

Easter: The End of Lent

Easter marks the end of what the Church calls "Holy Week." On Good Friday the crucifixion of Christ is solemnly remembered. On that day, Christians remember that God the Father laid their sins on Jesus Christ His Son and, for their sake, abandoned Him to the shame and slaughter of the cross (Isaiah 53:5). Easter Sunday celebrates the empty cross – a day of exultation! Christians are overcome with joy. Through His resurrection, Christ released the world from its bondage and terror. Death has been overcome! Christians celebrate hope!

For anyone who watches a loved one die, death is a painful and disturbing reality. What happens at death? We wonder. We query. There is scarcely a subject that holds such a keen and universal interest for us as the life beyond the grave. And it is not merely an academic question, but one that presses for an answer. Yet we have the unmistakable tendency to deny our own death. Freud observed that one's own death is beyond imagining: "at bottom, nobody believes in his own death." Such a man was film magnate, Sam Goldwyn. When he was told that he could not take anything with him when he had to die, he retorted, "Then I am not going." But the Hollywood tycoon died nonetheless, in 1974. Goldwyn's view of death is so typical in our modern times. We all seem to be convinced of our own immortality. Yet we all have to die. There are no exceptions. Modern technology may prolong human life and provide drugs to ease its departure, but death remains the last enemy.

Job, of ancient times, asked, "If a man dies, will he live again?" Ultimately it is a vital question for each one of us. What if death had the last word? What hope would we have? The atheist British philosopher, mathematician, and Nobel Prize winner, Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), spent most of his life in giving advice, counsel, and exhortations to mankind. He wrote sixty-eight books, plus numerous newspaper and magazine articles, on every conceivable subject, ranging from *The Use of Lipstick* to *Wife-Beating*. Yet, this brilliant man had no hope to offer to anyone. He affirmed that his life was built on a foundation of unyielding despair. Shortly before his death, he said, "There is darkness without, and when I die there will be darkness within. There is no splendour, no vastness anywhere, only triviality for a moment, and then nothing." For Russell death was the last curtain call.

Does death end all? Throughout history, people have expressed in various ways their faith in a life hereafter. There is a natural longing for a continued existence. The belief in immortality is ages-old and worldwide. The ancient Egyptian Pharaohs stashed their wealth in great pyramids, believing that they would be able to enjoy it all in the next life. Multitudes adhere to the widespread belief in reincarnation; the soul journeying from one form of existence to another until it finally reaches liberation – the oneness with the Divine. Others put great stress on reported experiences of the dying, the weightless floating and the view of a death scene. Dr. Kubler-Ross declares that these "view of the beyond" experiences confirm what we have been taught for many years – that there is life after death. And all major religions believe in an afterlife of one sort or another. All people have a sense of eternity in their hearts. But this innate longing for life beyond the

grave does not prove immortality. However, it does reveal the need to know the truth about life and death. Only the truth can give us hope and security. Jesus alone can give the assurance that life has overcome death. He said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die" (John 11:25). On this hope the early Christians staked their lives. They were certain that the grave could not hold Jesus. As He broke the bonds of death, so will all who believe in Him overcome death. Death is no longer a terror for Christians. Its sting has been removed. As Christ lives, so shall we live. The grave does not block our progress. It is a thoroughfare to a new life.

One of the great witnesses of the reality of Christ's physical resurrection was Saul of Tarsus, who, volunteering to persecute and slaughter Christians, was on the way to Damascus to fulfill his mission. But he never reached his intended destination. He was felled by a blinding light and heard the voice of the raised Christ. This dramatic meeting altered the course of his life. He became a changed man; from a persecutor of the Christian faith, he became its greatest missionary. In the power of the raised Christ, he stood before leaders and princes. Fearing no one, he said, "Let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus" (Gal. 6:17). And he even told the Corinthians, "And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith" (1 Cor. 15:14). For Paul, the resurrection was neither myth nor fable, it was a reality. He had seen and heard Christ. This fact gave him a purpose for this life and hope for the life to come. He was convinced that whatever he did for the Lord on earth would have eternal consequences. He knew that his labour in the Lord would not be in vain (1 Cor. 15:15). Billy Graham, on one occasion, told of a meeting he had with German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer (1876-1967), co-founder of the Christian Democratic Union and one time mayor of Cologne. During the conversation Adenauer looked the evangelist in the eye and asked, "Mr. Graham, do you believe in the resurrection from the dead?" Graham, somewhat surprised by the pointedness of the question replied, "Of course I do." To that confessional response Adenauer said, "Mr. Graham, outside of the resurrection of Jesus, I do not know of any other hope for this world." How true! On this fact, our faith and hope are based. This Easter hope gives us courage to go on. Where there is no answer for death, hopelessness will eventually have the last word. Our hope comes from beyond the boundaries of this life. Jesus died and rose again to open a new future for us in the midst of a violent and dying world. The goal of our lives is to serve the risen Saviour and to follow in His footsteps. When we stand at the graveside of a Christian, we "do not grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him" (1 Thess. 4:13f.). May all of you have a blessed and joyful Easter!

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