

“THE CHRIST OF THE LONG TOMORROW”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

1 Cor. 15:35-58

For the past sixteen weeks we have been engaged in a somewhat searching study of The Greatest Life Ever Lived. We have traced the footprints of the master from the time he was first spoken of by the ancient prophets, through the silent years of preparation, along the pathway which led to the river Jordan where he was baptized by John, up into the wilderness where on the mount of temptation he overcame evil after a duel with the devil, and then out onto the stage of human events where he moved about bringing sight to the blind, sound to the deaf, healing to the halt, wholeness and hope to the broken-hearted.

For me, personally, this has been a most provocative and profitable series. Having completed this study of the greatest life ever lived, I cannot help but agree with Charles Lamb when he suggests that, if all the illustrious men of all the ages were gathered together in one room, and Shakespeare were to come into their midst, they would rise to do him honor. If Jesus Christ should come into their august company, they would kneel before him in humble adoration.

The world has been blessed with many great and good men, but it has never known one quite so great or quite so good as Jesus.

All other greatness has been marred by littleness.

All other wisdom has been weakened by folly.

All other goodness has been tainted by imperfection.

Jesus Christ is the one man whom ever lived of who it can be said, “He is altogether lovely.” All other men have but a fragmentary fineness, but that of Jesus is complete. It is perfect. It is undefiled.

And yet, having paid this tribute to the greatest life ever lived, I must go on to say that if it were not for the event which we celebrate today, the Lord Jesus Christ would be little, if any, more

important than the other great teachers, preachers and healers who have graced the world with their presence.

It is the resurrection that makes Jesus unique.

It is the resurrection that transformed him from a martyr into a Savior, from a mere way-shower into the Way, from an example of good living into the source and substance of life itself.

It is the resurrection that added credence to his words,

“I have come that you might have life and that more abundant (and eternal).”

It is the resurrection that gives us confidence in his capacity to lead us through that dark valley of shadow called death.

It is the resurrection that adds substance, stability and sureness to our faith and makes us willing to own him as our Lord when he says,

“Come! *Follow me!*”

A few months ago Ricky Anundsen, one of my special young friends, sent me a story about a Baptist minister who, while attending a convention in Philadelphia, stopped a newsboy and inquired the way to the post office.

The lad thought a moment and said,

“Down this street two blocks and turn to the right.”

The minister thanked him and then said,

“You seem like a bright little fellow. Do you know who I am?”

“Nope!” said the newsy.

“Well,” said the preacher, “I’m the Baptist minister who is holding the revival meeting over at the tabernacle. If you’ll come to my meeting tonight I’ll show you the way to heaven.”

“Ah, go on!” answered the youngster, “you don’t even know the way to the post office.”

Underneath the lad’s layer of humor there is a very important insight. When it comes to matters of the soul, the world is looking for a sense of sureness. There can be no “if’s, and’s or but’s” about so serious a subject as this. Our eternal destiny lies in the balance. We want to know beyond any shadow of doubt that the One we own as Lord, whomever he be, has the power to see us through. And by that, I mean *all* the way through!

I am here this morning to say that if it were not for the resurrection, Jesus of Nazareth would possess no more authority, or power, than any of the other great and good men whose grave stones read,

“Born in the year so and so. Died in the year such and such.” *Period.!*

But thanks be to God, there is no period on the gravestone of Jesus. He lives. The stone has been rolled away. The grave is empty. For as the dawn of that first Easter morn thrust its rosy fingers into the fast fading night, he arose! The Christ of the Cross of Calvary, became “The Christ of the Long Tomorrow.”

“The head that once was crowned with thorns
Is crowned with glory now.
A royal diadem adorns
The mighty victor’s brow.

The highest place that heaven affords
Is his, is his by right.
The King of Kings and Lord of Lords
And heaven’s eternal light.”

Thomas Kelley

I have never been terribly taken with the so-called proofs of the resurrection. Or the arguments for immortality. Not because these proofs are unimportant. They are very important. However,

the question of *real* consequence is not, is there life after death? But what *kind* of life after death?

The really big news about Easter is not the assurance that life *continues*, but, as Dr. William Adams Brown once said, “The revelation of the *kind* of life *worthy* to be continued.”

No one can prove immortality in the demonstrable sense. Even Jesus didn’t attempt to prove it. He simply illustrated it by the kind of life he lived and the kind of death he died. Jesus didn’t say eternal life begins as a post-mortem experience. Rather, he indicated that eternal life begins here and now, when folks consciously and deliberately accept him as their Lord and Savior.

What we basically need then, if Easter is to have real meaning for us, is not a new argument for immortality, but a fresh and vital sense of what it means to have immortality *here and now*. And that does not depend upon someone producing proofs of the permanence of personality. It depends, rather, upon our willingness to put to the test of conduct, a manner of living for which no absolute proof can be found.

“Faith is not mere belief in a piece of evidence, faith is living in the absence of that evidence, *as if it were true!*”

The empowering and saving sense of immortality cannot be had by seeking proofs that man shall live again, but by living the kind of life, in Christ, that deserves to go on after death.

Having said I’ve never been terribly taken by the so-called arguments for immortality, I would like to do an about-face, and in the remaining moments available this morning, direct our thoughts down the avenue of those arguments, as a kind of concession to an area of interest that is very much in the atmosphere these days.

It hasn’t been many months since, for the first time, man succeeded in getting out of this world on his own steam. The awesome specter of man-made moons beeping their way through the sky has revived a sense of wonder and concern about what lies beyond. In fact, there are some who now wonder if science has not pretty well debunked the idea of an after-life.

Not so according to Werner Von Braun, the brilliant physicist who leads our satellite program.

Dr. Von Braun actually says,

“Science has a real surprise for the skeptics. Science, for instance, tells us that nothing in nature, not even the tiniest particle, can disappear without a trace.

Think about that for a moment. Once you do, your thoughts about life will never be the same. Science has found that nature does not know extinction. All it knows is transformation!

“Now, if God applies this fundamental principle to the most minute and insignificant parts of his universe, doesn’t it make sense to assume that he applies it also to the masterpiece of his creation, the human soul? I think it does. And everything science has taught me, and continues to teach me, strengthens my belief in the continuity of our spiritual existence after death. *Nothing disappears without a trace.*”

Some of you may be familiar with the experience Cecil B. De Mille relates, and which he says gave him not only an abiding faith in immortality, but a very real sense of present immortality. Several years ago Mr. De Mille was commissioned to write a play for David Belasco, and he went to Maine where he would be free of distraction to do his work.

“One day as I was lying in a canoe, very close to shore, reading a book, a big, black beetle came out of the water, crawled up on the gun’l of the boat and sat there blinking at me.

“As he sat there blinking, I noticed a score of his relations grubbing in the bottom of the lake. I felt rather sorry for them, those lowly creatures that might never know any other world except gloom and mud and water.

“Under the heat of the sun, the beetle on the canoe proceeded to die. Then

a strange thing happened. His glistening black shell cracked all the way down the back. Out of it came a shapeless mass, whose hideousness was transformed into a beautiful, brilliantly colored life.

“As I watched with fascination, out of the mass there gradually unfolded four iridescent wings from which the sunlight flashed a thousand colors. The wings spread wide, as if in worship of the sun, and a blue-green body took shape.

“Before my very eyes had occurred a metamorphosis, the transformation into another world, of a hideous beetle into a gorgeous dragon-fly which started dipping and soaring over the water. But the body it had left behind still clung to the gun’l of my canoe.

“While the dragon-fly happily explored its wonderful new world, darting in an instant over a space that a short time before would have taken it months to crawl, the other beetles still plodded and lumbered below in the mire. And I wondered if they were conscious of the glorious creature flitting over their heads, or if the dragon-fly which so recently had been one of them could look down and see and understand its fellow beetles crawling along the oozy bottom of the lake.

“I had witnessed what seemed to be a miracle. Out of the mud had come a beautiful new life, and the thought came to me that if the creator works such wonders with the lowliest of creatures, what must be in store for the human spirit!”

Well, the Bible and the Christian faith emphatically declare that the goal of the soul is nothing less than that of a spiritual dragon-fly. That purpose of our life in this oozy lake-bottom of a world is to achieve that goal. That while this shell of our beetle-like existence on earth is transient and impermanent, the personality which inhabits it is eternal. For as Paul so powerfully states,

“Though our outer man (the body) perish, yet the inward man (our spirit) is renewed day by day.

“(For) we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle be dissolved we have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”

There is something more out there beyond this life’s horizon. Death is not the end. It need not be a tragedy. Death can be a triumph when, through “The Christ of the Long Tomorrow,” we move into that place he has prepared for those who are his own.

Death As Birth

A number of thoughtful people have likened the experience of death, which to some is a frightening thing, to the process of birth. To an unborn child, the process of birth must seem like death. How, for instance, could she ever comprehend what it’s like outside the birth canal? How utterly different it is from that snug, secure world inside her mother’s womb. And, if that unborn child is possessed with imagination, the prospect of birth must seem to like a kind of death as she is wrenched violently away from the familiar conditions which have sustained her.

Don’t you suppose *that’s* why God took such pains to prepare a place for her? Don’t you think *that’s* why God saw to it the first thing a newborn child becomes aware of is that “someone has anticipated her coming.” That there are strong arms to sustain her, and bright eyes full of love and tenderness to watch over her.

And don’t you suppose God’s forethought was involved in the fact that, not only does a baby arrive in a place prepared for her, but she arrives in a place for which she has been being prepared. Long before she had any need of them, God had seen to it that this unborn baby was developing eyes for sights she had never seen. Ears for sounds she had never heard. Lungs for air she had never breathed. Hands for tasks she had never done. Feet for paths she had never trod. In ways

she could not possibly understand until she actually arrived on the scene, God had been preparing *her* for a place which, in turn, had been prepared *for* her.

Does it not follow then, that if God so carefully guards our entry into *this* world, he will also safely guard and guide our entry into the next?

“We come into this world all helpless and bare,
We go through this world in struggle and care,
We go out of this world, God only knows where,
But if he lives in us here, we shall live with him there.”

“Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he shall appear, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 Jn. 3:2).

In the power of this faith you can go out to live with courage, stability, and poise, with the creative joy and sustaining hope of those who *know* they belong to The Christ of The long Tomorrow. The risen and reigning Lord who says, “Because I live, you shall live also!”

Do you believe it? You can’t prove it. But do you believe it? Believe it enough to start living it? Right now? As if it *were* true? If so, *you shall prove it!*