

EASTER, THE GREAT CONTRAST.

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What makes Spring so welcome?
Why do we look forward to it with such anticipation?

It's because of the contrast!

What were drab browns and grays become bright reds and yellows.
What was dead now blooms.
What were lifeless sticks now bud into greening trees and bushes.

Not only does the landscape blossom into sharp contrast with the past months but so does the clothing of people.
Almost as if it is a rite of Spring when Easter comes the colors and styles of clothing change. Whites and pastels sprout up as surely as tulips and daffodils.

Even though the weather may be cool we know that Spring and Summer are on their way. WE love it - the contrasts.

What makes Easter so welcome? It's the contrast!
The contrast between death and life.

However, the way Easter is treated these days, the contrast is not so easily observable.

Saturday morning's Denver Post, in the spirit of a pluralistic society ran several stories on religious celebrations:

There was one on the Passover of the Jews.

There was another on a high holy-day of the Hindus.

And there was an article showing some people of Faith Bible Chapel carrying a cross down the 16th Street mall - Christianity.

Very few seem to want to come right out and eliminate Easter but what is done is that Easter is merged into a bland one-among-many religious rituals celebrating Spring and symbolizing life and hope: Two ideas which mankind hopes will spring eternal.

Easter's sharp edge has been so dulled in our culture that any contrast is largely lost to the average person.

But while the popular Easter of the culture may be a bland, amorphous, undifferentiated religious holiday, the FACT is that the true "Easter is the supreme fact of history."

The true Easter is not a bland, dull-colored emotional ideal but is the pivotal event in all of history.

What makes Easter so welcome? It is its contrast - the contrast to death. The true Easter is in bold vivid colors of life.

Easter Sunday marks the date nearly 1960 years ago that Jesus the Christ, the God-man, born of the virgin Mary, rose from the dead after three days in the grave.

According to the historical records of eyewitnesses, the Jesus that rose from the dead was the same Jesus who had died. And his resurrection was not figurative but literal.

In the same edition of the Post that I cited earlier there was an article challenging the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus.

But according to the eyewitness the Jesus who rose from the dead was not simply an ideal that lived on in the minds of his friends,

He was not a religious fantasy,

He WAS the same Jesus who talked to them, ate with them, spent time with them and loved them.

Though he resided now in a resurrected body it was nonetheless a physical body - one others could see and touch.

Easter, the resurrection of Jesus. What a contrast to the past!

In the book of Acts in the Bible we read that the resurrected Jesus spoke to the Apostle Paul in Damascus and said to him:

"I am sending you to people to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me." (from Acts 26)

Talk about contrasts: Do you hear the contrasts in those words:

light rather than darkness,
God's power rather than Satan's,
forgiveness instead of guilt,
belonging rather than loneliness.

That's what Easter is about - Contrasts!

The risen, living Jesus, the one with the power to conquer death stands today offering life instead of death.

This past week a woman who I did not know called me.

She called asking for counsel - she felt that she was at a crisis point in her life and needed to make a decision.

24 years earlier, as a teenager, she had become pregnant by a man more than 10 years older than her.

Her father was so grieved and possibly humiliated that when she was three months pregnant he took his own life.

Her mother had a nervous breakdown and was hospitalized.

When the baby was born, she was not allowed to see him but was nearly forced to put him up for adoption.

A couple of years after the baby was adopted out she was married - but after nine years that ended in divorce.

Living with constant feelings of guilt for her pregnancy, her father's death, her mother's depression, and her own failure at marriage - she attempted unsuccessfully to take her own life.

Convinced of her own unworthiness she took up a relationship with a man she and he considered to be hopelessly alcoholic.

Over the past nine years she has lived with this man and away from this man - but never finding peace.

For 24 years she has suffered the grief of losing her son. She has spent hours in searching for him. She has spent years in support groups trying to live with the pain. But the child is an obsession - no peace.

When I heard that story I couldn't help but think that though her circumstances may sound extreme to some of you - her story is nonetheless everyone's story.

I hear her longing for real love - the kind that won't vanish.

I hear her striving to find a lasting purpose for living - in her case she has adopted a purpose that is so temporal that the saddest thing would be for her to find son. For then she would cease to have a purpose in life.

And I hear her seeking security in life but finding it neither in life and certainly not in death.

Can you understand the CONTRAST to that life that Jesus offers.

In the Bible Jesus said that the Easter contrast is light rather than darkness.

People in darkness are people who don't understand what it truly going on. They who don't understand reality.

It's not an issue of native intelligence - even the most intelligent among us can miss the truth of who Jesus is and what He has done.

Oh, if that woman could only see Jesus.

If she could be brought to understand that his life, death and resurrection have a direct bearing on her life.

If only she could come to understand there is more to her life than the sum of her tragic experiences. God loves her.

Oh, if she could see the Easter "light" - God's perspective on her.

Notice another Easter contrast: Jesus said that he offers the power of God to her to break the power of Satan in her life.

The Bible says that Satan has blinded the eyes of people.

There was in this woman's voice a sad acquiescence to the status-quo - A hopelessness about any real change in her life.

Satan had her right where he wanted her: believing that fate had dealt her an unfair hand and her lot in life was to simply bear it.

Further than that. She knew many of her own weaknesses and failures and believed that those could never really change.

Oh, if only she could know that the same power that raised Jesus from the dead is available to make a change in her life.

Of, if only she would accept the truth that Jesus can transform her mind, her values, and her actions.

If only she knew that she does not have to be a slave to her past.

The Easter contrast of the power of God winning in her life rather than Satan winning.

Listen to yet another Easter contrast: Jesus said she could know forgiveness instead of guilt.

The fact is that Jesus intentionally died not as suicide but as a sacrifice.

His death was for the purpose of paying the penalty for her sins. The wrath of God against her sin was poured out on Jesus rather than being poured out on her.

AS I listened to that woman, I heard a person who was haunted by her own guilt.

There is no freedom from that until she accepts God's forgiveness. He will forgive...because he has provided for that forgiveness through Jesus.

What freedom, to know that God, the ultimate Judge, has acquitted her. Rather than eternal separation from God she can know eternal life in the presence of the risen Jesus.

The Easter contrast of forgiveness rather than guilt.

Hear just one more contrast: Belonging instead of loneliness.

My heart went out to that woman as I heard her lonely despair.

She has sold her body and soul all of her life just to purchase acceptance by someone - but she is still alone.

And most of us understand that being married or finding her son would not cure that loneliness.

Sooner or later everyone comes to understand that all human relationships are limited - limited by our sins and our finiteness. WE fail each other and eventually we leave each other when we die.

Sad is the person whose belonging is tied only to human relationships.

Jesus said that by faith in Him we become part of His family. And his words are: "I will never leave you or forsake you".

Oh, if only that woman could know the peace that comes from belonging to the risen Jesus who cannot fail.

What a contrast Easter brings to life as usual:

There is light instead of darkness,
There is change by God's power rather than Satan's slavery to the past,
There is forgiveness rather than guilt,
And there is love, acceptance and belonging instead of loneliness.

No Easter is not just another religious holiday, indistinguishable from other religious rites of spring:

Easter stands in vivid contrast to the past.

Easter is when life came instead of death.

Easter is when Jesus rose from the dead.

Ida Kempel tells the story of Jeremy (source: The Focus on the Family magazine)

Doris Miller, his teacher, was often exasperated with him.

Jeremy was born with a twisted body and slow mind and even though he was 12 years old he would sit in the classroom squirming in his seat, drooling and making grunting noises.

But at other times he would speak clearly and distinctly as if some light had come on

inside.

Nevertheless, Doris couldn't imagine keeping him in the classroom any longer and so had a meeting with his parents to tell them that he would have to be removed from the school.

Jeremy's parent pleaded with her to keep him since there was no other school nearby to which he could go.

As Doris pondered the situation she was filled with guilt at being so insensitive to these poor parents. She agreed that she would try to keep him and she prayed for patience.

Spring came and the children looked forward excitedly to Easter. Doris told them of Jesus and the new life that comes from Jesus resurrection.

Then to emphasize new life springing forth she gave each child a large plastic egg and said to them, "Take this home and tomorrow bring it back with something inside that shows new life. Do you understand?"

The children responded enthusiastically, all except Jeremy - he just watched her intently. Had he understood?

Should she call his parents and explain the project.

That evening Doris's got so busy with things that she completely forgot to call them.

The next day 18 other children and Jeremy came to school laughing and talking excitedly as they placed their eggs in the basket.

By the second hour it was time to open the eggs.

In the first one she chose Doris found a flower. The little girl who brought it waved her hand with pride and Doris made some comment about the flower showing life.

The second egg contained a plastic butterfly and Doris talked about the caterpillar changing.

Then Doris opened the third egg. She gasped. It was empty. Surely this egg belonged to Jeremy and he didn't understand. If only she had not forgotten to call his parents.

She set the egg aside not wanting to embarrass him but Jeremy raised his hand and called out "Miss Miller, aren't you going to talk about my egg?"

Doris was so flustered that she blurted out, "But Jeremy your egg is empty."
AT that Jeremy looked into her eyes and said softly,
"Yes, but Jesus' tomb was empty too."

Time seemed to stop for Doris. When she could speak again she asked, "Do you know why it was empty?"

"Oh, yes" Jeremy said, "Jesus was killed and put in there. Then his Father raised Him up."

In this true story, Jeremy died three months later.

On his casket were 19 eggs - all of them empty.

Yes, folks, an empty grave is what it's all about.

Easter - life in contrast to death.

There is undoubtedly someone sitting here this morning like the woman I spoke to last week who has not discovered the difference, the contrast, that the real, the historical, Easter can bring to your life.

Jesus died and rose from the dead for you.

He is alive and by His Spirit He is here this morning calling you to accept him

for who he is - God, and

receive His gift of forgiveness and life.

You need the change, the contrast that Jesus offers.

If you want to know more about receiving that gift of life please give me your name and phone number after the service so that I can call you and we can arrange to talk.