

“WILL EASTER EVER HAPPEN TO ME?”

Date: April 8, 2007

Text: Acts 10: 34-43

Robert Raines in one of his books says that his small son one night asked him, “Daddy, will Easter ever happen to me?” He replied, “Yes, I believe it will.” And the child said, “No, it won’t. Jesus was special. He was Jesus Christ Superstar.” Raines had to laugh and replied, “You’re special too. You’re Bobby Super Boy.” Then he went on, “And so we laughed together and I rubbed his back some more and he went to sleep. I realized later that his question is our question too. **WILL EASTER EVER HAPPEN TO ME?”**

The disciple Peter in his meeting with the soldier Cornelius confronted the problem of every Easter: what can be said so that people will leave not just feeling “oh, that was nice” but rather with an overwhelming sense of the awesomeness of what God has done to make our lives different through the resurrection event?

Cornelius, the Roman soldier, wasn’t so different from many of us. He had heard about the resurrection. He was interested, had some questions and reservations. Can’t many of us identify with his feelings? This meeting with Cornelius provided a tremendous opportunity for early Christianity. It would mark new ground in the Gentile or non-Hebrew world if Peter could convince this important official that Jesus had risen from the dead. The disciple started the conversation by offering a brief summary of Jesus’ life. He was sent by God; his ministry consisted of teaching and healing; he challenged the authorities and was put to death; now he has risen from the grave. It’s the kind of information discussed in a confirmation class before young people consider joining the church. For adults, Peter’s comment may seem pretty much like “old stuff” that we have heard many times. It may be “yadda, yadda, yadda,” to use the old Seinfeld phrase.

The very fact that the story is well known may make it more difficult than ever to bring the true meaning of what happened long ago to the surface. Always the danger lurks that the story has become so familiar and become so much a part of our customs that Easter threatens to join Christmas as merely a time for family gatherings, long vacations and good things to eat. Nothing better illustrates the danger that Easter will become another secular tradition than an early Sunday morning phone call I received several years ago. 7:30 Sunday morning a mother called my office to ask if the junior choir had to wear robes for the Easter service. It didn’t really matter to me but I was puzzled by the question. Why was she so concerned? The answer was simple: little Suzy had gotten a new dress, and, if she wore a robe, no one would see it.

How can a break-through be made so that not the trappings but the true meaning of the resurrection event bursts forth? Peter, I am sure, was wrestling with the same dilemma. Cornelius obviously was a knowledgeable individual who knew something about religion. There had been other stories of people coming back from the dead, other messiahs. What Peter had said didn’t appear all that startling. Given the disciple’s impetuous nature, one can sense his growing impatience with the drift of the conversation. All he could do was to move beyond a statement of facts to a declaration of his own very deep and personal beliefs. “I have felt within me the presence of the Living Christ. Remarkable changes have occurred in the way I view each day because of this presence.” Some scholars have stated that the only evidence for Jesus’ resurrection lies in the testimony of these first witnesses. We can debate endlessly theories of what occurred at the empty tomb or various interpretations of the resurrection appearances but there can be no argument about what happened in the lives of Jesus’ followers in the weeks and months after the first Easter. A small band of disorganized, ordinary people was instilled with such power that they created one of the greatest life changing forces history has ever known.

It was the enthusiasm and conviction of Peter and others as witnesses to the resurrection that caused Christianity to grow by leaps and bounds but a problem soon developed. What would happen when these original witnesses, who emanated such power, were no longer around to testify? Would Christianity fade into oblivion or could this contagious quality be passed on?

Fortunately, God has touched the lives of men, women and young people in every generation with the presence of the Living Christ so the story has continued but always new “witnesses” are needed. The great challenge of every Easter is to somehow move beyond a once a year celebration to an experience that not only affects every day living but all eternity. How can we become today’s “witnesses,” who share Peter’s excitement so that his joy and power become part of our lives?

Back in the early 1700’s John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, had gone to the colony of Georgia as a missionary. It had been a very unsuccessful adventure and he was returning to England quite discouraged. On the boat home a terrible storm arose. Wesley, though supposedly a believer, was scared to death. He was amazed that a group of Moravian Christians appeared to be so calm during the storm. Afterwards, Wesley asked them how he could have a faith like theirs. The answer was simple: “live as though you have it and such a faith will gradually come to you.” The Moravian advice sounds a little bit like the old ad: “try it and you’ll like it.”

Now apply that kind of logic to your life. What would it be like tomorrow if you lived as though the Living Christ actually was with you? We are not talking about getting rich or living on easy street as the fruits of Easter but rather we are talking about a different perspective on life that brings new meaning and purpose to getting up each morning. The Christian who seeks to live out the meaning of Easter will find it necessary to confront old fears and angers, be concerned more about the have nots of our world, ask difficult questions about peace and justice. In other words, followers of Christ have to deal with life’s realities while recognizing that each day possesses something more.

I’d describe resurrection living as the ability to deal with all that life throws at you and still appreciate the rainbows. Consider an experience our daughter told us about when she was in college in Indiana. It had been a particularly hard winter and March saw lots of rain and threats of tornados, something akin to what the people of Oklahoma have gone through recently. One lunchtime, after another morning of rain, someone came into the college cafeteria and announced, “Boy, you ought to go out and see the great rainbow.” Spontaneously all the students left their trays and ran for the outdoors. They stood in silent appreciation at what was truly a gorgeous spectrum of colors. Finally someone quietly said, “Thank you, God” and everyone clapped.

It’s that simple: if you live tomorrow as followers of the Living Christ out in the world, you too will begin to see the rainbows in the midst of all that life has to offer. You will find more and more that is enriching, not the soupy, sentimental kind of lightness that you see on TV, but a goodness that begins deep within and moves out into every corner of existence.

Remember that little boy who asked his parent, “Will Easter ever happen to me?” It’s a question for all of us, isn’t it? I hope that within all of us, whether we be at our first Easter service or sitting in the same pew for the 30th year, that there is with some inner undefined longing, a vague feeling that life might have more dimensions than presently being realized. If that be the case, then just maybe, Easter will happen for us this year. Maybe 2007 is the year when we will know a love that is all forgiving and empowering, a way of living that begins in this life and continues forever. That’s what the resurrection is all about.