

## A Sermon for Easter

I know a man who passed through a period of great emotional distress. He could not sleep at night. He discovered that at three o'clock in the morning it is always the dark night of the soul, for the hours of darkness were appalling. Every night he kept watch for morning. He knew the exact place over the lake, and the exact time, at which the sun would appear. He both tested and confirmed the words of the Psalmist, "Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning." Another man who went through an even deeper depression found great comfort in his Christian faith. Indeed, the brightness of morning and the light of faith became not two things but one in his experience. The sun arising in the east became for him the symbol of hope and the promise that his distress would not last for ever. He found enormous hope in Browning's words:

If I stoop into a dark tremendous sea of cloud  
It is but for a time:  
I hold God's lamp close to my breast,  
Its splendor soon or late will pierce the gloom.  
I shall emerge one day.

When he emerged, it seemed fitting that he should describe our Christian faith as "the religion of the dawn."

Now already I have given you two phrases to remember for your strengthening: "The religion of the dawn" and "Joy in the morning." But is our faith the religion of the dawn? Does it bring joy in the morning? I believe that it is, and that it does, and for the four reasons I wish to mention. Here is the first:

### **I. It is the religion of the dawn because of the Dance of the Sons of the Morning.**

The image comes to us from The Book of Job, a book so full of bitter complaint against God that it doubts the value of life and wishes for death. But all is changed when God answers Job out of the whirlwind, asking him where he was when the world was created, "When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy." William Blake made twenty-one paintings of The Book of Job, and Vaughan Williams set them to music. In his Job-A Masque for Dancing, he gave a dance to the sons of God and called it The Saraband of the Sons of the Morning. The dance of the sons of the Morning is an affirmation that life is good, God's gracious gift to be joyously received, not lamented.

Dwelling on our afflictions, it is easy for us to forget that. We lose our sense of wonder in this world of wonders. G.K. Chesterton reminds us that Creation is not God's work, but God's play. He tells us that God made the world and tossed it into a sky already full of stars because he loves to multiply beauty. And not only does He multiply worlds; He multiplies buttercups and butterflies, apple blossom and cherries, because, like a little child, God delights to make over and over again the things that give Him joy by their loveliness. The sun rises, says Chesterton, not by anything so

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dull as natural law, but because every morning God delights to tell it, "Get up and do it again!" It may be that God is the only child left in the universe.

Now, if we can't smile at that we have lost the playfulness, the childlikeness that is the most creative part of us, for we have lost our sense of wonder. Do you ever wonder why there is something and not nothing? There did not need to be anything! We sometimes complain about the human condition and ask why God made the world the way it is. It seems never to occur to us that if the world were other than it is we might not be in it to make our complaint and ask our questions! We magnify our afflictions and dwell on our tribulations, forgetting that we can complain only because we possess the good gift of life.

Years ago Father D'Arcy wrote a book about the problem of evil. His thought engaged the ills that afflict us. But he began his book in an act of praise. He reminded his readers that all our troubles, distressing though they may be, are part of the gift of life which most of us, most of the time, believe to be good. We send birthday cards to our friends because we believe that the day they were born was a very good day indeed; and we are pleased when they send one to us. We may lament the human condition, but we continue to bring children into the world, with all its risks and hazards, because life is something to cherish, and we want to give it to those whom we shall love more than we love ourselves. And if this is true, then we must speak not only of the quantity of life, and the quality of life, but of the sanctity of life. It is God's splendid gift to us, received from His hand to be affirmed, treasured and delighted in.

Of course, not everyone agrees with this affirmation of life's goodness. Bertrand Russell, for example, wrote eloquently, movingly, of the dignity and worth of the human spirit, its courage and nobility; but his conclusion is that the whole enterprise is futile and empty. He advises us to build our life on a foundation of unshakable despair, for everything comes to nothing. This view is found even in the Bible. The author of Ecclesiastes, in a passage well known and loved, describes how beautiful everything is in its season. But behind the description is the conviction that all is vanity, a searching after wind, a mindless, hopeless cycle of recurring events without meaning or purpose. This sense of emptiness and futility is so pervasive that we should envy the dead rather than admire the living.

We all know, too, that people of all ages, but most sadly, many among the young, find the burden of this life insupportable. They don't want it, can't carry it, and so they end it. When they do, what do we think and feel about their action? Do we not feel an enormous sadness that their moment of despair should become their defining moment, annihilating all moments that were to come? And do we not wonder what might have been said or done to save them from despair and remove all that is at enmity with joy? When people take their own life, we immediately wonder what was wrong, for we believe life to be good.

This is what we affirm. Even though death comes to all, never to have lived would be the greatest loss. Think for a moment of all that we should have missed had we not been born. Imagine never to have fallen in love, or to have made love;

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never to have caressed a baby, or seen daffodils and crocuses and starlight and moonlight; never to have read a poem or heard a symphony; never to have discovered the high superfluosness of God, His extravagant kindness by which He makes "not even the weeds to multiply without blossom, nor the birds without music." Imagine never to have felt the rain on your cheek, or the wind in your hair; never to have splashed in puddles or tasted salt sea air. Think of never knowing God, or loving Jesus, or being moved to worship and adore His goodness! Listen to George Borrow:

Life is sweet, brother:  
Sweet, brother?  
There's night and day, brother,  
Both sweet things;  
Sun, moon and stars, brother,  
All sweet things;  
There's likewise the wind on the heath.  
Life is very sweet, brother;  
Who would wish to die?

Our religion is the religion of the dawn because of the dance of the Sons of the Morning; because when the world was made the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy.

### **II. Here is another reason: Our faith is the religion of the dawn, not only because of the Dance of the Sons of the Morning, but because of the Song of the Morning Star.**

The thought is from St. Luke's Gospel. Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, speaking of the coming of our Lord, rejoices that "the dayspring from on high hath visited us." The dayspring from on high is the morning star, the herald of the dawn. What Zechariah announces is that with the coming of Christ a new day has dawned, a day to be likened to the first day of creation. The Book of Genesis starts the story of creation with the words, "In the beginning God created . . ." And that is how St. John begins the Gospel story of the coming of Christ: "In the beginning was the Word . . ." The birth of Christ is God's work of creation over again. Creation is re-created. The Word that spoke in the beginning, bringing light out of darkness and order out of chaos, is the Word made flesh, the Light of the World shining in a darkness that has never been able to put it out.

It makes me think of the old black-and-white movies which, by means of an astonishing new process, may now be seen in color. The writers of the New Testament say something like that about the coming of Christ. A new day has dawned, and this old world of ours will never be the same:

Skies above are softer blue,  
Earth around is sweeter green;  
Something lives in every hue,  
Christless eyes have never seen.

And we know it because of the Song of the Morning Star. "The dayspring from on high hath visited us to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

We need to be made over again because we can be created only by being re-created. We sometimes put the making of us in the past tense as though God's work of creation is finished. But in what sense can we say that we were created? Surely it is closer to the truth of experience to say that we are being created all the time. The making of us is not finished. The work goes on. You will not be the same person leaving church this morning that you were when you came. Our bodies are renewed every day by the death of old cells and the birth of new ones; and our minds are renewed as we think new ideas, respond to new insights, repent old sins and embrace new opportunities. It was Meister Eckhart who wrote, "Only the hand that erases can write the true thing." We are being made over again in body and spirit as the work of re-creation goes on. The Apostle Paul puts it clearly, "When anyone is united to Christ, there is a new world; the old order has gone, and a new order has already begun."

This truth has special relevance to those parts of our life that have disappointed us. It is often said that we no longer have a sense of sin; that the guilt that was part of our self-awareness in days past is no longer evident. I believe that judgment to be mistaken. It is not that we lack a sense of sin but that we fail to recognize the particular form it takes. Have we lost our sense of the difference between what we are and what we might be? I think not. We bear the burden of that difference every day of our lives. Because of it, we seek either the priest or the psychiatrist to lift it, or to help us carry it.

That is one of the reasons why I think it such a great pity that the words "born again" are identified, not only with religion, but with a fundamentalist religion that is narrow and exclusive. The experience of being born again is universal and is not limited to evangelical faith. Our psychiatrist cannot help us if we have no sense of the person we should like to be. We are dissatisfied with ourselves because of our awareness that there is more to us than has yet been discovered or expressed. We know that always there is a child in us waiting to be born. We long for a new beginning, a fresh start. Creation is not enough. Only our re-creation will do.

I read not long ago of a psychiatrist who asked a patient who had attempted to take his own life, "Now what part of you did you want to kill?" We all have parts of us that we'd like to kill, and other parts we should like to see strengthened and dominant. And all of this, in all of us, is the work of that Creator Spirit who brooded over chaos before the world was brought into being, and who broods still over the confusion of our lives, seeking to love us into newness of life and fullness of being.

We see it happening in the words and ministry of Jesus. Imagine what His re-creating words must have meant to the disciples after the failure of understanding and courage that marked their betrayal and desertion of Him at the time of His arrest, trial, and crucifixion! Good Friday seemed to have brought everything to an end; it was a full stop, with nothing following. And then to those who had denied and

deserted Him, there came His words that He would see them in Galilee. Galilee! Where it had all started, and where it was to begin again. It wasn't over. The dark night had given way to a new morning, and the religion of the dawn was the gift of hope.

And it is not over for you, or for me, whatever we have done. Jesus was much less interested in where people were coming from and in what they had done, than in where they were going and in what they might become. For Him, direction was far more important than position, and so He says to us, "I'll see you in Galilee!" and gives us the gift of hope and the promise of a new day. Ours is the religion of the dawn because, as Dr. Fosdick used to say, "While we ought not to be the way we are, no man need stay the way he is." Our faith is the religion of the dawn because the providence of God has created us, and the mercy of God re-makes us closer to His heart's desire. It is not only creation that is created; as the magnificent Russian anthem declares, "Salvation is Created!"

### **III. That brings me to the third reason why our religion is the religion of the dawn: It is that before the sun was up, the Son had risen.**

This play on words has always gone on at Easter, bringing together the rising of the sun, and the rising of the Son. George Herbert expresses it beautifully in a poem for Easter, gloriously set to music by Vaughan Williams in his *Five Mystical Songs*:

I got me flowers to strew Thy way;  
I got me boughs off many a tree;  
But Thou wast up by break of day,  
And brought'st Thy sweets along with Thee.  
The sun arising in the East  
Though he give light, and the East perfume.  
If they should offer to contest  
With Thy arising, they presume.

The greater rising is not the sun which rises in the Eastern sky and sinks in the West, but the Son who rises once and never sets.

That was the experience of the women on the first Easter morning. They came to the garden tomb in darkness and found Him striding to meet them, radiant with resurrection light. They had been worried, wondering who would roll away the stone from the tomb in which they had laid Him. But they discovered that the stone, great as it was, had already been rolled back and that, instead of being able to offer only their poor, heartbroken, last ministrations of love, they were themselves "surprised by joy."

It is an enduring truth of faith. Bernard of Clairvaux used to say that however early in the morning we come to the place of prayer, we find Christ already present and waiting to meet us. God's action is always first; indeed, our coming to Him is but our answer to His call. To use an old word, God's grace is prevenient grace. Every part of our religious experience is but our response to One who has loved us into loving, smiled us into smiling, forgiven us into repentance, and found us before we knew we were lost.

That is the difference between Sabbath and Sunday, and why Christians do not keep the Sabbath but celebrate Sunday, the Lord's day. The Sabbath is the seventh day of the week. Coming when it does, it seems to tell us that we have six days in which to put our house in order so that we can come to God's house on the seventh day, bringing our righteousness with us: "Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord, and who shall stand in His holy place?" Why, "he that hath clean hands and a pure heart, who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully." But, of course, our house never is in order. If we think it is, we deceive ourselves. If the condition of our acceptance by God is clean hands and a pure heart, then I am unacceptable. The words disqualify me, for I know my heart well enough to know that it is not pure and that the soul's worst vanity is to believe that it is.

And then, just when the whole matter has become unmanageable, our Lord comes to meet us. Not on the seventh day, but on the first; before we are ready for Him; when we have no claim but our emptiness, and nothing to offer but our need. We come to the garden wondering how we are to move the stone only to discover that it has been rolled away already and that what we had no hope of achieving is graciously bestowed.

The prevenience of God's grace is the truth of the gospel. It tells us that we are not loved because we are good, but are good because we are loved. It declares that God's good will is not something that is ours at the end when we have earned it, but is ours at the beginning, from His sheer goodness. It affirms that we are accepted not because we are acceptable, but because we are loved; not because we have a claim but because His grace claims us. Why do we go on trying to earn what is freely given and need only be received?

And this prior action of grace transforms every demand of faith. The demands are many, and heavy, and appear not only burdensome but impossible. Love God! Love your neighbor! Have faith! Repent! Believe! How are we to do these things which are so easy to demand, but so hard to deliver? And once more on the edge of despair, we find that what He asks, He gives; and what He requires, He bestows; and what He demands He accomplishes in us. St. Augustine's prayer expresses it perfectly: "Demand what Thou wilt, but first give me that which Thou dost demand."

The truth of this prevenient grace is perfectly declared in the baptism of infants, so often celebrated at Easter. The objection some have to the baptism of children, that little babies do not have faith and cannot be expected to repent, seems to me to declare the wonder of grace. It tells us that when we are helpless, with neither repentance, nor faith, nor good works to offer; before we have acquired one item of merit, God claims us as His own. Before the sun is up, the Son has risen.

**IV. That brings us to the last reason why our faith is properly described as the religion of the dawn: It is because "There was evening and there was morning, one day."**

That sentence is from The Book of Genesis. Did you notice the strangeness of it? If we had written the words we should have reversed the order of evening and

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morning. We should have said that there was morning and there was evening, one day. But that is not what The Book of Genesis says. It tells us, "There was evening and there was morning, one day." Why this strange order when we know that morning wears to evening as the hours go by? It is because the author of Genesis wants us to know that God's last word is always morning. Not evening, but morning. And if it is, then it means that life is eternal. It declares that God made darkness and light, but especially light. "There was evening and there was morning, one day."

Well, that expresses the Easter experience, doesn't it? It was the experience of the disciples who watched night descend on the first Good Friday; not only on the events of the day, but on their hopes and dreams. On that awful day everything they had loved and believed in and hoped for went down with the declining sun. And then they discovered that God's last word is not an evening word but a morning word; not darkness and death but light and life; not the cry of dereliction but the music of God's laughter.

It is our tendency, and a very natural one, to think of our death as a sunset. Tennyson did, most beautifully:

Sunset and evening star  
And one clear call to me. . .  
Twilight and evening bell, and  
After that the dark. . .

But Easter faith declares that the hour of our death is the brightest morning of our life. "They are all gone into the world of light" cries Henry Vaughan, speaking of our beloved dead, "I see them walking in an air of glory."

Just the other day I read of an epitaph which I think must be the most beautiful epitaph ever written: "When we saw the beauty of his sunset we said, 'It will be a lovely day tomorrow.' " Clement of Alexandria expressed it simply and beautifully, "Christ has made all our sunsets into dawns."

Can there by any day but this,  
Though many suns to shine endeavor?  
We count three hundred, but we miss!  
There is but one, and that one ever.