

The Church as Fellowship for Common Purpose

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This does not sound much like an Easter subject, and yet I have selected it for the very purpose of suggesting the deeper meaning by which all the associations of this spring festival are vitalized. The roots of its tradition, its forms, its symbolism run far back into the rich and fertile soil of human history. The institution of a spring festival was already a part of man's organized life when he first arrived at that point in his history of making records of his thoughts and institutions.

Easter is essentially the festival of life, of faith in the conquering power, the imperishable quality of life. There is a tingle to life in these days that no one can escape. Even to the most blind and sordid there comes some kind of consciousness that all about him the great mystery of life is operating with unwonted zeal and power; that we are absorbing the dead past up into the living present, the vital pulsating glorious present in whose womb the unborn tomorrow leaps with joy. Among all people this faith in the unconquerable life, in the power that overcomes all things has centered about some kind of a spring festival.

Out [of] that deep rich past of human history, with all its glory and its tragedy, we have come to this day. Many forms, many leaves of the past, many great trees in the forest of human achievement that once pulsed with the life of the living God are now but the rich soil out of which we draw our sustenance and nourishment. But on this day, as we meet together, the same spirit, the same faith that once gave hope to a more primitive man, the same living power stirs in us, and almost in spite of

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<sup>1</sup> This is from the bound collection—"bundle #6"—that is labeled "Sermons During the War." There is no explicit date on this sermon, but from the text this clearly is an Easter sermon. Also in the text there is reference to the previous Good Friday—April 6, 1917—being the day the United States declared war and entered World War I.

ourselves our souls expand and grow with the expectancy of tomorrow's glory. If you could clear away all the dross so as to leave the living power that has operated in the mind of man all through the years and ages, as it has faced year after year the mystery of the expanding life, and if you could reduce it to a single form of expression, you would find that its nature is suggested by a deep and unconquerable faith in the worth of the human personality, the human soul.

Age after age has added new vistas to our outlook, as we have climbed up the steep and rugged pathway of human achievement. New occasions have taught new duties, life has made ancient forms seem uncouth, but if we listen with an understanding ear, we shall detect the same motif running through all the strains, of joy and sadness that make the symphony of the festival of the new life. That is the background out of which we have come. Bear that in mind.

But I turn now [to] that thing in the large, to the process in the concrete. You will pardon me if, for the purposes of what I wish to say this morning, I lay before [you] with an abandonment that is not above some of the intimate experiences of my own life, for it is only through those, after all, that I can tell you the tale of the world that I live in.

I was born in the country. Our house sat upon a high hill. To the east I could look for miles, in the foreground of which view I could see the church steeples and high buildings of the nearby city. To the south was a wide range of country on whose hilltops I could see the small dots that told me the tale of human life, perhaps like unto the life in the houses that I saw nearby. Away to the west, beyond the nearest hills some ten miles distant, I have watched many a night the sun go down behind Mount Washington, seventy-five miles beyond. To the north still more expanse of country. It was a free glorious country. I roamed the fields, fished the brooks, had my adventures in the woods. I worked, played, went to school. It was just growing human life, discovering the facts, the powers, the beauty of the world that it lived in. I remember so clearly the day when I first awakened to the beauty of the woods. It was a day in spring such as we shall soon see here.

In winter evenings I read my tales of the pioneers, and the heroism of Natty Bumppo and the *Last of the Mohicans*.<sup>2</sup> Into this country that I lived in I brought men, heroes and heroines from abroad. I remember also the time when one day in school it first dawned on me that there was some kind of meaning to life. I could not see just what it was, or why it was, but I knew that it was there. I began then to work over the question of what my plan might be. I was getting hold of lines that we may wind on forever, but we shall never find the end thereof. But the winding of this line carried me away to school and college. I lived in a maze, so strange and confusing were the new relations with which I came into contact. One of the most clearly defined incidents was an experience that I had one fall evening as I was returning home from college for the weekend. As I left the train, I found the streets filled with excited people, running and shouting. I learned that there was a strike in the shoe factories, and that there had been a riot, and pistols had been fired.<sup>3</sup> I was learning something more about my world. Rights and privileges were the words that I heard and learned the meaning of then.

Years went by. I was reading, studying, playing, living, coming upon an illuminating experience here and there, or hearing and illuminating remark here and there, until one day, as I sat under the lecture of a great teacher, it suddenly dawned upon me that all those faint ideas of a meaning to life, and a plan of life were a part of the very nature of things, that life is shot through and through with meaning and purpose.

But the suggestion as to why I am here is but a slight variation of the story that each one might tell. I am not here because I was born on a hill, or went to a country school, but because, according to my ability, I have followed the lead of purpose. So also have you. In a large measure I have told your

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<sup>2</sup> James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851) American writer and author of *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) of which Natty Bumppo is a character.

<sup>3</sup> Davis does not identify the strike. There was a strike in the fall of 1893, when Davis was a first-year student at Bowdoin at the Pray, Small & Co., shoe manufacturers in Auburn, Maine. This very well could be the strike he refers to. Also worth noting, Davis' father, Augustus Davis, was himself a shoe manufacturer in Auburn, Maine.

story also. The setting is different, the experience is differently colored, and differently emphasized, but it is essentially the same. The purpose, the search after the values of life, the seeking of the holy grail, that is the story of each. On the one hand, there is the big broad generalization that we call humanity. On the other, the concrete individual. Inbetween are the groups, the centers, the fellowships that for one sort of purpose or another come together to assist, and to receive assistance, in carrying out their purpose, in fulfilling their destiny, in achieving the heights of human life, in measuring and selecting life's greatest values. Why are we here? Because life has a meaning to each one of us. We come freighted with a purpose. We have a message to transmit, a task to perform. Each one says to himself that it is his task, his message, his life. While the tale of one is essentially the tale of all, yet in another sense, each tale is the tale of an individual, with its own peculiar setting, coloring, character and quality. From the others he may receive raw material which he may work over into his own story, but the telling of his own story is his task, his life. We are not machines all cut in the same mold. We are living organisms, living personalities, each with his own peculiar mark, and character.

We are here, in this particular fellowship, if you please, because we recognize that as a fundamental principle of life. You may help me, but you cannot live my life. We may try to imitate one another, but we cannot change places. It is because we know that this is a fundamental principle of life, that our purposes have led us here where self-assertion, self-respect, responsibility, obligation to tell our tale is recognized in the principle of freedom. But further, we are here because we recognize that a second great principle is that of mutual aid. I do not want to make you think or feel or act like me. God forbid. You are to feel and think and act like yourselves. But we are here because we can help one another. You tell me the experiences of your lives, things that I never could know otherwise. Perhaps I may tell you some little thing that helps you in your great task of living, that you might not otherwise have known. Give and take is the gospel, mutual aid is a great factor in the struggle for existence, fellowship. We are here because of these two principles of freedom and fellowship.

But they are only conditions of life. They are not life itself. Under these conditions of freedom and fellowship,

individual responsibility and mutual aid, we seek a common purpose.

What is that purpose? There is a statement of the apostle Paul which, if you can give it its real meaning, contains in a negative way what I want to say, "If Christ be not raised from the dead, then is our preaching in vain?"<sup>4</sup> To put it in modern language, we would say, "If there be no imperishable character to a personality that achieved the greatness of giving his life that others might live, and if there be no place in the purpose of God that recognizes such qualities in life, then is the whole conception of life a mockery?" I believe that there is in man that character, or rather that man is incorruptible, that in his life, as it registers itself in human effort, there is operating a quality that is indestructible and immortal. I see in man that imperishable quality that rides in heroic conquest through the storms of life.

But my thoughts are not on the life after death this day. They are on that other concern which has to do with the recognition of the fact that, if human life is immortal anywhere, it is immortal here and now. The purpose is not to ensure the insignificant irresponsible life as we know it here for a future glory, but to let the elements of immortality display themselves in the life that now is, in the integrity, and the quality of life that we live, its unconquerable buoyancy, its illimitable faith, its transcendent hope. This is where the elements of immortality must show themselves, here on this earth, in the lives that you and I live, here in Pittsfield, in this fellowship, in this year, not by and by but now, in our personal life, in our political, social, business relations. When we get up in the morning, fill ourselves with the consciousness that we are not animals even though we have bodies, that we are not playing a game but living the life of an immortal being, through whose soul shoots the shaft of life of a living god. That is the big thought, the big transcendent faith that through the ages man has gleaned by the travail of his soul in the midst of the mystery of life. Whatever language he uses, whatever symbol he speaks with, that is the song that he sings this day, the triumphant song of an unconquerable faith in the imperishable worth of his own soul.

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<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:14.

But you say that all sounds very well, but I seem to hear the cry of anguish going up from a blood-stained world, writhing in the struggle of horrible war. Yes, so do I. I recall that on this very Good Friday the President of our nation has sent forth the declaration of war against a nation already shaken to its foundations. But still I believe, not entirely in spite of, but partly because of, that very situation, however much I loathe and detest war.

What we are, and what we have, has not been handed out to us as a charity. The path is strewn with conflict and hardship. Not one single idea has been given. We have earned it by the sweat of our brow, the anguish of hardship. The world is not a soft comfortable bed of ease and luxury. Even if war is not here, new truth finds but a cool reception in this world, but it does come, and it does conquer, and we do learn some things as the ages pass by, and, down at the bottom is the search for the holy grail, for the secrets of life, the acceptance of the challenge that the universe throws out to us, the daring to discover the awful sweetness of life in life and life in death, that is the thought that counts. In spite of the fact that I hate war, that I believe that it is foolish, absurd, and barbaric, I have to recognize that in the background of each of the contending forces there is that heroic spirit that says,

Though love repine, and reason chafe,  
There came a voice without reply,  
" 'Tis man's perdition to be safe,  
When for the truth he ought to die."<sup>5</sup>

It is this heroic spirit, even though it rouses itself to champion a dying institution, that lifts even a battlefield above the filth of its mud. It bespeaks the greatness of a man that can give all that he is for what he believes is important and true.

Yet it has been with heavy heart that I have watched the developments of the past week. I know that there are forces at work that are damnable, but still, I believe in man, and the imperishable worth of his life, and his ability to achieve freedom and fellowship as the conditions of his life.

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<sup>5</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), "Sacrifice," a Quatrain in *The Poems of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Co., 1867, p. 296.

I come now to the point towards which I have been striving, and I could not come to you with a song in my heart this day unless I could include in its melody the deep undertone of tragedy that is fact and factor in life. It is no use trying to live in this world by the silly process of shutting our eyes to what we call the dark side of life. We are at the end of an era. The superstructure of the past has fallen and is falling. But the end of one era is the doorway to another.

This immortal life we live here. Before us lies the future. Into the stream of life, current in this nation, have come men and women from many nations. Each brings his own story with him. The Puritan, the Huguenot, the Irishman, the German, and men from many nations to live together here. It is the melting pot of the world. Out of it, in freedom and fellowship, we are going to bring this people through, and achieve the purpose that made glorious the early days of this Republic. We have wandered far from that purpose, we have worshipped false gods, we have dragged our heritage in the mire, and we still are doing so, but the debauch of mammonism is having its last fling. Out of the stress and travail of its downfall we are going through to a greater day, where freedom shall be more of a reality than today. And fellowship, based on responsibility and mutual aid in the great common purpose of life, shall give place to [the] scramble for wealth and property.

You have often asked me why I have loved so much this fellowship. I will tell you. I have seen here not only the symbol, but the beginnings of that common purpose. I have seen here men and women from many different national hilltops of birth, associated in a common end, recognizing, respecting differences. I have seen in this the beginnings of a glorious tomorrow. I have remembered that it was in just such obscure beginnings of freedom and fellowship that the little groups that founded this Republic had their origin. I have remembered that it was in just such fellowships that the early Christian movement brought a new civilization out of the crumbling remnants of a decaying Roman Empire. I have remembered that such has always been the process of stepping forward in the world's history. As I have linked all this up with my idea of a meaning in life and have seen here in miniature the Republic of tomorrow, and perhaps the federation of the world. To be part of that, to feel that one is taking part in the life of that new

era, that is something that commands the allegiance of an immortal soul.

The task is not easy. The pathway is not clear. But the light is shining through the clouds. On this Easter morn I bid you take all earth's sadness up into your hearts, and sing, sing for joy, for I have seen in the eyes of men [the] mystery of life that shall carry us through.

### Easter

Beauty for ashes forever the planet puts on!  
Blossoms and birdlings and brooks when the winter is  
gone!  
Rise, O my soul, to the Easter without and within;  
Flee from life's bareness and weakness and selfhood and  
sin.

Live with the lavish forthspending of Nature at play;  
Fling on the path of thy fellows some luminous ray.  
Sleep not while War and Oppression hold nations in woe;  
Wide in the furrows of Man seed regenerate sow.  
Listen! the song of Humanity's springtime is near!  
Join in the chorus sublime which the race shall yet hear.  
Laugh like the sun, sound the bobolink's jubilant cry;  
This shall be Easter full-bloom, fit for earth or for  
sky.

By James H. West<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> James Harcourt West (1856-19XX) This poem, "Easter," is in his *Poems of Human Progress*, Boston, The Tufts College Press, 1914, p. 266.