

EASTER HOPE IN AN AGE OF RESIGNATION

James A. Wharton

Memorial Drive Presbyterian Church, Houston, Texas

I. Easter Hope in Any Age

Before we talk about an "Age of Resignation," let's take a hard look at three problems with "Easter Hope" in any age. The first is that Good Friday looks too dark for otherwise relatively hopeful people to swallow and digest. The outrageous claim of the Christian community about Good Friday is that the whole human experiment reaches the point of utter bankruptcy in the death of Jesus. From the theological standpoint Good Friday was no isolated or merely "typical" personal tragedy in the life of one good man. The claim of faith is that all of us stand exposed, in a decisive failure of our humanity, when the world finds Jesus of Nazareth intolerable.

That is an uncommonly depressing assessment of our natural human resources for justice, righteousness, faithfulness, truth, goodness, wisdom, compassion, and love. Surely things can't be that bad! Such a dim view of people makes Freud and Sartre seem like naive optimists by comparison. Yet any move to soften the horrendous scandal of Good Friday, to reduce it to one more example of humanity at its worst, over against which the best that is in us shines even brighter, simply dismisses what I take to be the distinctively Christian affirmation about the death of Jesus. We are all implicated in his death without remainder. The crisis between God and the people who put Jesus to death is the crisis in relationship between God and humanity. That's dark! Perhaps too dark?

The second problem with "Easter Hope" in any age is that Easter dawn simply looks too bright for otherwise relatively realistic people to swallow and digest. The outrageous claim of the Christian community about Easter is that the whole human experiment reaches the point of utter vindication in the resurrection of Jesus. Or, as Paul put it, "In Christ, God was reconciling the cosmos to himself, not counting their trespasses against them!" A fullness and permanence of human life, beyond the most optimistic human dreams, has been granted to us by God through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Charles Swinburne and Buckminster Fuller look like screaming pessimists by comparison. Yet to claim less than this for Easter dismisses what I take to be the distinctively Christian affirmation about the resurrection of Jesus: Through this life God penetrated the human experience at absolute depth, sharing life with us, bearing its pain and death with us, and creating life out of death on our behalf. We are all implicated in Jesus' resurrection. The victory of God on behalf of the people who put Jesus to death is the victory of God for our humanity. That's bright! Perhaps too bright?

The third problem is linked with the other two. No candid assessment of the human condition before and after Easter reveals any unambiguous sign that the fundamental condition or character of the human race has been altered in the slightest by what happened at the turn of the era in Jerusalem. Human experience world-wide has continued to be a mixed bag of relative good and relative bad, relative success and relative failure. We have certainly become more numerous, the issues have become more complex, and we have achieved vastly greater technologi-

cal proficiency for good as well as evil. But the authentic resonance of the ancient biblical stories with contemporary human experience constitutes sufficient evidence in itself that the fundamental crisis of our humanity--and particularly the crisis of our humanity vis-a-vis God--has really not changed decisively since Abraham. In one form or another, however amplified or "complexified," the real issues are still those of justice, righteousness, faithfulness, truth, goodness, wisdom, compassion, and love. If, after two thousand years, one detects no decisive changes wrought by Easter in the overall character or condition of the human race, what's to hope? That's confusing! Perhaps too confusing?

The proclamation of Easter hope, in any age, necessarily swims upstream against an apparently self-evident consensus that its assessment of humanity is simply too dark on Good Friday, too bright on Easter morning, and too confusing against the background of historical human experience. If you undertake to preach about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, you simply grasp those three burning nettles with your bare hands. Particularly if your theme is something called "Easter Hope."

II. An Age of Resignation

Christopher Lasch has recently published a book entitled The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations. I think any thoughtful Presbyterian preacher could have written ninety percent of the analysis simply from careful people-watching out of a theological perspective. Listen to a few chapter headings: "The Awareness Movement and Social Invasion of the Self," "The Narcissistic Personality of our Times," "Changing Modes of Making It: From Horatio Alger to the Happy Hooker," "The Banality of Pseudo-Self-Awareness: Theatrics of Politics and Everyday Existence," "The Degradation of Sport," "Schooling and the New Illiteracy," etc.

Evidence is marshalled to describe America as a nation in "the dotage of bourgeois society," crippled by a "world view of the resigned," suffering from "the eclipse of achievement," "ironic detachment," "leisure as escape," the "atrophy of competence," the "trivialization of personal relationships," the "dread of old age," "the collapse of authority." Although Lasch writes from a distinctly leftish position, the phrases I have cited explain why reviewers from the left have accused Lasch of reverting to curiously right-wing analyses and criticisms. Lasch would repudiate any such charges, but at least it is clear that a resolute Calvinist would have little difficulty writing a passionate homily on almost any of the topics listed. It is perhaps this peculiar blend of Calvinistic-sounding criticism with "new left" presuppositions that makes the book somewhat shocking to both ends of the political spectrum. And perhaps worth reading for ministers who share Lasch's alarm at the unparalleled mood of resignation that currently grips our body social and politic.

However one evaluates Lasch's book--and it can be praised or condemned from a number of viewpoints--there is an extraordinarily wide consensus that our society indeed faces a loss of public vision, a retreat in the direction of "inwardness" (if not narcissism), and an unaccustomed general mood of resignation. As Eric Sevareid pointed out in one of his pre-retirement television chats, America has never yet come to terms with what Unamuno called "The tragic sense of life." For a variety of reasons, our experience of history has not forced American society generally to conclude that "nothing can be done." We may not have reached that point yet, as a cultural and societal consensus. There is still something touchingly naive and even

inversely optimistic about distinctively American forms of resignation. There is a lingering sense that we once "had it," or "almost had it" or "might have had it." And perhaps no small fund of sentiment that "by gum, we may make it yet." But it is hard to deny that this people, whose birthright was revolution and whose style was progress, now wonders at a new depth whether anything will really work. The old hope of the American dream, the great society with its promise of freedom and justice--and of course prosperity--for all, is surely dimmer than it has been in a long time, perhaps since 1776. And there is little doubt that people by the millions are opting out of social and political concern in favor of a peculiarly self-centered kind of resignation from the arena of public involvement.

If Easter hope is to be proclaimed in 1980, it will fall on the ears of a great number of people who experience this as an age of resignation. In view of the age, and in view of the preacher's own experience of the three classic problems with Easter hope in any age, ministers may face their own crises of resignation in preaching about Easter hope one more time. The pragmatic question is raised again: What good will it do to rehearse the story of Cross and Resurrection for people who are trapped in a mood of resignation? "I've said it before. They've heard it since they first developed the church habit. What is left to be said."

Perhaps that is the place for preachers to begin: not with resignation as a new cultural phenomenon in America, but with a peculiar resignation ministers may feel who have proclaimed Easter hope as many as five years in a row. If you have ever felt the sense of boredom and vulnerability that comes from trying to say the too dark word about Good Friday and the too bright word about Easter against the too confusing background of the historical human experience of the past two thousand years, you know the experience of resignation "up close and personal." If you are more concerned about generating the energy to go through Easter one more time than to proclaim Easter hope, then you are a native child of the age of resignation. And you have some dang good reasons for giving up and taking care of yourself for a change. Where is the evidence that the sum total of all proclamations of Easter hope has produced substantial change? What hope is there that Easter proclamation in 1980 can counter the mood of resignation even among the relatively few our words may reach?

III. Easter Hope in an Age of Resignation

I suggest that the three classic problems with Easter hope in any age, strangely enough, provide the church with what may be said and must be said on Easter to counter the current mood of resignation. If one remembers the total eclipse of all human possibilities for love and justice and peace on Good Friday, the darkness of any subsequent moment is never quite complete. Resignation feeds on the sense that things are not only in bad shape but that the worst lies ahead of us. The outrageous Christian claim about Good Friday is that the absolute worst lies behind us! Clear reflection on Jesus' cry of dereliction provides for faith an ultimate floor beneath the devastating experiences of human failure, defeat, and loss. When you stand on that floor, by faith--at the rock bottom of human experience--every line of sight is upward. At their worst, all contemporary experiences of failure, defeat and loss only approximate and participate in the moment when God's utterly faithful person cried out for all of us, "My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Good Friday darkness is not measured against our ordinary trivial swings from optimism to pessimism and back again. It is not measured against our fitful efforts, our self-

pitying and self-serving moods of frustration or disappointment. The utter darkness of Good Friday is measured against the life of Jesus, the maximal human expression of God's will for justice and righteousness and faithfulness and truth and compassion and steadfast love and peace.

Take that ground and you simply cannot take the individual and corporate failures of the present time with ultimate seriousness. By comparison with that memory, this time and place in human history is charged with endless concrete and real possibilities for good. Take that ground and contemporary resignation begins to look like the pouting of an indulged child who has lost a lollypop. The disillusionment of Good Friday should make it impossible for Christians ever again to be completely disillusioned or shocked or surprised by anything anybody ever does, including ourselves. And from the Good Friday vantage point of total disillusionment, even the darkest future discloses openings to be explored, avenues to walk down, goals to be pressed toward. We remember an infinitely worse time than these times. Good Friday is not too dark! It is precisely dark enough to equip Christians with the rock bottom realism necessary to take all lesser failures and defeats and losses in stride.

The apparently too bright word of Easter should also be a direct and powerful counter to the current mood of resignation. Resignation not only stems from a hopeless estimate of how things are. It also stems from a dismal view of what might be accomplished if we put our minds and hearts and backs to it. What achievable goals lie out there for the American people capable of firing imaginations and steeling resolve to go after them together? All the envisionable goals appear to be either altogether impossible or too trivial or simply too splintered to make corporate social and political efforts worth the candle.

The outrageous Christian claim about Easter is that the absolute goal of all human striving, the utter and complete vindication of the human, has been reached in God's vindication of Jesus against all the odds. No lesser goal can ever prove finally adequate for human hearts than a quality of life in which people are knit to people by the liberating bonds of justice and compassion and truth and peace and love. The best we have achieved in the history of the race are tantalizing but very dim approximations of that quality of life. These approximations are sufficiently tantalizing to give us a notion of what we are resigning from, but sufficiently dim to convince us that such a quality of life is inherently unrealizable, and therefore not finally worth the effort.

At the very least, the life of Jesus demonstrates that the interior quality of a single human life appropriate to that goal not only can occur but has occurred in the historical experience of the human race. From the vantage point of Christian faith the goal itself gets sharp and clear definition in the way this one human being exercised his humanity in relationship to people and in relationship to God.

At the very least, the death of Jesus demonstrates that this interior quality of a human life was tested against the worst that human experience can bring against it, including death itself.

But at the very least, the Christian claim about the resurrection of Jesus affirms that this quality of life was not only achieved by Jesus but vindicated by God as the pattern, the goal, and the accomplished fact of the life God intends for all humanity. The future of our common humanity, in that sense, is no longer a carrot at the end of a stick to be plodded after as it recedes endlessly before us. It is a God-given and God-guaranteed reality to be received, to be entered into, to be explored with excitement and joy in all the details of ordinary individual and

corporate expressions of life. The rejections and failures and losses we meet in that enterprise are those Jesus met. But God has overcome them decisively in the vindication of Jesus. Take that ground and the obstacles you confront in the search for that quality of life are no longer decisive frustrations that kill the vision. They are painful. They are real. Their power to kill is something Christians remember from the career of Jesus as well as the countless careers of suffering millions of people. But Easter faith forbids the judgment that those obstacles possess the power and majesty and finality of God. Resignation in the face of such obstacles constitutes worship of an alien god, an act of ascribing the kingdom and the power and the glory to the forces that cripple and destroy human life. Let it be said in 1980, on the grounds of Easter hope, that resignation is no less serious a thing than abject servility to the gods of injustice, hatred, triviality, self-pity, and corruption in every form. It is a celebration of the power of the cross over the life of Jesus.

That brings us to the third problem with "Easter hope" in any age: On any grounds other than faith it is simply not evident that Good Friday and Easter accomplished marked changes in the fundamental character or condition of the human race. Yet the same faith that challenges us to perceive utter human defeat in the cross and utter victory for the human in the resurrection also challenges us to view human history in a decisively altered way. History is the field on which God is working out this ultimate defeat and this ultimate victory in all the real details of historical human existence.

I think there is one experience of Christian faith, more nearly than any other, that makes this perception of human existence uncommonly real. You stand at the graveside of a friend, starkly confronted with the Good Friday negation of everything that seemed to make this beloved life worthwhile. If the grief is real and the loss is great, you may experience resignation in its classic and most acute form. External involvements that seemed so urgent yesterday now seem pale and pointless. It is impossible, for the moment at least, to imagine their ever becoming urgent again. If such a life as this one finally adds up to this mocking zero, what's the use? The horizon of your own life shrinks down to the intensely personal hurt within. The dominant input of your consciousness becomes the undisciplined output of your own feelings. It is the universal narcissism of authentic grief. And it is the experience of Good Friday.

But then it may happen--and it has happened literally billions of times in the community of faith over the past two thousand years--that the fact of Easter explodes in Good Friday hearts at such a time. Often, perhaps most often, without conscious efforts to draw on the ideological or theological resources of Christian faith, an interior confidence is born that this specific death has not negated this specific life. If it is Easter confidence that thus invades a human heart, it is not a question of denying the pain or the reality of this human death. Easter must never be taken as a trivialization of the suffering and death of Jesus, or the grief of his friends, on Good Friday. But if it is Easter confidence that surges at such a time, it comes with the strangely objective perception that nothing--not even this death--nothing "in all creation shall be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord!"

As often as people find courage, singly and together, to build life on this Easter reality by faith, "resignation" is simply not an option. Easter faith constantly refuses to be reduced to a cosy spiritual comfort that our intimate loves and our loved ones are somehow death-proof. Rather, the victory we are able to celebrate in the instance of this one fragmentary life now throws all of life and history into a

dazzling new light. We have become witnesses together with the apostles that the forces that seemed to have the upper hand on Good Friday have been denied their ultimate victory. We have experienced the fact, in our own time and place, that the life Jesus lived out of love for God and people is sheerly invincible. Hope of such magnitude demands the engagement of all our resources, in every area of life, to celebrate what Christ's victory means for God's beloved world.

Easter hope always carries with it the acid realism of Good Friday. This is a cross-shaped world, make no mistake about it! There really are no self-evident signs, over the past two thousand years, that Easter made a difference. Christians should be singularly aware that no amount of twiddling with the ideological dials or fine-tuning of programs for human improvement can produce the kingdom of God on earth. The enemy is far too ingenious and well-organized for that. Christians do their work in the face of two apparently withering Good Friday realities: The best we produce may wind up on some Calvary, and (most devastating!) we ourselves may be implicated in the very evils we set out to oppose. In fact, "If Christ be not raised from the dead . . ." we Christians should be among the first, out of Good Friday realism, to resign all efforts "to make and keep human life human" (Paul Lehmann's phrase).

"But now is Christ raised from the dead!" Concretely that means that there is no area involving human well-being where Christians are not called to celebrate Easter. Human life and history no longer appear, in the brilliant light of Easter, as "a mixed bag of relative good and relative bad, relative success and relative failure." From the vantage point of Easter faith, every tentative and fragmentary gesture in the direction of "making and keeping human life human," whether individual or social or political or economic, is charged with testimony to God's victory for our humanity in Jesus Christ. Singly and together, Christians are involved in those areas in direct proportion to the vividness and scope of their Easter hope.

To our society, in an "age of resignation," Christians owe some remarkable debts and perhaps the foremost is to believe our own gospel and reject the temptation to resign our social and political and economic efforts on behalf of people. And there is the perennial debt Christians owe to share the hope in Christ to which we are called. But not least is our debt to those who may never share the particular form of our hope. Out of diverse reasons, or for no identifiable reasons at all, there are millions of people who have not bowed the knee to the Baals of hopeless resignation. They press on, in ways large and small, with the effort to secure greater justice, to make human life richer and fuller and more loving. In the apparent absence of "Easter hope," they yet live more hopefully than thousands of Christians who see and wish no more for "this old world" than a Good Friday finale, with the gracious exception of themselves and their kind. Not infrequently in the biblical story the "insiders" have had to learn from the "outsiders" just how good the good news of God actually is. That may be peculiarly true in the present age of resignation, when the signs of Easter victory are cropping up in unlikely places, wherever people refuse to give up on the human experiment. To learn from and encourage and pray for such hopeful people in the world may be a signal celebration of Easter hope in an age of resignation.