

This account of the first Easter morning is not as familiar as the accounts in Matthew, Luke, and John because of the abrupt way it ends: "Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid." The earliest and best manuscripts of the Gospel of Mark stop at verse 8. Verses 9-20 were added at some later time to round off and summarise the events of the first Easter morning. They were not part of the original divinely inspired Gospel of Mark. Most New Testament scholars whether conservative or liberal agree that the Gospel of Mark ends with verse 8.

From the time I was a little boy I have been familiar with this portion of Scripture as well as the account of the resurrection of Christ in the other Gospels. As a child I heard them and believed them on the basis of the authority of my mother, father, sister, Sunday school teachers, and pastor. As I look back on my early childhood, the story of the resurrection did not seem particularly marvelous or miraculous or difficult to believe. I simply believed what I was told. It seemed quite natural that Jesus should rise from the dead. Nothing to raise one's eyebrows over and certainly nothing that should cause one to run away in fear and trembling. In fact, at that early age it never occurred to me that anyone believed any differently.

I can't remember when I first heard of men and women who didn't believe in the resurrection of Jesus. But when I did hear of them I thought they must be very strange and evil people. The thought that unbelievers existed frightened me. At that early age I met a boy who boasted that he didn't believe in God. He frightened me and I stayed away from him as though he had some demonic powers to influence me. It was my parents aim, in fact, for me to avoid all contact with such people. As I grew older I began to read and I began to meet people from homes quite different from my own. I began to discover that many people don't believe in the resurrection and yet they are quite nice and friendly. I was disturbed to discover that very intelligent people were often in that number of unbelievers. It was about this time in grammar school that I began to sense just how miraculous and unnatural a resurrection is.

It is not at all natural for something dead to return to life perfectly healthy. The very thought of a dead person coming back to life filled me with terror. The last person I wanted to see or talk with was a person who had died. If someone had said to me, "Hey, Ted. Remember that guy who died a few days ago; you know, that convict that was executed?"

He's over in Newark now. We're going to see him. He has something he wants to tell us", I would have said, "No way!" I would have fled trembling and bewildered like the women in our Scripture lesson.

As a child I really never gave much thought at all to death although I believed without any doubt in the resurrection of Jesus. The significance and the hope of the resurrection was not something, however, that had much relevance to me at the time. I lived then in an innocent, protected world of youth surrounded with all sorts of symbols of health, life, vitality, and security. But then there was Vicki. Vicki was a little girl who lived next door. We used to play together when we were little. I still have a picture of us all dressed up on Easter morning. I remember wanting to play with Vicki one day but my mother told me that I couldn't. Vicki was sick. There was something wrong with her heart and she got very tired quickly. She couldn't come out and play anymore. Then one day I saw my mother crying. My friend Vicki had gone to heaven my mother told me. That was my first contact with death. I didn't know what it meant and I didn't know what relationship it had to the resurrection of Jesus but it frightened me when I saw my mother crying like that.

When I was in fifth or sixth grade I had a friend by the name of Eddie Grandel who was a couple years older than myself and much wiser than I in the ways of the world. He told me about a book he was reading. It was entitled, "The Search for Bridey Murphy". It was the story, supposedly true, of a woman who was hypnotised and asked to go back as far as she could remember. She went back to very early childhood and remembered in detail things long forgotten. Then the hypnotist asked her to go back still further. Eventually she began to speak in an Irish brogue and spoke of things that had happened centuries before her birth. The book was really teaching a popular form of reincarnation. Reincarnation is the non-Christian belief that when a person dies he or she returns in the form of another person, animal, or plant. As I heard my friend tell me the story of Bridey Murphy I became terribly frightened. In fact we both became frightened and decided not to talk about it anymore since I had to go home through a desolate field that night.

What was it that frightened me? I think I was frightened by the thought of someone living on, after death, in the form of another person. I was frightened because I knew this challenged what the Bible said and plainly contradicted all I had been lovingly taught about life, death, resurrection,

and final judgment. I was also frightened because the story made me painfully conscious of the fact that I would die one day. What would happen then? Was the Bible true or was Bridey Murphy true? What really happens after death? I had never really thought that much about that question. I had simply believed what my parents, Sunday school teachers and pastor had said about the resurrection of Jesus but I had never related the fact of his resurrection to the fact of my own impending and imminent death. But I must confess that since that time so many years ago rarely does a day go by that I am not confronted with the thought that one day I must die and one day all whom I love will die.

I do not believe my thoughts of death and the hereafter are abnormal. They are thoughts that I'm sure most of us have had unless we are very young. These thoughts are basic to being human. The Bible presupposes that one fact above all others fills all of us with anxiety and that is the fact of death, our death and the death of loved ones. The Good News of the gospel is so good because it addresses that anxiety directly. It doesn't address our anxiety philosophically or theoretically or abstractly or even doctrinally. It doesn't even address our anxiety scientifically. Instead it tells us

of an event that happened, an event the significance of which has turned the shadow of death into the morning.

~~Two~~ <sup>Three</sup> women who loved Jesus very much went to anoint his body several days after his burial. It was very early in the morning. They discovered the large stone rolled away which had covered the face of the tomb. As they entered the tomb they saw a young man dressed in a white robe and they were alarmed. "Don't be alarmed," he said, "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'"

Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid. This is where the Gospel of Mark ends. It seems rather abrupt to us, perhaps because it seems inappropriate to ~~end~~ a Gospel on the note of fear. But the fear those women felt was not the fear I have talked about experiencing from time to time. It was not the fear of death they felt. It was not the fear of not knowing what happens after death. It was the fear of awe, wonder, and true faith in the Word of God that was spoken to them.

In the Gospel of Mark whenever the disciples are con-

fronted with the realisation of who Jesus really is they were overcome with fear. Remember how the disciples were afraid when the storm came upon them so quickly on the sea of Galilee? They awakened Jesus and Jesus still the storm with a word. Then, Mark tells us the disciples were even more afraid because they had come face-to-face with the thought that Jesus was none other than God almighty in the flesh. When Jesus cast out the demons from the Gerasene demoniac (5:1ff) the people of that region were overcome with fear. The woman with the issue of blood (5:25ff) touched Jesus and was immediately healed. The woman, knowing what had happened to her came and fell at the feet of Jesus trembling with fear. When Jesus came walking on the water to the disciples their immediate reaction was terror (Mark 6:45ff.). When Jesus was transfigured before the eyes of Peter, James, and John they did not know what to say they were so frightened ((:2ff). Whenever a person is confronted with the almighty power of <sup>the</sup> a sovereign God he or she is <sup>initially</sup> overcome with fear and trembling. This is what happened to the <sup>3</sup> ~~two~~ women at the empty tomb. Their fear was a result of the fact that they really believed that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Their fear was caused by the shocking revelation that Jesus is alive.

That may sound strange to you. But I think that many of us cannot understand this fear because we have never realised how unnatural, how wonderful, how incredible is the resurrection of Jesus. We are not talking about somebody who has had a cardiac arrest or has drowned and whom doctors have managed to restore to life; people who make the rounds of television talk shows describing the hallucinations they experienced in that twilight zone between life and death. No! We are talking about a man who was raised to life never to die again; a man crucified as a criminal but vindicated as the Son of God; a man who has ascended into heaven, who is Lord of lords and King of kings.

So often the resurrection of Jesus is compared to the coming of Spring, the budding of flowers, and the rebirth of nature as though the resurrection were something that happened naturally. But the resurrection of Jesus was not at all natural or expected. In it we see the hand of an all-powerful God laid bare. "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." This is true, not only of unbelievers, but of Christians as well. That fear is not the fear of judgment nor is it the fear of death. It is the fear of awe and wonder. It is the fear of life, everlasting life, of eternity, and of the holiness of our gracious God.

My prayer this morning is that the power of the Word of God announcing the resurrection of Christ would fill each one of us with such faith that we too would leave in fear and trembling and silent awe in the face of the glorious fact that Jesus is alive, that he goes before us. When we have that kind of believing fear and awe all other fears of death <sup>begin to</sup> fade away and are conquered. Only if we have experienced that believing, reverent fear and trembling at the realisation that Christ really is alive will our witnessing have any depth or reality to a cynical and unbelieving world.

AMEN