

HAVE YOU BEEN FITTED FOR EASTER?

Dr. John Allan Lavender Job 14:1, 2, 7, 14a

During the holocaust of the last Great War, a young pilot was ordered to leave with his squadron on a very dangerous mission. Before climbing into the cockpit of his plane, he called to the chaplain standing nearby. The padre came over and the young pilot, looking him square in the eyes, said:

“Tell me, man to man. When we die do we go on living? Or,” and the young man struck a match, held it up for a moment and then, blowing it out, finished his sentence, “is this all there is to it?”

People have always asked that question. Even Job anxiously voiced it millennia ago when he wrote:

“If a man die, shall he live again?”

In one way or another the question of life after death has plagued the minds of people from the beginning of time, and they have eagerly lent willing ears to anyone they felt might have the answer.

My good friend, Dr. Ron Meredith, pastor of the great First Methodist Church of Wichita, Kansas, tells how one day he picked up a book from a shelf in his library. It was by Charles Duell Kean entitled, Making Sense Out of Life. Dr. Meredith says:

“I thought if he could do that, he could surely tell me whether or not I am immortal. I read the first chapter on immortality and then, turning the page, discovered that the printing press had gone haywire, and had superimposed three pages on that second page. It was a meaningless blur!”

There is something parabolic about Dr. Meredith’s experience for, as he goes on to say,

“So often people look with mortal eyes to see beyond

the sunset and find only a blur. They probe for the deepest of meanings and all they have to show for their yearning is a sense of empty frustration. What they really need is a word from God!"

That's exactly what the disciples needed that first Christian morning 2000 years ago. A word from God. A poet has described the emotions they must have felt:

"Gray clouds against a leaden sky
Unlit by any flow of dawn.
Two weeping women hasten by
Whose love still lives tho' hope is gone.

"The day breaks dull and red without
A cheering ray for those who grieve.
Two men come running, who dare not doubt
The thing they dare not yet believe."

And why shouldn't they have doubted? They had invested their whole future in Jesus Christ!. They had banked upon His words:

"I am the Way, the Truth and the *Life*."

They had faithfully believed that His kingdom was at hand.

And then, after three long years of faithful service and hopeful anticipation, their dreams were shattered like bits of broken glass. Christ was dead. Really, truly, utterly dead. All they had to show for their years of yearning was a heart full of emptiness.

And then something happened! With the coming of that first Easter morn, their frustration was gone.

Their despair was turned to gladness.

Their fear was turned to faith.

Something happened that changed the course of history and injected into the bloodstream of humanity the vitality of a great hope.

When one really sees what happened to those who experienced that first Easter morning, and what has happened to people ever since who have really discovered the Easter secret, one is forced to proclaim

“Here is what I’m looking for. They have found what
I must find!”

Well, what *did* happen? What discovery *did* the disciples make that so changed their lives? What was it that transformed them from a motley group of quaking cowards into a marching legion of courageous conquerors?

God is Still in the Field

For one thing, *God* spoke that first Easter morning and I think the first thing He said was:

“Don’t be afraid. Don’t be bewildered. I still have my
hand upon the rudder of this world.”

The Roman rulers and ruthless religionists had locked Christ in a tomb. They had rolled a stone across the opening and by so doing had thought they had buried Him and all his influence. But it wasn’t that easy. God was at work in the field bringing good out of evil.

And today you and I gather within the shadow of an open tomb—our hearts aglow with light divine—for we have learned to put out faith in God and not in stones.

Through the glory of Easter, God is saying to everyone:

“If you have faith enough to believe that I know how
to run this world which I have made, and will commit
yourself to me, then I will see you through.”

There is so much bewilderment, so much mystery about life as we know it. Each day we come face to face with crises that cause us to reel with the power of their impact. Occasionally we try to bull our way through alone only to find that we have made more problems than we have solved.

But God is saying to us this morning:

“I am still in the field. I have not abandoned you.
Have faith in Me for all things work together for good
to them that trust in Me. If you don’t believe it, then
look at the empty tomb.”

The Cross Is Not The End

Then, I think God also said:

“The cross was not the end for Jesus and death need
not be the end for you.”

I love that glorious piece of free verse by James Weldon Johnson:

“Go down death.”

As a child living in the south land, he had heard Negro preachers describe the Christian hope. He says his poem was suggested by vague memories of that inspired preaching. It goes like this:

“Weep not, weep not,
She is not dead;
She is resting in the bosom of Jesus.
Heart-broken husband, weep no more;

Grief-stricken son, weep no more;
Left-lonesome daughter, weep no more;
She’s only just gone home.

“Day before yesterday morning,

God was looking down from His great, high heaven.
Looking down on all his children,
And his eye fell on sister Caroline
Tossing on her bed of pain.
And God's great big heart was touched by pity,
With the everlasting pity.

“And God sat back on His throne,
And He commanded that tall, bright angel
Standing at His right hand:
Call me death!

“And that tall, bright angel cried in a voice
That broke like a clap of thunder:
‘Call death! Call death!’
And the echo sounded down the streets of heaven
‘Till it reached away back to that shadowy place
Where death waits with his pale, white horses.

“And death heard the summons,
And he leaped on his fastest horse,
Pale as a sheet in the moonlight.
Up the golden street death galloped,
And the hooves of his horse struck fire from the gold,
But they didn't make no sound.
Up death rode to the Great White Throne,
And waited for God's command.

“And God said: ‘Go down, death, go down,

Go down to Savannah, Georgia,
Down to Yamacraw,
And find sister Caroline.
She's borne the burden and the heat of the day,
She's labored long in my vineyard,
And she's tired—
She's weary—
Go down, death, and fetch her home to me.'

"And death didn't say a word,
But he loosed the reins on his pale, white horse,
And he clamped the spurs to his bloodless sides,
And out and down he rode.
Through heaven's pearly gates,
Past sun and moon and stars;
On death rode,
And the foam from his horse was like a comet in the sky;
On death rode,
Leaving the lightening's flash behind;
Straight on down he came.

"While we were watching 'round her bed,
She turned her eyes and looked away,
She saw what we couldn't see;
She saw old death. She saw old death
Coming like a falling star.
But death didn't frighten sister Caroline;
He looked to her like a welcome friend.
And she whispered to us; 'I'm going home,'

And she smiled and closed her eyes.

“And death took her up like a baby,
And she lay in his icy arms,
And she didn’t feel no chill.
And death began to ride again—
Up beyond the evening star,
Out beyond the morning star,
Into the glittering light of Glory,
On to the Great White Throne.
And there he laid sister Caroline
On the loving breast of Jesus.

“And Jesus took his own hand and wiped away her tears,
And he smoothed the furrows from her face,
And the angels sang a little song,
And Jesus rocked her in his arms,
And kept a-saying:
‘Take your rest,
Take your rest, take your rest.’

“Weep not, weep not,
She is not dead;
She’s resting in the bosom of Jesus.”

But suppose she had not known Jesus? *That’s* what concerns me this morning. What of those who don’t know the good news. Those who don’t know Jesus. Those who have not been fitted for Easter?

You see, it’s Jesus who makes the difference!

If we are told we are to live forever and are still left without the knowledge that we will spend forever with *God*—then eternity stretches before us like a boundless desert—a perpetual and desolate orphanage.

It's the promise of a Divine Companionship that allows us to say of Easter:

“This is the day which the Lord hath made. Let us
rejoice and be glad in it.”

The real question is not “will a man live again?” The proofs of immortality—of life beyond the grave—are legion. They are so plain that even he who runs may read.

The real question is what kind of life lies beyond the grave. Where? And with Whom? And the answer which Jesus gives to that most important question in all eternity is: *you can be with me!*

“...I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again
and will take you to myself, that *where I am there you
may be also*” (John 14:3).

There is no hope of resurrection unless first you walk the road that leads to Calvary. It is only *then*—and *there*—that you are fitted for Easter.

Heaven is a prepared place for prepared people. It is knowing Jesus that makes the difference. *Without* Him you are nothing but a creature of time. *With* Him you are a citizen of eternity.

There is a story about King Edward VII who was spending a holiday in his country castle. Rather late one evening, he went strolling with his queen. As they walked along a country road, lit only by the light of the moon, the queen fell and sprained her ankle. King Edward helped her to her feet and, clinging to his arm, she hobbled along until they came to a small cottage. It wasn't late, but country folk retire early, and so the King pounded on the door and called out:

“I am the King. It is Edward. Let me in.”

From inside the cottage came the answer,

“Be off with you. None of your tricks on a poor honest man trying to get his sleep.”

The king pounded again, calling out:

“*I am* the king. *It is* Edward. Let me in.”

The patience of the man on the other side of the still unopened door grew thin and he said:

“I’ll teach you to play tricks on a man in the middle of the night,”

and he flung the door open and saw that, in very truth, it was the king. He fell on his knees and begged forgiveness, but Edward said simply,

“Arise my son. Go summon aid.”

You can imagine the flurry of excitement as the young man helped the queen to a chair and his wife quickly put a kettle of water on the fire so she could bathe her discolored and painful ankle.

But here is the sequel and the real point of the story. During the years that followed, as the cottager and his wife grew old, whenever a guest came to visit, before the evening was done, his wife knew he would tell the story of how the king had visited his humble home. As he described the wonderful events which took place that night, he would sit in the rude rocker looking at the very spot on the carpet where the king had stood. As he came to the end of the story, he would always add the same solemn words,

“And to think, I almost did not let him in.”

This morning the King of Kings is knocking at the door of your heart begging for admission. Will you let Him in? The promise of scripture is that

“As many as received Him to them gave He the right to be called the children of God? And they are passed from death unto life everlasting.”

The future belongs to those who prepare for it. The resurrection is for those who first will walk the

road to Calvary. Have You Been Fitted For Easter? It is Christ who makes the difference. Receive Him now and

be saved from sin,

ransomed from ruin, and

delivered from death!