THE MYSTERY OF THE RESURRECTION

-- a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
Wellesley College Chapel
Easter Sunday
April 15, 1979

"Behold I tell you a mystery. Death is swallowed up in victory"
(I Cor. 15:51-54)

You may not have noticed, but the secular world is having its problems. I'm not thinking now of Three Mile Island or rising inflation or things like that. I have in mind the problem the secular world is facing as it tries to keep itself secular.

Recent reports suggest that this problem is particularly acute in the Soviet Union. According to official sources, 80 per cent of the adult population is either atheistic or agnostic. But a survey of Leningrad workers revealed that 41 per cent observe religious festivals, such as Easter.

Troubled, the Soviet regime is considering a counter-offensive. The head of the Department of Communist Upbringing, Spiritual Life and Culture recently suggested, for example, that new rituals should be developed that would be "just as emotionally affecting and spiritually uplifting as the old rituals," but "in keeping with today's needs."

"When someone dies," he lamented, "the relatives don't know what to do, how to act, what to say, how to conduct a burial... The church is always there with its rituals. What we should do", he suggested, "is compose a funeral anthem, or at least write new words to the beautifully tragic tune of the revolutionary funeral anthem."

Pity the poor comrade! He might have asked us, and we could have told him -- we in the Church who have been tinkering with new rituals, bringing guitars or incense or dancers or whatever into our services. We could have told him: all the tinkering in the world won't make any difference, it you don't deal with the essentials.

Either Christ is risen from the dead, or he is not. If he is, then certain things will follow, as a matter of course. If he is not, then other things will also follow, as a matter of course.

I think the comrade, and all of us indeed, can be instructed by the statement of the old Russian worker who said: "I was going to become an atheist, but then I found out that atheists don't have any festivals."

Well, we do have festivals in the Church, and Easter is the greatest of them. And that's because we know we have something to celebrate. Otherwise all our banners and lilies and fine songs would be so much tinkering, so much whistling in the dark, that would probably leave a very sour taste in our mouths when all was said and done.

So I want to talk about essentials this morning, this morning especially, above every other morning. I want to tell you afresh about the mystery of the resurrection.

Specifically, I want to discuss the victory of the living Christ, his hidden dominion in the world, and the sweet joys of his salvation.

I.

We begin with the theme of mystery.

I think we have to fault the Church itself, particularly the American Church, for a certain failure of nerve, in this respect.

Last week I had planned to show a film on the life of Jesus as part of our commemoration of the events of Maundy Thursday. It had received much publicity and good reviews in the Church press. But when I previewed it -- thank God, I previewed it -- I saw a parade of Bibleland people that was so unreal and so unbiblical that I considered becoming an atheist on the spot. The characters were so clean, so middle-class, and the death of Christ was so trivial, that I wondered how the Church has survived some of its own sincere commitments.

If the resurrection, for example, means nothing more than the magical removal of a rock from a tomb and the emergence of a nice man who smiles at you, which is about all the film manage to suggest, then give me Camus or Nietzche or Ivan Karamazov, or anyone, practically. To claim so much for so little, is to perpetrate a bitter hoax on people who are searching for faith.

"Behold, I tell you a mystery," says Paul. This is the same Paul who was thrown down to the ground and blinded by his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus.

Have you ever gone to the ocean and just stood there at the shore and looked out and wondered? Have you ever thought about the dark currents and collosal depths of those waters? Have you ever stood there during a storm, perhaps, and witnessed the waves come crashing in? Have you ever heard them thunder? Have you ever felt the salty wind practically blowing you off your feet?

"The voice of the Lord is upon the waters," sings the Psalmist. "the God of glory thunders, the Lord, upon many waters... The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars, the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon... The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire. The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness.... The Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord sits enthroned as king for ever." (Ps. 29)

I take this as a far more instructive context for encountering the resurrection of Christ, than the picture of a Nice Man who steps out of a tomb, from which a rock has just been magically rolled away like a subway door. The New Testament account of the empty tomb and the encounters with the risen Christ surely are much more reminiscent of the faith of the Psalmist - the voice of the Lord on the waters - than the American middle class image of Jesus as the Nice Man next door.

You are walking on holy ground here. You are about to be thrown down to the ground and be blinded. You are about to hear thundering in your soul. And indeed, your soul is about to be filled with a joy that is so overwhelming that you may wonder, in retrospect, how you survived the whole experience. Behold, I tell you a mystery!

II

When you get up from your feet, then, how do you begin to express what you have seen?

Let's follow Paul in I Corinthians 15, and see how he begins to express his encounter with the Mystery of the resurrection.

First, this theme: the victory of the living Christ. Paul quotes Isaiah: "Death is swallowed up in victory."

By this, I think there can be little doubt, Paul has in mind a future condition of this present world, and of all of us who dwell within it.

We've all had the experience of going to a play that we've seen before. We know how it's going to end, and yet somehow that doesn't spoil the play for us. On the contrary, the whole thing may take on a new and deeper meaning for us, when we see it the second or third time, and encounter its meaning, as it unfolds, in terms of the end that we know is coming.

So Paul knows what the last act of the drama of this universe is all about. As he tells us vividly in Romans 8: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as members of God's family, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved."

The glorious last chapter of the story of this universe will be the renewal of all things, according to Paul, the coming of the new heavens and the new earth, that John talks about, when justice and peace and life will triumph, once and for all. And the resurrection of Christ, according to Paul, is the victory that inaugurates the coming of that last act, already now in the midst of this act, which we experience today in this world.

The resurrection of Christ, therefore, is the proclamation of the last word and we should hear this as starkly and as gloriously as Paul would have us hear it:

The day is coming when the works of the Hitlers and the Idi Amins will be destroyed.
The day is coming when threats and rumors of war, and the prospect of fire and brimstone from nuclear madness will be destroyed,
The day is coming when 500 million children will no longer have to suffer from malnutrition, when the principalities and powers of greed will be destroyed.

The day is coming when the unrighteous works of the apartheid system, whether in South Africa, or anywhere in the world, will be destroyed, once and for all.
The day is coming when lonely individuals will no longer have to live in the terror of their isolation, wondering whether anyone cares that they exist.
The day is coming when, as the prophet says, God will swallow up death forever, and will wipe away tears from all faces, when 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 and of wine on the lees well refined. The day is coming.

This is one of the primary meanings of the mystery of the resurrection, according to Paul. We know what the last act of this universe will be all about. We know that come what may, ravages of war, terrors of isolation, even entropy for the cosmos, God will triumph over all the forces of death and disintegration, and inaugurate the new heavens and the new earth, in which righteousness dwells. This is one of the essential meanings of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. His rising to life is the beginning of that glorious ending.

III

But we don't know when that ending will come. The day of resurrection is the beginning of that ending. This much we can confess. But we know neither the time nor the hour, when all will be consummated. The resurrection is a mystery in this respect also.

Still we know, according to Paul, that we have not been forsaken: that the risen Lord who has inaugurated the last act of the universe, through the mystery of the resurrection, exercises a hidden dominion in this world. "For he must reign," says Paul of Christ, "until he has put all his enemies under his feet."

Which is to say, we are not left in the lurch. God does not give us this glorious promise, and then withdraw, as it were, to his throne-room by himself to let us stew in our own juice, until the kingdom finally comes. God continues to be our Immanuel, our "God with us" in the person of our living Lord, yet hiddenly.

What this means, among other things, is that there can be such a thing as a Christian interpretation of history. If you add up the balance sheet, things don't usually come out very rosey. If you put on one side of the balance all the evil things we experience in this life, and on the other, all the good things that happen, the balance will surely be skewed out of sight.

All you have to do is to begin to catalog the evils of our time, as we all do in our hearts from time to time, with heavy and discouraging results: Auschwitz and Dachau, apartheid in South Africa and tyranny in South Korea, hundreds dead in Jonesville and thousands dead on our holiday highways, hunger and malnutrition around the world, Three Mile Island and the threat of nuclear annihilation through accident or madness. Death very much seems to have the upper hand in these days.

That is the external, visible reading of history, which drives some of our contemporaries to despair, even to suicide, and which drives many people to repression and a kind of bland, mindless innocence.

But a lot depends - everything depends - on how you understand the last act of human history. If Christ is not risen, if indeed the last act of life is death, if indeed the last act of the universe is entropy, if ineed the last act of your life and mine is loneliness and isolation and disintegration as selves, then it might be helpful to accept Freud's advice. "Much is won," he observes, "if we succeed in transforming hysterical misery into common unhappiness."

But if we encounter the mystery of Christ's resurrection, if we are thrown to the ground and overcome with blindness -- or however that mystery may shake our lives -- if we know that the last word about life is not death, but life, and that Christ is reigning, then we can see things in our daily experience much differently.

When we look at the world of Auschwitz and Dachau, we can see the faces of Corrie ten Boom and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and the heroic resistance of the Warsaw ghetto.

When we look at apartheid in South Africa and death-wielding governments in Asia, we can see the face of a Steve Biko and the many South African martyrs; we can see the glorious life of a community of Christian martyrs in South Korea, for example, standing up in the midst of persecution in the name of justice and truth.

When we see the pictures of starving children, we can see, as well, the intense concern of thousands of Church folk in this country, who are giving of their resources, and attempting to consider what it means to live in a land of affluence and be Christian, too.

When we see the pictures of the reactors at Three Mile Island, we can also remember the face of the Wellesley student in the picture carried by the Hartford Courant, as she stood there at the launching of the death-wielding Trident submarine in silent protest.

These, and many more, are signs, I venture to say, of the hidden dominion of the risen Christ in our common history. And in them all we can rejoice: not only for what they are in themselves, but for what they signal to us, what they proclaim to us -- the coming of the final day of victory, when Christ's triumph over death will be complete. "For he must reign", says Paul, "until he has put all his enemies under his feet."

IV

So the mystery of the resurrection means the gift of insight, seeing through blinded eyes, as it were, into the hidden dominion of Christ, and his works of life, in the midst of this world of death. But that is only part of the story.

God might have left us with just this much, and that surely would have been enough: the confession that death is swallowed up in victory, that the mystery of the resurrection means that the last act of the universe is the birth of a glorious life and that Christ is reigning now invisibly, through his works of life, in behalf of that final victory that is yet to come. All this would have surely been enough.

But in addition to everything else we have been given this great grace: the mystery of the resurrection has been disclosed to us in personal terms, it has been given to us self-consciously to taste the sweet joys of Christ's salvation. For us, the universal hidden dominion of the risen Christ is always near.

So the early Church, and Paul in particular, lived with the vivid conviction that the coming of the great heavenly banquet of fat things and wine on the lees, was not just a future event, to be given with the consummation of the ages, in God's good time. They believed that the sweetness of those end times was available within the life of the Church as it identified itself consciously with the life of Christ.

"Thanks be to God," says Paul, "who gives us the vistory through our Lord Jesus Christ." We know from other places that this thanksgiving was for Paul, and for the Churches he founded, a most joyous liturgical reality. The kind of ritual that would overwhelm that comrade in Russia or any secular soul, if he or she would ever expose it on its own terms.

As we read in the letter to the Ephesians, we quickly see that the question is not whether to drink the wine of human gladness, but how to drink it, and in what spirit: "And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ to God.

So the early Church looked at its central ritual, the eating and drinking of the bread and the wine, as a foretaste of the consummating banquet in heaven, promised by the prophets, the feast of fat things and wine on the lees. So the early Church looked at this act of thanksgiving, this eucharist, as the sweetness of heaven, and the richness of earth consummated, in one moment of intense sharing.

This is the revealed presence of the mystery of the resurrection in our very midst. This is a glorious privilege that you and I have as persons who are seeking to follow Christ and accept his discipline: this is the gift of sweet joy, not only to have insight into the mystery, but to taste it, to savor it, and to share it with each other in hymns of joy.

"Behold, I tell you a mystery .... 'Death is swallowed up in victory.'"

Christ is risen!

I invite you to taste anew the sweet joys of his salvation.