

The Easter That Changed

The widow of a beloved minister faced this feast alone and in despair; then from a pile of papers

HAVE YOU EVER dreaded Easter and wanted to flee it? I did that spring of 1949.

Early in that year, I had been happy in my snug little world. Then came a January morning when that world lay in pieces at my feet. My husband Peter Marshall was dead. Acute coronary occlusion, the doctor said. A single blood clot—a man's life snuffed out at 46.

As spring approached, I could scarcely bear the thought of Easter. I could never have analyzed why I resisted even the general atmosphere of gladness. Would not my small son's fun in coloring Easter eggs, the gay shop windows, the usual triumphant church music merely mock my grief, throw into greater contrast my sense of loss?

It was in this mood that I plunged into frenzied activity. A month earlier I had agreed to the editing of a book of Peter's sermons. So now I plunged into the task of sorting out the sermon manuscripts.

I remember that I chose for the task my favorite spot in our Washington home—the sunroom. There the windows were filled with shelves of colored pressed glass which Peter and I had collected during our summers on Cape Cod. The spring sunshine—filtering through the cranberry, amber, amethyst, cobalt blue, opalescent glass—laid patterns of color on the floor and across the piles of papers.

There were some 600 sermon manuscripts. I was trying to divide them into types: Biblical word pictures, those with a national or patriotic flavor, sermons on prayer, special-occasion ones, and so on.

Suddenly beneath my hand was the last Easter sermon that Peter had preached. Vividly I remembered that service. What a happy day it had been! And now? Bitterness seeped in. Shut off that train of thought, a part of my mind warned. Get on with your work.

I was about to toss the sermon onto the special-occasion pile when my eyes were drawn like a magnet to the typed words before me. Soon I was caught up in the thoughts that flowed from line to line:

Jerusalem had been anything but impressed with the way Christ's disciples had conducted themselves during the arrest and trial of the Nazarene.

His followers had certainly not been courageous. In fact, they had all either fled to save their lives or followed at a great distance. Simon Peter was so fearful that he had even denied having known the Nazarene. Then, after their Master's death, the band of disciples had stayed in hiding with the doors locked.

Yet after that first Easter morning, we find these same men, who had been so timid, frightened, ineffective, now preaching openly, with no fear of anyone. Their personal conviction rings like a bell through the pages of the New Testament, steady and strong:

"That which we have heard with our own ears, seen with our own eyes, handled with our own hands, declare we unto you."

And of what were they so sure? That Jesus Christ was alive—but no spiritual resurrection this—not just the perpetuation of a dead man's ideas.

Furthermore, they were saying these things in the same city that had sought to destroy the Christ, right at the door of the stronghold of the priests, a thousand paces from the tomb where Christ had lain.

Christ's enemies would have given anything to have refuted their claims. One thing would have done it—so simply. If only they could have produced a body. But they could not.

So they tried everything they could think of to silence these fishermen, tax collectors, farmers, carpenters, shepherds—imprisonment, threats, scourgings, stonings, and death.

Nothing succeeded in silencing them.

Now it takes a very great conviction to change men so drastically. Men do not persist in a lie, or even a delusion, if every time they insist on its truth they are driving nails into their own coffins.

A self-hypnotic illusion may sustain men for a time—but not for long. In the long run, an illusion does not build character strong enough to withstand great hardship, great persecution. Only the bedrock truth can do that!

Moreover, men who are merely fooling themselves do not become purposeful men, well-integrated men with self-sustaining qualities of leadership, as these erstwhile timid apostles became.

For now they had boldness and courage, and they had power—qualities that they had not had until after the first Easter morning.

They now felt they still were in touch with Him—in a different way, yes, but in a more powerful way. They knew that He was with them still, even as He had promised that He would be.

And you, too, may have that same fellowship with the Risen Christ. Indeed you will not believe the fact of the Resurrection for yourself until the living Christ lives in your own heart. When you have in your

own life that sense of His nearness and His power—ah, then you, too, will know! To you there may come the same wonderful changes that have come to other men and women down through the years.

This is the reality that can be yours. This comradeship with the Resurrected Christ through His spirit is available now—to the man in the street, to the government clerk, to the anxious mother, to the confused schoolboy or schoolgirl.

Your life may be guided by Christ. Your problems may be solved by His wisdom. Your weakness may be turned into strength by His help. Your struggles may become victories by His grace. Your sorrows may be turned into joy by His comfort.*

SORROWS turned into joy? It was as if Peter were speaking to me. Suddenly I realized that I had been refusing to let God turn my sorrow into joy. I had been shutting Him out. I had not really believed that God could give me a new life without Peter—a happy life.

For weeks I had been walking unseeing through the world. Grief had blinded me, deafened me. So now I had to stop dreading Easter, go to meet it with an open heart.

My newly opened eyes were rewarded. That year, spring burst upon the nation's capital with unusual beauty. The forsythia was more brilliant than I had ever seen it. The azaleas were punctuation marks of flaming coral and cerise. Out past the creamy whiteness of the Lincoln Memorial, the Tidal Basin was adrift in pale pink blossoms. There were fairy-feathered avenues of pink and white dogwood.

And my heart responded. I discovered in myself a new kind of peace. It was the peace that comes not from the absence of any difficulties but from knowing that happiness is possible in spite of difficulties.

By Easter Sunday morning the triumphant music of the massed choirs echoed my own gladness. In my heart I could kneel before the Risen Christ and promise Him to try to live in the present—joyfully; tell Him that I was finally willing to put myself in the stream of His creative purposes for me—though at that moment I had no idea what those purposes were.

And in my mind's eye I saw again Peter's sermon lying on the floor of the sunroom with the light dancing across the words:

You will not believe the fact of the Resurrection for yourself until the living Christ lives in your own heart. When you have in your own life that sense of His nearness and His power—ah, then you, too, will know!

Now I believed. Now I knew.

My Life

By CATHERINE MARSHALL

Author of "A Man Called Peter,"
"Beyond Ourselves," and "Friends with God"

from the past came her husband's words for the future



Beneath the shelves of colored glass that Peter and I had collected, my eyes fell like a magnet on one sermon—and memories came flooding back.

ILLUSTRATION BY PAUL CALLE