# THE DANCE OF LIFE

-a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
Houghton Memorial Chapel
Wellesley College
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"Do not be amazed; you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen, he is not here; see the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you." (Mark 16:6f.)

The other day a student I know decided to buy an Easter card to send to an older relative. In the course of her search, she made a significant finding: Easter cannot be convincingly secularized. With Christmas there's the little child born in humble circumstances and the theme, "Peace on earth, good will toward men." But with Easter you have death and resurrection, and that's not so easy to handle. Easter plants, Easter hats, and Easter rabbits don't begin to deal with the theme, death and resurrection.

In a sense that's good. If Easter cannot be convincingly secularized, then we're in a better position to understand its meaning. Yet in another sense it's not so good. We can't use the secular whitewash to cover over our religious uncertainties. We have to look directly at them. What did happen? What does the Easter message say? What can it say to us?

I.

We can begin by admitting that no one who lives in the modern world can be automatically clear about Easter. There was a time, perhaps, when this was different, a time when death was a frightful reality. In the late Middle Ages, for example, a certain pious bishop ordered that his likeness be engraved on his bronze tomb. Not his living countenance, however, as was usual. He ordered that his body was to be exhumed six months after his death, and that what he looked like then was to be drawn on his tomb. To this day one can see <u>that</u> likeness on a tomb in the Cathedral at Naumberg, Germany. On the tomb he had these words inscribed: "As I was, you are now. As I am, you will be."

This of course comes from a time before the rise of modern medicine and the modern science of public health, a time when death danced a frightful dance in the streets everywhere, in untold private agony and in awful public plagues. If there was any hope at all, it had to come from the outside, from God. Hence the promise of life eternal through the Resurrection of Christ from the dead was a very attractive promise. And the likes of the Bishop of Naumberg did not fail to seize every alternative to press that lesson home.

For us, clearly, it's different. All manner of plagues have been conquered through painstaking medical research. The life span has been doubled since the time of the Bishop of Naumberg. We're even told that with organ transplants and similar astounding operations, man is at the point of achieving an extension of the life span beyond anything we now anticipate. Why, then, do we need the Resurrection? That's the razor-sharp question.

II.

Perhaps the situation will come into focus if we make a slight geographical shift, only a few miles, from the exquisite romanesque Cathedral at Naumberg to the insipid modern memorial built by the East German regime at--Dachau. I don't know how many of the six million Jews were incinerated there, but many were. I talked to a Roman Catholic chaplain who accompanied the liberating armies into the camp, and he told of seeing stacks and stacks and stacks of bodies throughout the place.

You and I live in a technological era when efficient, quick mass slaughter is possible. Indeed there has been so much of it that our sense of horror has begun to fade. We have learned to play language tricks. As someone has observed, there's no better way of making evil into good than by giving it a Latin name. Thus we call killing and destroying in farm areas "rural pacification". Or we think of little children withering away to nothing, mothers without milk, old people unable to move in Biafra or Mississippi--we think of these people as statistics of the starvation rate. In this way killing and destroying, and

shrinking, dying bodies become an accepted part of the daily news.

This overall phenomenon has been called "the banality of evil". We see so much that we simply don't admit that it is evil anymore. We whitewash it by using vapid words or by building massively inane memorials such as the one at Dachau. But the problem isn't only the banality of evil. On a broader level we also live with the tasteless and the senseless. One town in New Jersey, for example, now has an elevated superhighway running down its main street. This happens to be one of New Jersey's most important historical sites. But the State Highway Department authorized the project on the grounds that more people would be able to see the town.

Generally, then, it seems that our problem isn't death, as much as it's deadness or insensitivity. Not horror, but banality. Not threatening illness, but extended meaninglessness. That, I guess, is at least part of what the pop artists and their cohorts are saying. If our sensitivity for life is such that we are satisfied when we contemplate a tomato-soup can, then we have little sensitivity left. Then we are indeed in a state of spiritual, emotional, and perhaps even physical deadness.

This was already evident to that great prophet of the nineteenth century, Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche looked at the largely stagnant culture of his time and called for a <u>new vitality</u>. With specific regard to the academic mind, for example, he wrote: "Dancing in all its forms cannot be excluded from the curriculum..., dancing with feet, with ideas, with words, and need I add that one must be able to dance with the pen." As you know, Nietzsche passionately rejected Christianity and, behind that, the man Jesus. He saw only more suffering and death, more weakness and despair, in Christian existence. I have a private opinion, however, that Nietzsche might have looked differently at Christianity

and Christ, had the Church of his time seen fit to have him encounter the Christian message in its fullness,--had Nietzsche heard about Easter as well as Good Friday. Even more, had he heard about Easter as the beginning of a new vitality in this life, as well as a promise for a glorious life to come.

III.

Here it's important that we see our text from the Gospel of Mark both against its Old Testament background and in relation to the writing of Paul. Consider the this-worldly imagery of our Old Testament lesson. It looks forward to a day of deliverance; and this is how it sees that day:

> On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of fat things, a feast of wine on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wine on the lees well refined. (Is. 25:6)

The day of deliverance is a day of feasting. This expectation then shaped the present life of the people. They celebrated without inhibition, as the Psalmist tells:

> Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise in the assembly of the faithful! Let Israel be glad in his Maker.... Let them praise his Name with dancing, making melody to him with the timbrel and lyre! (Ps. 149:1-3)

I wonder whether Nietzsche ever read such passages. I wonder whether he ever knew that the anticipated Divine deliverance was the occasion for feasting and singing and dancing.

That Old Testament experience was then carried over into the New Testament. The first Lord's Supper was viewed as the first banquet in an age which was to culminate in that Heavenly Banquet of fat things and wine on the lees. Likewise, and contrary to some of our habits, the eucharists of the early church were genuinely swinging affairs. In fact, some of them were such swinging affairs that the members lost sight of mutual concern, and St. Paul had to set some limits. He talks about this in his letters. Yet he by no means rules out

ecstatic phenomena, such as speaking in tongues. He just wants the church members to avoid a self-indulgent spirit among themselves.

What was the occasion for this swinging liturgical life of the early Church? The sense of the presence of the living Christ. As Paul says to the Philippians, "Christ is proclaimed; and in that I rejoice." "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." (Phil 1:18b, 21) In this kind of experience,--akin I think to the pleasant conviviality of ordinary table fellowship,--deadness is overcome by new life; banality by vitality; meaninglessness by joy. You might call this the empirical precipitation of the Resurrection,--a tangible, this-worldly sense of new life, vitality, and joy.

In a sense, then, what Nietzsche called for in the academic world of his day was already present in the Old Testament cult and in the New Testament liturgy: dancing with feet, dancing with ideas, dancing with words, and, not to forget the uninhibited imagination of the biblical writers, dancing with the pen.

IV.

So I think we can begin to make some sense out of the Easter message, in terms of the new vitality over against the old banality. The Easter message points to a transformation of <u>this</u> life, as well as to the gift of a transcendent life at the End of all things.

But we have to be more specific than this. If we don't, it's likely, perhaps inevitable, that we'll lapse into that self-indulgent spirit, which Paul so thoroughly rejected. You know what I mean, the Church which may have something going for itself, but which, when all has been said, is chiefly interested in itself. This is the lily-white suburban country club church. This is the compulsively elitist , avant garde underground church. Perhaps it's also the randomly disciplined, see-what-you-have-to-offer College chapel

church. Somehow people in the Church always find a way to focus much, if not all, of their attention on themselves and their needs.

But the Church the New Testament points us to is quite different. It's not inward looking, in that sense of self-indulgence. To begin with, this swinging, celebrating Church looks away from itself back to a specific historical event as the source of its new vitality. "He is risen, he is not here," says our text. That is to say, the swinging liturgical experience isn't self-contained. It's open to the past. It's predicated on remembering. It begins by looking back to the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Now it scarcely needs to be said that no one, including the New Testament writers themselves, ever has successfully said exactly what happened on the first Easter. Indeed, the New Testament shows a noticeable reluctance to go into details. The conviction is that on Easter Day there was an astounding inbreaking of new life in and through the person of Jesus of Nazareth who had been put to death on a cross. That is the conviction. But the articulation of that event is self-consciously modest. It's as if some untutored person were to come upon a town or a countryside which had been swept by a tornado. You know that something remarkable happened, but you're not quite sure how. In some such way as this the Church looks back to the Resurrection: as the moment when new life from the Infinite Source of life broke into a deadened world.

The swinging worship of the Church also looks outward. You don't rightly enter into this celebration of vitality just for your own sake. You don't rush in and devour all the food for yourself. But you, being hungry, and being fed, then carry the food with you for others who are also hungry. In a word, there is no proper worship, however much it may turn you on, if it doesn't also send you forth in deeds of love,--if it doesn't impel you and inspire you to love

the poor. "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels," says St. Paul, "but have not love, I am a noisy gong of a clanging cymbal." (I Cor 13:1)

This past week some of us participated in a Maunday Thursday Supper here, with a long table, with the spots on overhead, with much friendly conversation. But then, sitting in the same place, we also saw a film on war-injured children in Vietnam. The horror displayed in the film, stood in stark contrast to the conviviality of the supper. But it <u>had</u> to be. That is the way Divinely ordained worship is, not only vital, but also sensitive to the poor and the oppressed, outward looking.

So the Church's swinging liturgy looks back to the event of the Resurrection, it looks out to the suffering of the poor, and, finally, it looks forward in hope to the coming of the glorious End time, the new creation of all things. "But go," says our text, "tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; <u>there</u> you will see him, as he told you." This too, is a characteristic mark of Christian experience, openness to the future, a trust that all that is to come,--come hell or high water,--is in God's hands, and that ultimately the new life manifest in the risen Messiah will triumph everywhere.

Again, we don't have any blueprints of what the future will be like, either with a small "f", or with a large "F". But in virtue of what we remember together of the first Easter, and what we experience now of the new vitality, we are bold enough--or we can be bold enough--to enter into the conviction expressed by that Old Testament imagery, fragile as it is:

> And he will destroy on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is cast over all nations. He will swallow up death for ever, and the Lord will wipe away tears from all faces...(Is. 25:6,7)

Our present communal experience, then, isn't just a thing for itself. It looks <u>back</u> to a Divine inbreaking of new life. It looks <u>outward</u> to our brothers and our neighbors. It looks <u>forward</u> to God's Future. Indeed, is it not the

case that it's precisely because our present experience in the church isn't just a thing for itself that it can be a genuinely swinging affair, a real dance of life? The bold conviction is that he is risen, that he is going before us to minister to the poor, and that in him on that transcendent Day of days all things and all men will reach their glorious fulfillment and banquet of life.

With this conviction, venturesome as it is, we aren't left turned in on ourselves, left to create and manipulate our own experience, with little or no hope for the future. We are free to open ourselves joyfully now. We can dance: with feet, with ideas, with words, and, when we have occasion, with our pens. We are free to say with the words of the Old Testament Lesson: "This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation." (Is. 25:9b)