Bulletin

A SWINGING CHURCH

--a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
University Lutheran Church
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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 searching, she made a significant finding: Easter cannot be convincingly secularized. With Christmas there is 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 is not so easy to handle. Easter plants, Easter hats, and Easter rabbits do not begin to deal with the theme, death and resurrection.

In a sense that is good. If Easter cannot be convincingly secularized, then we are in a better position to understand its meaning. Yet in another sense it is not so good. We are not able to use secular whitewash to gloss over our religious uncertainties. We have to look directly at them. The question of Easter stands before us in all its cutting force. What did happen? What does the Easter message say? What can it say to <u>us</u>?

I.

Let's 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 that 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 came from a time before the rise of modern medicine and the modern science of public health, a time when death danced in the streets 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 was a very attractive promise.

For us, clearly, it is 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 are 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.

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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.

Dachau. I do not know how many of the six million Jews were incinerated there, but many were. Just the other day, Father Collins over at St. Paul's was telling me about the stacks and stacks and stacks of bodies he saw when, as a chaplain, he accompanied the U.S. army in its liberation of Dachau.

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 is 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." In this way killing and destroying become a natural part of the daily news.

This overall phenomenon has been called "the banality of evil." We see so much evil that we simply do not 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 not 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. The State Highway Department authorized the project on the grounds that more people would be able to see the town.

Generally, then, I would say that our problem is not death, but 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, son of a Lutheran pastor, 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."(Things Germans Lack, p. 7)

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 that Nietzsche might have looked differently at Christianity and Christ had he encountered the Christian message in its fullness, had he heard about Easter as well as Good Friday. Even more, had he

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heard about Easter as the beginning of a new vitality in this life, as well as a promise for a life to come.

III.

Here it is important that we see our text from the Gospel of Mark both against its Old Testament background and in relation to the writings of St. Paul.

Consider the this-worldly imagry 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 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 does not rule 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 this life, as well as to the gift of a transcendent life at the End of all things. But this

raises a question. Is there a difference between the swinging liturgical life of the church and other contemporary groups seeking new life?

Recently San Francisco witnessed a "human be-in," so-called, in its Golden Gate park. A kind of hippie liturgy, if one can believe newspaper reports. Apparently there were a number of genuine elements in the gathering. How, then, is that and other such gatherings really different from the church, that is, when the church is a swinging church?

The obvious differences seem to be on the level of personal morality, but I think that is only symptomatic. The answer is deeper. From what I can see, that so-called hippie culture is almost totally inward looking. The church is quite different.

To begin with, the 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. You don't begin by swallowing a sugar cube, you begin by looking back to something that happened long before your birth. "He is risen, he is not here."

Now no one, including the New Testament writers themselves, ever has successfully said esactly what happened on the third day after Good Friday. 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 is 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 are 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. So Paul says quite naturally, "for me to live is Christ."

The liturgy of the church also looks outward. The idea is not to gain experience for your own sake. The idea is to take your stand in a Divinely empowered movement which is giving new life to the whole world. I am told that the latest book by Marshal MacLuhan is called "The Medium is the Massage." Well, if the Easter message is a medium, it is not a massage. We do not use it to massage our own hearts. We use it to empower us to serve our neighbors. We look outward, away from ourselves. I think we can say (with a little stretching of our text) that this point is implicit in the words spoken to the women to tell the disciples that Christ was going before them into Galilee. In a word, you do not experience the Resurrected Christ by standing still. You come into communion with him when you are on the move, when you are going out to the world around you and looking toward its needs.

But not only do you move outward. The swinging liturgical experience of the church is also forward looking. "But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will

see him, as he told you." A characteristic mark of Christian existence is its openness to the future, a trust that all that is to come is in God's hands, and that ultimately the new life manifest in Christ will triumph everywhere.

Again, we do not have any blueprints of when or what the future will be like, either with a small "f," or with a large "F." But in virtue of what we know in the first Easter, and what we know of the new vitality now, we are bold enough to enter into the conviction expressed by that Old Testament imagry. "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) More specifically, we are entering into this conviction: that little streams of new life were building up in the history of the Old Testament people, and that those little streams suddenly came together into a mightly river of vitality in the Resurrection. Now we look forward to the time when that mighty river will flow into the ocean of the Divine Life itself, on that incomprehensible Day of days at the very End.(cf. I Cor. 15:28)

Our present liturgical experience, then, is not just a thing for itself. It looks back to a Divine inbreaking of new life. It looks outward to our brothers and neighbors. It looks forward to God's Future. It is precisely because our liturgical experience is not just a thing for itself, indeed, that it can be a genuinely swinging affair. The bold conviction is that he is risen, that he is going before us, and that we will see him. With this conviction we are not left turned in on ourselves, left to create our own experience, massage our own hearts, 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 can 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)