or enable him to contribute something to others. I met Thomas on the street and spoke to him. He appeared so utterly wretched that I could not pass him by. "Thomas," I said, "are you going to church tonight? I saw your friends go just now. Don't you think you had better go? You might see Jesus, you know. He has promised that where as many as two or three have gathered together in his name, he will be present."

Had I thus spoken, Thomas would have looked at me with bitter indignation. "No, I am not going. I know Jesus will not be there. I know he will not because Jesus is dead. God pity me, I am not speaking from hearsay. I know. I was there when they arrested him. I stood through his mock trial. I saw him scourged and crowned with thorns. I was standing by when he fell under the weight of his cross. I saw him nailed to that cross and I heard him cry in bitter anguish, 'It is finished'. He said
'It is all over', and it is all over. Why should I try to carry on when there is no hope?' Yet even this despairing and bitter man came to certainty.

III

How did it come about?

1. Thomas owed a great debt to his friends. Thank God for the testimony of fellow believers. Again and again, when my own candle burns low, when it seems to have gone out, I go back to relight it to those whom I have known along the way. However much I distrust myself and my own experience, I am sure beyond a shadow of a doubt that these had some values in their lives that could only be accounted for in terms of God. I was by when my father passed to where beyond these voices there is peace. I saw when he stretched forth his trembling, worn hands and sang: "Jesus, Lover of my soul, Let me to thy bosom fly." Thank God for the faith of others.

These ten who had attended the service came all with faces alight and passionate eagerness to tell gloomy Thomas what had happened. "We have seen the Lord," they declared. That, of course, was an amazing word in itself, but they could have said it in such a fashion as to have left Thomas and the rest of the world entirely cold. What they said had to be fortified and reinforced by what they were. Thomas might have shaken his head, as he did. He might have said, "It is impossible. Yet this fact remains, something has happened that has remade them."

Glance at the difference this service had made. Seeing the Lord and being sure that he was alive, they had recovered a sense of mission. They were utterly sure now that life had meaning and purpose. Their Risen Lord had said to them, "As the Father hath sent me, even so send I you." If life does not go on, if personality crumbles to nothingness, then the
whole universe is a jumble of nonsense. What potter would be so stupid as to make lovely vases only to smash them to bits as soon as he had finished his artistic work? I submit to you that life is totally without purpose and without meaning if it all ends in a handful of dust.

What does the individual mean in Russia? He means nothing at all. He is a slave of the state, having no value whatsoever in himself. What does the State mean? It, too, is mortal and must end as the individual in a handful of bloody mud. But if it is true that life goes on, if it is true that God has a purpose in every individual life, that he calls his own people by name, then life has high meaning. Then we can go on with a song in our hearts and a light in our eyes.

Not only did this experience of the Risen Christ give life a new sense of meaning and of purpose, but they found here a new adequacy for the business of living. "He breathed on them and said, Receive ye the Holy Spirit." This Risen Christ came to be their constant companion. He was both with and within them. That was their experience as they went out to change the world. "All men forsook me," writes Paul, of a certain dark hour of his life. "But the Lord stood with me and gave me inward strength." In his fellowship these saints found themselves adequate for every situation. They summed up their experience in this fashion: "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength."

Naturally, with life taking on new meaning, with life being undergirded with the presence and passion of the Living Christ, they came to possess a new joy. There was a radiance in their lives that all the hail storms and fires and snows of this world could not put out. They were possessed of a peace that passeth all understanding and as
Thomas listened to them, he knew that to him life had no meaning. He knew that for him the Great Companion was dead. He knew that for him was only the bitterness of going on living when he had nothing left for which to live. Yet this bitterness of bitter men came into the morning. He was indebted to his friends. But he had to do more than listen. He had to make a response.

IV

What response did Thomas make: The answer is, at first, disappointing. "We have found the Lord," said his friend. Then he looked to watch the light break in the dark face of Thomas. But no light came. Instead of saying, "Hallelujah", he replied with what amounted to a flat denial. "You are dead wrong," he said. "Jesus is not alive. I don't believe a word of it. I will never believe it. You say you saw him. I have got to have more than sight. Unless I see in his hands the prints of the nails and put my finger into the print of the nails and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe."

Thus you can see that Thomas was not merely a doubter. He was a practical doubter. But there is this saving fact about his doubt. He was not proud of it. Our Lord is infinitely patient with our doubts if they are honest. Of course, if you are proud of your doubts, if you say, "I do not believe in any sort of hereafter judgment" because you do not desire to meet the demands that come from such a faith, then you are deceitfully lacking in honesty. The saving fact about the denial of Thomas was that it was honest.

How do we know this? Because Thomas gave himself a chance to know the truth. When he uttered his emphatic denial, his friends were too wise to argue with him. They only replied, "Well, Thomas, we
are going to have another service next Sunday. Since Jesus came
to be one with us at our last service, maybe he will be with us at
our next. That is his promise, you know. Won't you come along this
time? "Had Thomas answered with "I know he will not come", then he
would have shown himself dishonest. But he made no such answer. In-
stead I hear him say, "I will be there. I don't expect to see him.
What you say is entirely too good to be true. I wish I could believe
it." Therefore, when the next service came, Thomas was present. He
was present with his empty, hungry unbelieving heart. So what?
"Jesus came and stood in the midst and said, Peace be unto you. Then
saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger and behold my hands and
reach hither thy hand and thrust it into my side and be not faithless
but believing." But Thomas didn't have to make any such test. Instead
he fell on his face, crying "My Lord and my God." Thus he entered into
Easter.

Now, what about us? We are separated by this scene by seas and
centuries and continents. Yet this same experience of spiritual certain-
ty is open to us. Have you claimed it or have you not? Do you desire
it or are you content to be without it? One day a woman stood beside
the great artist, Turner, as they looked at one of his beautiful sun-sets.
"Why, Mr. Turner," said the woman rather flippantly, "I never saw a sun-
set like that." "Indeed not," answered the artist, "but don't you wish
you could?"

"I have never had an experience like that," you tell me. I answer,
"Don't you wish you could?" Well, you can. Thomas, the bitterest of
doubters, came to certainty because he was willing to do the will of
Jesus Christ. Here is his unconditional promise to every single soul:
"If any man is willing to do his will, he shall know." We do not reach certainty in any realm except by acting.

How, for instance, do you know that sugar is sweet? The testimony of friends is of value. But you only know it by testing it. How do you know that spinach tastes like double distilled extract of nothing? Only through experience. How did the Wright brothers come to know that a ship heavier than air could fly? Only by acting on their convictions, on their belief. How may you come to know God through Christ? Only by acting day by day as if he is true. If you assume that there is nothing religion for you, the assumption will be entirely correct.

The truth is that our convictions about any question are conditioned by our own conduct rather than by our thinking. Our fathers believed in slavery. They could prove the rightness of it by the Bible. Abraham, one of the great saints, was a slave only. It was thus they first bought and then proved the rightness of it by the scriptures.

Many of you are cigarette smokers. Don't get upset. I am not going to lecture you on it. This is no time to swat a house fly when a tiger is raging at your heels. But how did you come to be a cigarette smoker? One day you sat down and laid out on a sheet of paper the merits of a cigarette. You wrote down this - "They satisfy. They are kind to your throat. There is not a cough in a car load. One of them is worth walking a mile for." Having added up all these, weighed the merits, you went out and bought your first pack. No, it was the other way round. You bought first and then discovered the many merits. It would be strange if a Christ who loved us well enough to
die for us wouldn't make certainty available to every one of us. If you will begin here and now to act as if Easter is true, as if Jesus Christ is really here, a present, living sacrifice, you will find it true in your own experience, and finding him, you will find all else that life needs either for time or for eternity. He is the answer who is fitting to all our needs. No man living now in the realization of the living Christ can possibly have a doubt that he will go on living in that fellowship through eternity.

Last summer Mrs. Chappell and I took a train at Waverly to visit our children and grandchildren in Houston. As we were going into Memphis the conductor said, "This train stops here. Change for all points West." To the man with Easter experience, death is not the terminus, it is not a blind alley, it is the station where we change trains for that journey that continues through eternity. I want faith like this. Such a faith is all that can meet my needs at once. It can also meet my needs in eternity. If in surrender we fall at his feet this Easter day, saying, "My Lord and my God," we come to possess that which satisfies now and will satisfy when this world is a forgotten memory.
THE SUPREME SURPRISE

The Lord is risen indeed. Luke 24:34

This book we call the Bible is a thrill with the astonishing. It is in a sense a handbook of surprises. The Old Testament constantly brings us face to face with the unexpected. But with the New Testament this is even more true. It constantly makes the open-eyed reader gasp with amazement. But of all its surprises, there is none other quite so great to the intimate friends of Jesus as the resurrection of our Lord.

PART I

The need of a resurrection was for these friends a complete surprise.

Before there could be a resurrection there had to be a death. Those that knew Jesus best, His own disciples, did not expect their master to die. In fact His death seemed to have taken them completely by surprise. This was the case in spite of the fact that He had warned them of this coming tragedy again and again. They heard what He said, but they simply could not take it in.

For instance on the Mount of Transfiguration, when the Cross was very near, Jesus talked with Moses and Elijah of the Exodus He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. As they came down from the Mountain He warned His three most intimate friends, Peter, James, and John, that they keep what they had heard a secret until after He had risen from the dead. But somehow they heard without hearing. So as they came from this experience they were discussing what the rising from the dead might mean.

It was this certainty that their tremendously vital Lord could not be conquered by death that gave rise to the conviction on the part of
many that Judas was not a traitor but the most ardent and firm of believers. Being utterly sure that no foe could destroy his Master, he seemingly betrayed him without fear. He did not for a moment believe that he would bring about the death of Jesus. He would put Him on the spot where he would act in accordance within His power, and thus hasten the coming of the Kingdom. Personally I do not agree with this theory, but it has some reasons in it. The Matthew Evangelist tells us that it was when Judas had seen that his Master was condemned that he set out and hanged himself. As he had witnessed this utterly impossible certainty that his Master was going to die and suffer at their own hands—i.e., from whom he was about to destroy the death of a criminal—it was more than he could stand.

But be that as it may, as we read the record there seems to be no indication that a single one of the disciples believed that their Master, so tremendously alive, was going to allow himself to be put to death. In spite of all warnings, they had had, it came to them as a complete and devastating surprise.

PART II

Now if they were surprised by His death, they were, if possible, even more surprised by His resurrection.

How can this be, we ask? Had Jesus not told them He would rise from the dead? Indeed He had. He had warned them of this tremendous event. He had warned them of His coming death. But not as a possibility, but as a certainty. They had been able to accept His dying, they could not accept His rising from the dead.

Not one of them, so far as the record goes, during those black hours immediately after their Master had died, recalled one word that He had said. It is significant that the only mention of what
Jesus—had—said—about—rising came from the lips of His enemies. When these went to ask Pilot for a guard to set about the tomb, they gave as their reason for the request the fact that Jesus had said that He would rise on the third day. Of course they did not believe him, but they did remember that He had so promised.

Not only did these disciples not expect the resurrection, in spite of what Jesus had said; he more did they expect it, in spite of certain circumstances, that one would have given a hint that He might have risen. For instance, there was the empty tomb. Just when it was emptied we do not know. In my opinion it was empty Easter Sunday morning, when the first visitor arrived. If not then, it was empty soon thereafter. We may be sure of this, because the preaching of the resurrection in the presence of a tomb, with a great stone before it and a red Roman seal upon it, would have been sheer foolishness. Nobody could have taken such preaching seriously.

Now since the tomb was empty these disciples of Jesus knew that in all probability it was emptied in one of two ways; either by the power of man or by the power of God. If it was emptied by the power of man it was emptied either by the friends of Jesus or by His foes. Naturally they knew it had not been emptied by themselves, His friends. In the first place, to have emptied it would have been for them impossible. They had neither the fortitude nor the power. Having fled like frightened hares in the presence of the living Christ, they would not likely have rallied about a dead body that was under guard. They would hardly have dared to defy the seal of Rome.

Naturally also they realized the futility of such a move. Had they succeeded in obtaining the body, it would have been of no worth
at all. Their one gain would have been the privilege of living, fighting, and dying for a known lie. The accusation that they stole the body, therefore, does not make sense.

These friends knew further that it was not stolen by the foes of Jesus. They might have had both the opportunity and the power, but even if they had taken advantage of that opportunity, why did they not produce the body when these fanatical friends began to proclaim the resurrection? The most brazen of followers could hardly carry conviction of such a miracle in the presence of a corpse that the enemy could put on display. Since then the tomb was not emptied by some but it might have occurred to them that had the power of man, it must have been emptied by the power of God. Yet this possibility seemed never to have occurred to these hopeless friends.

Then there was another strong hint. Certain women went early Easter Sunday morning to the tomb, not to worship a living Christ, but to minister to a dead body. They came back and reported that the tomb was empty, and that they had seen a vision of angels who said He was alive. When Cleopas, whose hope was dead, told the story he put it this way: "Some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning and did not find His body; and they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels who said that He was alive... But when they did not see (Luke 24:22-24). The assertion of these women meant far more to Cleopas than did life. Yet he did not have enough faith then to induce him to stay in Jerusalem even for a few hours to find out if they were true or not. (This was the case because he flatly did not believe)"

When this same message was brought to the disciples themselves and the few friends that were gathered with them, did they begin to hope?
Did they go even beyond hope and shout for joy? Not a bit of it.

Their reaction is expressed both by Moffatt and the New English Version in one word—"nonsense." This strong hint did not awaken in their darkened hearts one ray of hope.

Later still, after Jesus had appeared to the eleven in the Upper Room, they went out from that marvelous experience to tell their intimate friends about it. Thomas had not attended this meeting, nor had he held the一样, that Jesus had risen. He saw no use. He was utterly broken in heart and hope to go to share the despair of his fellow believers. No man had been more loyal than Thomas. None, I dare say, had suffered more than he had suffered and was suffering now. But, therefore, these friends whom he knew and loved and trusted came with the amazing news that they had seen the Lord. Thomas burst into loud hallelujahs? Not a bit of it. This vision of the risen One made him half angry.

"I don't believe it," he said by his whole attitude. "I saw Him nailed to the Cross. I saw Him die. I heard Him say it is finished."

"I think He was telling the sober truth. All the mad dreams we have dreamed are over. Before I believe I will have to put my finger into the print of the nails in His hands and thrust my hand into the hole in His side." By Thomas meant, "I will not believe under any circumstances." Thomas was by nature a bit more real than his fellows, but they were there in the crowd of witnesses. A candid reading of the story, I believe, will convince the reader that no single soul expected Jesus to arise from the dead.

Those who knew Him best were taken completely by surprise.

PART III

Yet we face this amazing fact. These men who had been certain
that Jesus was dead forever, came to be equally certain that He had risen from the dead. I think this is a fact beyond dispute.

Their certainty of the resurrection is indicated by the change that took place in themselves. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. By His great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." For men without hope they had been transformed into dauntless optimists. From fearful deserters who had turned their backs on their Master in His greatest hour of need, they became heroes, loyal in the face of every foe, with possibly one exception, they died to a man in proclaiming a risen Christ after they had thought Him dead forever.

Here is one who had sworn that he had never met Jesus. He is standing now with a friend before the same Court that had sentenced their Master to death just a few days ago. He is no longer shaking with terror. "When they saw the boldness of Peter and John and perceived that they were uneducated laymen, they marvelled." When this powerful court laid the command on them that they were not to speak any more in the name of Jesus, they answered, it almost seem quiet laughter, "We can not help but speak the things we have seen and heard!" This change was not brought about by a dead Jesus, but by a risen Saviour.

The fact that these men were sure of the resurrection is indicated not only by the change that took place in themselves, but also by the change that they brought about in the world of their day. This certainty of the resurrection had wrought a revolution in them. Having experienced this revolution, they went out and wrought one in the
The Supreme Surprise

...an ordinary man... They accomplished the impossible. They made it happen what no intelligent person on the face of the earth would have thought possible.

By their preaching of the resurrection, they shook the city of Jerusalem. They shook the whole Roman Empire. We feel the mighty impact of their message to this hour.

This is a fact of history. It would be as futile to deny it as to deny the Battle of Gettysburg, the discovery of American, or any historical fact. Every church around the world this Easter Sunday is declaring that somebody really and tremendously believed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

PART IV

Now the fact that these men who were certain that Jesus could not rise, who became equally certain that He did rise, had some reasons for their new faith. They were not credulous nitwits. They were reasonable men, even as you and I. Why then did they believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ?

It would seem that not one of these disciples believed in the resurrection because of what they read in their Old Testament. No more did they believe because of anything that Jesus had said. His sayings became evidence after the fact, but they counted for nothing before the fact. No more did they believe because of what a brother disciple had told them. Why then, I repeat, did they believe?

They believed because every man of them had had a personal encounter with the living Christ. To some He had appeared when they were together. To some He had appeared individually, as to James, Simon Peter, and Paul. But their faith was based not on hearsay, but on a personal experience. Mary of Magdala voiced the one reason...
The Supreme Surprise

for their belief, "I have seen the Lord".

Now as I join you in worship on this Easter Day I do so girded by the certainty that Jesus Christ rose from the dead. But it is well for us to know that the certainty of the resurrection as a historic fact is not enough. It is possible for me to believe that Jesus rose, and yet be little more transformed by it than by my faith in any other fact of history. If I do not go beyond that faith, Easter will be for me only a date in the calendar.

But there is a way to change Easter into more than a day of pomp and pagentry. I can change it into a personal experience. This I can do by a dedication of myself to our Lord Jesus. "If any man is willing to do His will, he shall know." Up to Calvary Jesus made His appeal as a physical Christ only. They felt His touch. They heard His voice. During the brief forty days between Easter and the Ascension He appeared and disappeared. The New Testament does not tell us why this is the case, but it seems to me it is obvious. Our Lord was seeking thus to show us that He was as close when He was invisible as He was when He was visible. That He was preparing us ready for today when He does not reveal Himself to the physical eye, but to the eye of the heart. To all who will accept Him, He will make this revelation.

Now when this risen Christ becomes a reality we become sure of the resurrection, not simply for Jesus but for ourselves. We are certain that He will say to us, no less than He said to the dying highwayman, "Thou shalt be with me in Paradise." We can be sure that life goes on. That it goes on in His fellowship. That it will go on forever. We can be sure that John was speaking truth when he said "We know that
The Supreme Surprise

when He shall appear we shall be like Him".

Let us face together this fact. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, our faith is in vain. We are yet in our sin. But if He did rise from the dead we have a mighty Saviour and all our dearest dreams can come true. Living with Him here, we know that not even death can separate us. Countless thousands undergirded by that conviction.

Recently I found an excerpt from a letter written by that English preacher, E. B. Meyer, of a generation ago. It read something like this: "I have just learned that, somewhat to my surprise, I have only a few days to live. Indeed it may be before this letter reaches you I shall have entered the Palace. Do not bother to answer. We shall meet in the morning." That man was already living amidst the splendors of Easter.