

AN EASTER HOMILY BY RICHARD B. TUDOR

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The Easter Moment!

Writing a sermon during the Easter Season is not as easy as you might think! Some years ago - a few days before the celebration of Easter - my wife asked me if I had finished my Easter sermon. I replied, "No, I'm still thinking about it." She said, "What's the problem? You say the same thing every year." Now, defensively, I will say that in some ways that's true and in some ways, it's not true." One of the difficult Easter preaching problems is: how many new & different ways can you say, "The Lord is risen!" That is the Easter message; it doesn't change.

Beginning on Easter Sunday and continuing through the long Easter Season, a reading from the Acts of the Apostles is read in place of the Old Testament lesson. These readings often feature the apostle Peter preaching a sermon about Jesus. And Peter's sermons are all pretty much the same. He tells the people that, he was a witness to the ministry of a man named Jesus whom God sent into the world to do good. He would then go on to say, "You [The people] put this Jesus to death by crucifying him; but God raised him from the dead and he appeared to us who were chosen by God as witnesses..." We hear in the Acts reading for today that, "With great power, the apostles gave their testimony to the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus." This is the Easter message originally preached by Peter and the other followers of Jesus.

Peter got traction with his message because he was known as a companion of Jesus and he could say to great effect that he had seen Jesus after he was raised from the dead. Peter was a credible witness! He was a contemporary of Jesus. Peter was able in his time to take the Easter message and proclaim it in such a powerful, convincing way that people's lives were changed. They had what I am going to call: "The Easter Moment!" They absorbed Peter's proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus deeply into their lives, literally into their souls, and it changed their lives forever. They inwardly "knew" it to be true! That was then and this is now.

Today we are the witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus roughly 2,000 years after his death. We are definitely not eye witnesses. We are also living in a much different kind of society than Jesus and Peter. Ours is a secular society which does not easily accept stories of miracles and people being raised from the dead. For 1500 years in the life of the Church, reason was subordinate to revelation. That is certainly not true now. Today, reason rules!

My point is this! If someone asks you whether or not you believe in the resurrection of Jesus or whether you believe in an afterlife, how do you answer? Perhaps like Thomas: "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, I will not believe." That is the practical answer. Really, what would you say to them to them? Let's take the statement made by Jesus known popularly as John 3:16: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.* Can you explain that important

statement in such powerful secular terms that people will understand it and take into their souls? Can you help them, literally, to see the crucified and risen Jesus?

I think that everyone wonders about Jesus' promise to us of eternal life or an afterlife, as some call it. Few people seem to have the nerve to speak up and ask about it. Fewer people have the ability to formulate an answer. I know someone who does.

I am a fan of Norman Vincent Peale, author of "The Power of Positive Thinking." Years ago, he was an honored guest at a luncheon in London, England. His host, an individual named Lord Thompson, confronted him with the following statement in front of all the guests there.

"Dr. Peale, I would like to propound a question and I would appreciate a straightforward yes or no answer. You see, I am becoming an old man, and one of these days I'm going to die. Tell me, is there an afterlife or not?" The room became silent. Here is Dr. Peale's reply.

"Well, Lord Thompson," he said, "I am no great scholar, only a preacher, but I am a committed Christian and believe in the promises written in the Holy Bible. But even beyond the Biblical, is the evidence of intelligence and common sense." He then went on to tell Lord Thompson and the others a parable about a baby in the prenatal state in its mother's womb.

"Suppose," he said, "that someone might come to this unborn baby and say, "You cannot stay here very long. In a few months you will be born, or as you might think of it, die out of your present state."

The baby might stubbornly object. "I don't want to leave here. I'm comfortable, well-cared for; I'm warm, loved and happy. I don't want to be what you call born, or what I call, die out of this place.

But in the normal course of events, he is born. He does die out of his present life. And what does he find? He feels beneath him strong, loving arms. He looks up into a beautiful face, tender with love, the face of his mother.

The years pass: Childhood, youth with all of its excitement and romance, adulthood. He marries and has children of his own. The years pass quickly. The joy and wonder of life are his.

Then he becomes an old man. His health is failing. Someone might come to him and say, "You cannot stay here any longer. You are going to die, or, as we might call it, be born out of this place into another."

And again, he might object. "But I don't want to die. I like it here. I have my loved ones, my family. I like springtime and summer and fall and even winter. I love this life. I don't want to leave it. I don't want to die.

But there comes a time when in the natural course of things, he does die. What happens then? Is God the creator suddenly going to change his nature? Can we not assume that he will feel strong, loving arms beneath him, and once again look up into a strong beautiful face, more lovely than the first face he saw so long ago?

Won't he soon be exclaiming, "This is wonderful. I love this new life. I want to remain here forever! Dr. Peale looked at Lord Thompson and asked, "Doesn't this make sense?" A deep silence hung over the room. Some men coughed and others brushed tears from their eyes. Lord Thompson looked at Dr. Peale for a long moment and then he sighed. "It does indeed make sense," he said. "I will never forget that parable. It has helped me by answering a question that has haunted me for years." Lord Thompson had had his Easter moment!

Speaking for all of us, I will echo Lord Thompson, "Yes, it does make sense! And it is my hope that you all will never forget that parable, and that it will help you all to believe in the promise made by God through the power of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Here is the promise: "Jesus said, 'Truly, truly I say to you, he who hears my voice and believes him who sent me has eternal life. There is the promise of strong, loving arms for us all.

Amen