

Dr. Richard Lischer
March 27, 2005
Easter Sunday

Psalm 130:5-6 "The Third Question"

*I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word do I hope.
My soul waits for the Lord more than they that watch for the morning:
I say, more than they that watch for the morning.*

On Friday, when we were gathered in this great tomb of a place, the few candles sent spooky shadows up the walls and this room resembled more a mausoleum than a church, its glorious windows were dark and dead. We sang "*Were you there when they laid him in the tomb,*" and in our grief we felt that we were. There.

Then we did a funny thing. We went home, and we waited. Oh, we went about our business as usual. We got the tires rotated on Saturday morning, took the kids to soccer practice, ate a pizza, watched a movie, wrote a paper—but secretly we were waiting. But for what?

A great philosopher once said, There are only three questions worth asking: What can I know? What ought I to do? and, What may I hope? With all due respect to the first two, it's the Third Question that's on our minds this morning. It's the Third Question that keeps you awake at night. It's the third question that makes us human.

When we read the four accounts of the Resurrection and ask the first question, What can I know?, we get some contradictory answers. Mark says this event happened in the sunshine, John says in the dark, Luke says early dawn. And depending on who you read it was an angel or a young man or two men who brought the message. And how many women?--the number varies from one to three, and most of them were named Mary. One critic of the New Testament says, "The evidence falls apart in your hands."

And yes, the surveillance cameras were not functioning that morning. So we do not have a grainy image on a monitor that, like doubting Thomas, we can reach out and touch. Paul Simon sings,

These are the days of miracle and wonder
This is the long distance call,
The way the camera follows us in slow-mo
The way we look to us all.

If you can't follow this miracle in slow-mo, if you can't watch it in instant replay, if you can't access it in the mode to which we have all become addicted, then, friend, you can know very little.

There is a final, unfamiliar stanza to the Negro spiritual that goes, *Were you there when he rose up from the dead?* Despite our best efforts to recreate that scene historically or liturgically, we have to admit, No, we were not there. Nobody was.

The most important event in the history of the world was transacted not between armies or diplomats but between God the Father and God the Son by the power of God the Holy Spirit. It happened in darkness.

We don't know if it was a typically warm Palestinian morning or if it was unseasonably cool. We don't know if it thundered and lightned or if it was preternaturally still.

We don't know what he looked like when he was no longer dead—whether he burst from the tomb in heavenly light or came out the way Lazarus had, slowly unwrapping his bandages and squinting with wonder at the dawn. All these things and more—we do not know.

The second question, What ought I to do? moves us closer to the world of religion. Religion teaches duty. That's the way many of us first experienced religion—as something I must do. Ask *What ought I to do*, and some Christian will tell you in no uncertain terms. You ought to do what is right and honest and just. You ought to love God with your heart and soul and mind and your neighbor as yourself. Let me make it simple for you: you ought to be just like Jesus.

Do you remember in grade school when you were learning how to write in cursive? On the ruled line at the top of the page, the teacher would write a sentence with heavenly penmanship, "The great ship sailed to America" and the *m* was like a beautiful wave. Oh, to make such an *m*. And then on the next line you, age 8, would write the very same sentence. Then you would look at the two lines and compare them, and it would make you feel like a worm. Then, to add to the humiliation, the papers would be scotch-taped to the blackboard so that everyone could see the glaring discrepancy between penmanship as it ought to be done and your ugly scrawl.

It's like saying to a little boy who doesn't know how to stay out of trouble, Why can't you be like your older sister? Well, why indeed.

In the world of religion it often takes this form: What ought I to do? Well, What would Jesus do? What would Jesus drive? What kind of CDs would Jesus burn? What do I care? I'm the little brother in this story. He's Jesus. You can't whittle him down to my size or inflate me up to his. We need another approach to ethics besides speculative imitation. The question is not 'What would Jesus do?' but What sort of persons does his death and resurrection empower us to be?

This may be why many secular thinkers have addressed the "What ought I to do" question by skipping Jesus entirely. It's impossible to know what Jesus would do about a lot of things. One of my favorite columns in the *New York Times Magazine* is *The Ethicist* by Randy Cohen. People send in their ordinary ethical dilemmas—their 'What ought I to do' questions—and he answers them in no uncertain terms. For example—and this is my example—let's say the Duke Athletic office has erroneously (through some clerical error) begun sending you free tickets to Men's Basketball Games. What ought you to do? And let's suppose you are an incredibly generous person and donate annually to the university much more than the face value of the tickets. Therefore, are you obliged to return the tickets?—and then Randy publishes his answer. And here's the beauty of it, his answers are based on nothing, no religion, no sacred story or ethical system, only what appears reasonable to Randy Cohen. And, amazingly, it works. His answers makes sense.

Until you come to the Third Question—the question that was on the mind of the Psalmist who was so desperate (over what we do not know) that his desperation influenced his poetry: I wait for the Lord more than they that watch for the morning; I say

more than they that watch. . . It was on the minds of the men and women on the way to the tomb as well.

What do I dare hope? I haven't hoped in a long time. Can you tell me how? Hope begins with waiting, which most of us have confused with hesitating. Ten years ago the average visitor to an art museum spent 10 seconds before each painting. Now it's three seconds. If you wait for something or someone to offer itself to you, you might wait forever.

Therefore my mantra is your mantra. I've got to run. I have no choice but to run because my life is up to me. That is, I am compelled to run because I am on a treadmill of obligations with eternity to pay. A treadmill of worries about security, career, relationships, love, money—and did I mention my future?—and I am afraid if I stop running the machine will continue and grind me into its gears. I'd like to stop, but I am afraid.

When Jesus died something in the universe ground to a halt. His friends laid him in a tomb and then in honor of the Sabbath, left him to God and walked away. And Jesus, dead, waited, as it were, for something to happen. When we commit a person to the elements we commend them to God. The word "commend" means literally to place into someone else's hands. At the cemetery we say,

May God the Father who created this body,

May God the Son who by his blood redeemed this body,

May God the Holy Spirit who through baptism sanctified this body—keep these remains until the day of the resurrection of all flesh, and then—we throw down some dirt and walk away. But secretly we are humming the Psalmist's tune: My soul is waiting for the Lord and in his word do I hope.

What may I hope? You may hope in the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead. You see, the Third Question is really the First Question. If you have a ground of hope, you know more than you thought you did and you can do all things. For hope, you see, is a way of knowing and a way living openly and generously toward others. The resurrection of Jesus says that we are meant to be more and not less than we are.

The resurrection of Jesus is a pillar of fire ahead of the whole human race. It is testimony; not only to the pathos of human hoping, but to the justice of God. If you want to know where God stands on the issue of suffering or oppression, if you want to know what God thinks when he sees you walking away from a cemetery, if you want to know what God feels when he sees your tears—then go to the tomb of God's son and listen for testimony.

But it's dark there; so you will have to listen. And it may lead to an embarrassing case of mistaken identity. "He seemed to have a rake in his hand, though what he would have been raking in the dark is hard to say. Who exactly are you?" Then comes the greatest recognition scene in all literature. Two words: "Mary," "Teacher?" And finally testimony, "I have seen the Lord."

Nine years ago, when Hurricane Fran visited our city, it damaged countless homes, left thousands of trees down, and knocked out power for a week. We were a city in the dark. When Sunday came around, a few of us gathered for worship in a Lutheran church across town. Still without power and light. We were a devastated little group.

The pastor had the good sense to introduce the service by inviting anyone who wished to do so to tell a hurricane story. Now, Lutherans do not do this. But after some

appropriate display of reticence, we began. Some witnesses recounted rather trivial losses, like an air conditioner or a favorite tree, but gradually the stories gave way to testimony. It soon became clear that we had more than a hurricane on our minds. A woman testified of a cancer she had endured, another spoke of her divorce. An old man, who I would bet had never made a speech in church, stood at his pew and there in the darkness gave thanks to God for saving his life in World War II.

The stories varied greatly from one another, and who could verify the accuracy of every detail? But each story testified to some *side* of God's faithfulness. Each story seemed to say, 'I have seen the Lord.' From that miscellany of stories, a clearly-defined figure began to emerge as if from a mist or a cave, not of any one teller but the Object of the tale.

Brothers and sisters, we are waiting for him now. We are waiting for that definitive morning. Even on a campus such as this, we admit that we don't know everything we'd like to know, and we confess we don't do everything we ought to do. But we are beginning to get the hang of that Third Question. You know the one:

I wait for the Lord, and in his word do I hope.

God bless your Easter.