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THE LIVING PRESENCE

O. P. Kretzmann

Easter

The Church of God moves from Easter to Pentecost. Many centuries before the still dawn of Eastern Day a great cry, wrung from the heart of Job, began to echo across the waiting ages: "I know that my Redeemer liveth." Taken up and repeated by countless saints, in the years of life and the hours of death, it became the great, eternal message of the open grave and the empty tomb. Early in the morning the women hurrying to the grave with the sorrow of death returned from the grave with the joy of life. The stunned silence of the disciples, torn between the warm faith of their hearts and the hard fact of the Cross, became the everlasting antiphon for the voice of Job. "I know that my Redeemer liveth." All the ages could now sing it and all men could now know it. The stone rolled away had been made by the hand of God a witness to His eternal power and a monument to His living Presence.

In the fifty days after our first Easter came what men have called "The Great Transformation." A small band of men and women, confounded and appalled by the tragedy of Good Friday, huddled behind locked doors in hidden houses in Jerusalem, became the indomitable bearers of the Cross, the men and women before whom the Roman Empire began to tremble. If they became living fagots, they knew they were torches of the Gospel. If they died, their faces at the moment of death were like Stephen's. The "face of an angel." They lived "Under the long looks of God and His glances of a thousand years." A swift, wild calamity had been transformed into a long, lasting victory.

Why? The answer lies, yesterday, today, and forever in the living Presence of Him Who walked in the garden in the cool of Easter morning. In other times men had spoken dimly of immortality and a life beyond the grave. They knew vaguely that such thoughts would make life on this side of eternity faithful, fruitful, and fearless. But they did not know! There was no sureness in their broken dreams.

Easter changed everything. Now men could know, by the power and mercy of God, that no grave would remain closed forever. Life stood once more in the light of eternity. He Who had gone down into death and darkness for the sins of men returned to life and light bearing in His mighty hands the forgiveness of sin, the renewal of hope, and the assurance of Life Everlasting. The broken seal on the grave became the unbroken seal of God on the finished redemption of man.

Easter means everything for you and for me. For a little while we may still be compelled to stand at new graves and see empty chairs. But not forever! He lives. With Him we shall live also. The Easter garden is a dim shadow of the eternal gardens of God. Nothing in life and death is surer than this. All our hurried burdened days are made glad and sure by the knowledge that He lives and loves. Easter means that there are no tears which cannot be dried.

Easter means everything to the Church of God here on earth. Just as the news "He lives" transformed the sorrowing disciples, so it can transform the life of the Church after these many years. He lives among us in His Word. His Word lives in the Church. There can be no cowardice and no indifference and no defeat. Within a room where the doors were shut, by the late-side at

dawn, His living Presence appeared. Even if our mortal eyes no longer see Him, He is still here. Easter is both beginning and an end. It is the end of His victory, and the beginning of ours.

Easter means the end of all questions and fears. There is a famous story of a British officer in India who once remarked that some day he expected to know in five minutes more than all the philosophies of the world had ever learned. When asked what he meant, he said: "The first five minutes after death." He did not have to wait that long for the answer to the greatest question in life: "If a man die, shall he live again?" That was answered, finally and forever, nineteen hundred years ago. More than that! The answer also said that man could come to the gates of heaven pleading the redemption and mercy of Him Who has the keys of hell and of death and in Whose broken hands lie power and dominion now and forever.