

Sept 30, 19
Colossians 3.1-4

CONFRONTED BY LIFE
APRIL 19, 1987

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You may think
you have many
choices for you
A truly there
are only two
basic
choices

It was early on a Sunday morning, the sun had not yet risen--it was dark. I'm not sure what the weather was like but soon I'll be over there (going on a trip to the Holy Land) and I'll be able to check out the weather in Jerusalem. It was early when Mary Magdalene went to the tomb where Jesus had been buried. She saw the stone rolled away from the entrance to the cave and, quite distraught, ran to Simon Peter, shouting, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Peter and another disciple, probably John, ran back to the tomb with her. After they left, Mary stayed at the tomb, weeping. She saw two angels who asked her why she was weeping. She turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but in her grief, did not recognize him. She supposed him to be the gardener, until he spoke. She didn't recognize the risen Lord. Mary had adjusted to his death, but had difficulty assimilating his resurrection. The response of the other women and the disciples was equally predictable. When you read the four gospel accounts of Easter, you discover that they accepted his death, but were baffled when confronted by his life. They were astonished, disbelieving, and afraid of the unknown. The men, especially, were skeptical, and after the initial encounter, retreated. After a few appearances of the resurrected Christ, they retreated to the safety of the upper room, and there huddled together, depressed and scared, until the Day of Pentecost.

There is an immortal line in Morris West's novel, The Shoes of the Fisherman. The Pope, walking through the poorer section of Rome incognito as a regular priest, is asked by a doctor to attend to a dying man. The Pope pronounces the absolution and after the man dies, asks if he might help the family. A woman answers, "They can cope with death. It's only living that defeats them." The women and men disciples of Jesus could cope with death. They knew what to do with death and grief. But, when confronted by life, they were uncertain and confused.

w. the resurrected

In a very real sense, it is clearer, easier, and simpler to deal with death than life. Death has a certain attraction. The ancient Egyptians had an excessive obsession with death. Can you imagine the resources, engineering expertise, and manpower it took to erect the pyramids--burial tombs? The Pharaohs' fascination with the after-life lasted for centuries. My bias is that the Egyptian pharaohs were unduly preoccupied with death. Our culture also has a strong preference for death rather than life. Our nation's priorities are clear: designing, manufacturing and storing weapons of death have a higher priority than the life of people. Feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, providing health care for the sick, jobs for the unemployed, and education for our children and youth, are of lower priority than erecting pyramids of nuclear destruction.

Even the church emphasizes death. The major works of music and art deal with the passion and death of Jesus. There are very few works on the resurrection. It is difficult for our musicians to find choir and orchestra music for Easter, but we abound in works on the suffering and death of Jesus. Handel's Messiah is one of the few major works that has a large section on the resurrection. The church through the centuries has not really known what to

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do with the resurrection. The weakest part of the Oberammergau Passion Play was the portrayal of the resurrection. Last week the series on "Jesus of Nazareth" was rerun on television. Isn't it interesting that the eight hour production on the life of Jesus allowed less than 15 minutes for the resurrection, and then it was portrayed as relatively uneventful, with little emotion, almost giving the impression the resurrection was the fantasy of the women.

Dramatically, musically, and artistically it is easier to portray the death of Jesus than it is the resurrection. I realize it is easier to paint the crucifixion than it is to paint the resurrection, but that is my point. We really have not confronted the meaning of the resurrection, the meaning of Christ's life for us today. We have not yet learned how to represent it and celebrate it in art and music; likewise, we have not yet learned how to live in the reality of resurrection.

As a result, in church worship and practice, traditionally we seem to enjoy wallowing in guilt. We have been told long and often how sinful we are, but forgiveness, or at least the experiencing of forgiveness, is short-changed. Admitting our sinfulness and confessing it to God is a necessary part of the forgiveness process. But, let's not stop with confession, let's not stop with the death of Jesus. Let's move to the resurrection where we are confronted by life. We all know how to feel guilty; it's forgiveness we have a difficult time accepting.

We all know how to live with death; it's life we have a hard time with! Have you noticed how much easier it is to tear down than to build up? Much time and energy are spent in complaining, griping, and criticizing, which are expressions of death, rather than life. Even when you do pay a sincere compliment, or an expression of appreciation, do you usually feel compelled to add a "But...." We are so death-prone we feel guilty when we make a statement or an act on behalf of life!

The Easter message is life. This morning we have proclaimed, sung, played, prayed, that Christ is risen! We are confronted by life in Easter. The risen Christ confronts you and me this morning with the same challenge Moses gave his people in the Sinai wilderness 3,000 years ago, "I have set before you life and death. Choose life that you may live." (Deuteronomy 30:19) That is the challenge of Easter. Christ is risen! God overcame the forces of sin, evil and death.

Choose life! Don't let the forces of death defeat you. An old Chinese proverb says, "Man who say it cannot be done should not interrupt man doing it." Don't let yourself be interrupted, blocked, slowed down, hindered, hampered, deterred, or encumbered by the negative forces. Michael de Saint-Pierre said, "An optimist may see a light where there is none; but why must the pessimist always run to blow it out?" Don't let that pessimist blow out your light. Don't let the cynics defeat you. Success magazine reported that when multi-millionaire Chuck Givens was a child, he wrote down 181 dreams he wanted to achieve. So far, 160 have come true, and he is still working on the remaining 21! He tried to sell real estate and was ready to quit when his boss said, "You've lost the vision. Start selling people their dreams, instead of just dirt." That did it. He closed a sale the next day. Seven months later, he started his own company. Today he owns 43 companies and \$10

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million in real estate. Chuck Givens advises, "Most people go out in the real world, get kicked around and let go of their dream. I just never stopped thinking like a 10-year-old."

Hang on to your dreams. Choose life, don't give in to death. Don't let your dreams and visions die. Don't let anyone or anything take away your dreams. It is your dream that gives you direction. Keep pressing forward. Be future-oriented. When Frank Lloyd Wright was 83, he was asked which of his works he would select as his masterpiece. He replied, "The next one."

Choose life! There are signs of life all around you, signs of hope, fresh starts, new beginnings, new dreams. A minister closed his services by giving an altar call. He invited people to come forward with their special requests, kneel at the altar, and he would pray with them. One Sunday, the congregation was delighted to see the minister's three-year-old daughter go forward and kneel at the altar. She waited patiently while he prayed with the others, and when he came to her and asked her request, she looked up, with big eyes, and asked, "Can we go to the restaurant after church?" She knew how to reach her daddy. She knew how to confront her daddy with life, to keep his feet on the ground, his heart in the right place, his priorities straight.

I have a challenge for you this Easter morning. Choose life. Will you try choosing life, at least for the rest of this day. Look for signs of life. Look for the second chances, the fresh starts, the fun times after church in restaurants. It's a beautiful world. Maybe a baby will smile at you. When a baby smiles at you, it's like the sun breaking through the clouds on a dark, dreary day. A baby smiles and death is pushed back to the sidelines; the negative forces are overcome for an instant. I look forward to Sundays because on Sunday mornings, I get hugs from several of the pre-school children. Life is spontaneous hugs from children. At Family Camp last summer, I asked Brett Buttrill for my hug, but she informed me that she hugged me only on Sundays. Well, in this life, you take what you can get!

Look around you for signs of life. If you knock on the doors of households represented here this morning, you will find the forces of death behind many doors. Cancer, illness, grief, drugs, worries about children and grandchildren, alienation, divorce. But I proclaim to you this morning: Christ is risen! Choose life! Look carefully, and you will find in the midst of death, in the midst of the problems, tiny sprouts sticking their heads up through the earth, ready to grow, reaching for the sun, new life, new chances, new opportunities, beauty, joy, fun.

Look around for signs of life today, and, I challenge you, stamp out death whenever it lifts its ugly head. When you feel tempted to say something negative, when you feel the urge to gripe, to complain, to point out someone's faults, when you catch it on the tip of your tongue; or when you begin to think negatively--doom, gloom, depression, counting the problems; when you find yourself choosing "death" instead of "life," say out loud, "Christ is risen!" Not just inside yourself, but say it out loud, where it will convince your subconscious as well. Turn to the light, away from the darkness. Choose life, instead of death. Claim the power of the resurrection. When you say, "Christ is risen," believe Christ is alive in your life, believe that the Holy Spirit is cleansing you, freeing you from bondage to death, and releasing you into love, joy, and the power of God. Will you do that today?

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Who knows--the wonder and excitement of today may carry over into tomorrow. What would happen in your work place if occasionally you proclaimed, "Christ is risen!" Would they call for a straight jacket, or would they see a change in you? Would they share your hope, joy, and excitement? Wherever you go, do you plant seeds of discontent, despair, gloom and doom; or do you plant seeds of hope, promise, and blessing? Are you a joy to be around? Do people welcome your company? Or, do they say behind their masks, "Oh, oh, here comes the griper again. Here comes the complainer. I wonder what's wrong with the world today!"

I challenge you this Easter Day to look for signs of life: possibilities of change, second chances, fresh starts, new ideas, fun. Look for buds, look for sprouts of new life. Look for signs of life and stamp out death. Become obsessed with life, not preoccupied with death. Will you take the challenge, the dare? Try it for a day? Christ is risen! Choose life!