House Church

Old Testament: Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4;

New Testament: Matthew 27:45-50; 28:1-10

Paul F. Feiler

Easter Sunday, 2022

**The Christian's Shortest Question**

Text: "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here;

for he has risen." Matthew 28:6

There is no word more decisive for us than the word we proclaim today: Christ is risen from the dead. No story invades our lives with such ultimate consequence: Christ is risen from the dead. Without Easter, the message of God's love for us dies on a brutal Judean hill with the man who proclaimed it. Without the resurrection, we come to the end of our lives, or we stand beside the coffins of our loved ones facing the moment of death with no hope. We live our days with no confidence that anything we do, that any love we love has any lasting significance. We confront the difficulties of life with no promise that any doubt, any suffering or any of the pain we experience carries with it the possibility of resolution. The message of Easter is the central theme of our faith. Life is victorious over death; love is stronger than hate; light does overcome the darkness; and good will triumph over evil.

Yet this message of hope is won only through our questions, through our suffering and pain, through our encounter with that which is beyond our ability to explain. There is no empty tomb without a crucifixion. Before there was Easter, there was a Cross and, on that Cross, there was the cry of God's Son, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

The question is often formulated as an intellectual, a philosophical dilemma. If God is all-powerful, God must be able to prevent suffering. If God is all-loving, God must want to prevent suffering. Why then is there suffering? How can we reconcile the unlimited goodness of an all-powerful God with the reality of evil?

But the question "why" is more than an interesting philosophical dilemma. It's a question that comes from a heart stripped of its defenses and explanations. It's a question that comes in those moments of human, emotional ultimacy, when we are forced to face directly our finitude and need for God, when we wonder whether God is for us or against us. It's a question that is no respecter of persons, coming to the poor and the rich, to the devout and the irreligious, to the foolish and the wise.

Many years ago, when I lived in Boston, my friend Roe Smith, a professor at MIT, asked me to come to his house and help him build a partition in his basement. At noon we broke for lunch. A few minutes later the phone rang. Roe answered it, listened for a while, then just shook his head. His wife was on the phone and she told him that the space shuttle "Challenger" had just exploded shortly after take-off. We turned on the T.V. and watched the replays of the disaster. After about an hour we went back to work.

As I mentioned, Roe was a professor at MIT. He taught courses in the history of technology. One of the astronauts killed in the disaster, Ronald McNair, had been a student at MIT and Roe had assisted in directing his dissertation. For Roe the tragedy was felt as a personal loss.

At one point that afternoon Roe looked up from his work and asked, "Paul, why do things like this happen?" I'm sure he really didn't expect an answer and I didn't have one to give. Still, what followed was for us a thought-provoking and heartfelt conversation. Here was a professor of technology at one of the most prestigious scientific universities in the world, one who knew that NASA scientists and engineers would eventually identify the cause of the explosion. Still, his grief and sense about a failure of his discipline brought him to an ultimate moment, a moment beyond science, a moment when his mind focused on a theological question, the Christian's shortest question, the question "Why?"

The question comes to those who are wise, to those who are brilliant. The question comes to those who are devout.

Andre Resner was a student preparing for the ministry at Princeton Seminary. He was also a young father, reading through a medical report. It was a description of what the doctors had done, step by step, three days before, when his little boy was still alive. Everything was explained in a very medical-like, cold, impersonal way. Then he came to a line which read, "Does not respond to deep pain." Everything blurred as each word loosened from its position on the page, forming a puddle on the edge of the paper, and then fell, splattering on the floor.

The father later wrote: "How am I to respond to this which makes no sense? God, where are you in this? Do you feel the deep pain of suffering and loss?"

The writer of our Old Testament lesson, the Prophet Habakkuk did not escape the question either. Picture the situation. Habakkuk climbs to the top of a hill overlooking his beloved city of Jerusalem. Not too long ago his people were prosperous and happy. But now, in order to keep peace with the Babylonians, the king of Israel, King Jehoiakim plays a Machiavellian game of politics. The poor are taxed beyond their ability to pay. The ruling class squanders money on idolatry and immorality. Dishonesty and corruption are the norms on all levels of government. And even the King himself has recently sacrificed his own son to a Babylonian deity. In some ways he could have been describing our world today,

Habakkuk cries to God: "How long, O God, shall I cry for help and you will not listen? Or cry to you, 'Violence!' and you will not help? Why do you make me see wrong and look upon disaster, why do you make me look on faithless men and why are you silent when the wicked swallow up ones more righteous than they?"

I know that some of you reading this can think back over the intervening months since last Easter and ask the question, "My God, Why?" Some of you have lost work and possessions. Some of you have suffered the death of a loved one and bereavement, and the scars are very slow to heal. Still others of you have experienced the inconstancy of human friendships, people on whom you have relied have betrayed your trust. Some of you have been introduced for the first time to the limitations of an illness or disease.

And these do not begin to enumerate the possible circumstances that might give rise to the question. When was the last day a child did not die in his parents' arms? When was the last day a seemingly good marriage did not slowly fall apart? When was the last day a good person was not diagnosed with cancer? When was the last day a teenager with life before her did not lose or ruin her life in drugs, alcohol or suicide? When was the last day we did not hear the news of a war, or an insane stabbing of a preschool child? And so, we are not unacquainted with tears. And so, we sometimes wait in pain and lament for a response from God. Few of us escape it. Jesus did not. Habakkuk did not. The Psalmist David did not, "My God, My God why have you forsaken me, why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? I cry to you by day, but you do not answer and by night but find no rest." (Psalm 22).

We wait for God to answer. Does God feel the deep pain of suffering and loss? What is God's self-explanation?

When we finally quiet our lives and honestly wait for God's response, we see first a lonely hill, and a brutal cross, and a beloved son hanging from it in pain. Stripped, beaten, strung up between two thieves, mocked and deserted, this man of love, the Son of God, cries out to his Father, "Why?"

But alongside this brutal scene, after this ultimate, final moment, following this death of God's beloved son, we see the vision of Easter morning: an empty tomb, the message, "He is risen," the promise that ultimately, that finally, God's love and power are stronger than death, that sorrow will yield to joy, that brokenness will yield to wholeness, that loneliness will yield to companionship, that death will yield to life. Christ has triumphed over death.

Today, during times of war, our technology provides instant information on the progress of the battle; but in years past, the news of war was often long delayed in reaching the homes of those who fought in it. In the early 19th Century, all of England knew that Wellington was to face Napoleon in a great battle at Waterloo. The result of the battle could reach England only as a sailing ship semaphored news to a signalman on top of Winchester Cathedral. He then would signal to another man on a hill and this way the news was to be relayed by hand semaphore, from station to station all across England. When the ship finally came in, the signalman on board semaphored the first word, "Wellington." The next word he sent was "defeated," and then the fog came down and the ship could not be seen.

And so, the message "Wellington defeated" went across England and a great sense of sadness spread across the countryside.

Then several hours later, the fog lifted, and the signal came again, "Wellington defeated the enemy," and all of England rejoiced.

On Good Friday they put the body of Jesus in the tomb, and the message came down, "Jesus Christ defeated." Today, the darkness lifts and the fog rolls away and the truth is proclaimed, "Jesus Christ defeated the enemy."

In the face of utter doubt, confronting great uncertainty and desperate loneliness, where else can we go but to the open grave outside the city of Jerusalem. In this life God leads us down no predictable path; rather God provides the promise that by walking, by stumbling in the darkness toward the source of all light, we will grow in wisdom, we will move toward restoration, and we will finally experience the ultimate triumph of eternal life.

Our Easter faith is a summons by the Prince of Life for this present hour. God calls you now to faith, to trust the word of the living God. Whatever your circumstance, there is hope, there is healing, there is life. This is not a vision for the faint-hearted. But for us who seek to live and to run, it is one on which we can depend.

I know that my Redeemer liveth.