

RECOGNIZING YOUR GREATNESS
I PETER 2:9-10 JOHN 14:12
MAY 17, 1987

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I walked today where Jesus walked, in days of long ago;
I wandered down each path he knew, with rev'rent step and slow.
Those little lanes, they have not changed, a sweet peace fills the air.
I walked today where Jesus walked, and felt his presence there.

My pathway led through Bethlehem, Ah, mem'ries ever sweet;
The little hills of Galilee, that knew those childish feet;
The Mount of Olives: hallowed scenes that Jesus knew before;
I saw the mighty Jordan roll as in the days of yore.

I knelt today where Jesus knelt, where all alone he prayed;
The Garden of Gethsemane, my heart felt unafraid!
I picked my heavy burden up, and with him by my side,
I climbed the hill of Calvary, I climbed the hill of Calvary,
I climbed the hill of Calvary, where on the cross he died!
I walked today where Jesus walked and felt him close to me.

It is an unforgettable experience to walk where Jesus walked--in the rolling hills of Galilee, along the seashore, and then the long trek through Jericho to Jerusalem where he would meet his death. Last week I spoke to you about our three-week trip to Jordan, Israel and Egypt and shared with you how impressed I was with the land. It was a monumental discovery to appreciate how land affects customs, traditions and religion. How grateful we are to the early Hebrews who, in the stark, austere Sinai wilderness, came to understand and make a covenant with the God who saved them and led them to the promised land--a God of time, history, and action, rather than a God of a stagnant, dead, immovable place! This morning let me share with you another vivid impression I gained: the preponderance of contrast. Israel is a land of contrasts. Jesus experienced contrast. Life is a contrast. You are a contrast.

Geographically, Israel is a land of contrast: the fertile fields of reclaimed swamp land in contrast to the Judean desert, a wilderness of rock and sand; the live Sea of Galilee which is really a fresh water lake through which the Jordan River flows in contrast to the salt filled Dead Sea; the serene, green Galilee country in contrast to the rocky, tumultuous, noisy city of Jerusalem; the heights of Jerusalem, some 2,500 feet above sea level, in contrast to Jericho, only a few miles away, and 2,000 feet below sea level; the modern Israeli cities and farms in contrast to the ancient Arab villages, farms and cities--including Bethlehem and Nazareth--with Israeli and Arab getting along nicely together, sharing a country.

One of the most moving and memorable experiences of the trip was the worship service we held on the First Sunday of Easter. On that Sunday, a week after Easter, the resurrected Christ surprised his disciples by preparing breakfast for them on the shore of Galilee after they had spent the night fishing. After breakfast, Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved him, reminiscent of the three times Peter denied knowing Jesus. We gathered in a small outdoor amphitheater which commemorates that incident. A simple statue depicting Jesus commissioning Peter has been erected on the shore. It was a quiet, sunny, warm morning when we gathered for the celebration of Holy Communion on the very spot and on the very day Jesus broke bread and fried fish for his disciples.

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Not only was it special for us to gather there on the actual day, but it was also the day the Israeli nation had set aside to remember the holocaust, when six million Jews were exterminated by the German Nazis. Our guide had explained that at 8:00 a.m. people would stop what they were doing and observe two minutes of silence. We decided to incorporate the observance into our worship service and arrived at the lake shore about fifteen minutes before 8:00. No one else was there except for two boats of fishermen, fishing with nets as the disciples had done 2,000 years ago.

Would you believe that 8:00 arrived just after we confessed our sins and prayed the Lord's Prayer? We confessed to God that we are part of a world where holocausts can and still do happen. We confessed there is something in all of us called sin that can cause us to mistreat our fellow human beings, even to violence and slaughter. After the Lord's Prayer, we paused and then heard sirens calling the nation to remember. I shall long remember that peaceful, serene setting on the shore of Galilee. Birds were singing, men were fishing, we sang "Christ the Lord is risen today," and then stood in silence, listening to faint sirens in the distance from the city of Tiberias, bonded with a nation who remembers those ancestors who had been slaughtered in a 20th century crucifixion. The irony of contrast was never more vivid than in those moments: crucifixion/resurrection; peaceful Galilee/Nazi holocaust; birds singing/sirens blowing.

When we arrived in Jerusalem, the holy city, the contrasts continued. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher has been built over the hill of Golgotha or Calvary upon which Jesus was crucified and over the tomb from which Jesus was resurrected. The hill and the tomb are only a few hundred feet apart. The tomb was originally a cave in a quarry and both the tomb and Calvary were outside the city walls at that time. The church was built over the sites to honor them and to protect them from destruction or other kinds of construction. The emperor Constantine, who made Christianity the official religion of the Roman empire in the fourth century, sent his mother to Jerusalem to find and preserve the sacred sites.

But even in such a sacred spot there are contrasts. Four branches of Christendom share the Church of the Holy Sepulcher: Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Armenian, and the Coptic Church of Egypt. Each has its own altars. But they can't agree on the administration of the church, so a Muslim family holds the key to the church! When we stood in line to enter and pray in the shrine built on the site of the tomb, we had to contend with a group of tourists who tried to crash the line. The whole atmosphere was more like a circus than a holy place. The holy sites of the central focus of Christianity--Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection--were seen in contrast to pettiness, bickering, fighting, arguing. The holy becomes trivialized. There is a temptation for all of us to trivialize the sacred.

One of our group asked Bob Hamerton-Kelly, who gave us lectures and shared his knowledge and insights as we went along, why there is church strife. Why can't Christians get along? Why do churches have crises, conflicts and splits? Why even in Jerusalem, the holy city, can't they get along? Bob's answer was brilliant. When dealing with ultimate issues, when dealing with decisions of life and death, when dealing with the sacred, the best and the worst are brought out of people. In the holiest of places, the forces of evil attack. Violence and strife abound. Bob pointed out that heaven met earth in

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the resurrection. The earth will never again be the same. Yet in that very city, the forces of evil and destruction have never been quiet. In its history the city of Jerusalem has been besieged 50 times, conquered 36 times and destroyed 10 times. The temple was last destroyed in 70 A.D., never to be rebuilt. In the eighth century A.D., the Muslims built a shrine on the place where the temple stood. In 135 A.D. the Romans razed the city and the Jews were expelled to wander through the world, until 1948 when a Jewish homeland was created.

It was good for me to have the idyllic, peaceful, nostalgic picture I sometimes have had of biblical times, shattered. Sometimes we imagine the biblical period to be serene. We imagine shepherds peacefully watching their sheep and goats, and there are still shepherds there with their sheep and goats. We imagine farmers peacefully harvesting their olive crops, and olives are still a major industry. We saw an olive tree in the Garden of Gethsemane that is 1,400 years old. We imagine fishermen peacefully fishing on the Sea of Galilee, which they still do. But at the same time let us not forget the contrast. There were and are constant battles, skirmishes, occupation by foreign armies, and conflicts within the Jewish community, in Jesus' day and in our time. The reality of contrast is still alive and well in our midst. Our church has certainly experienced its share of pettiness, conflict, and mass exodus of upset people, as have most churches.

Do the forces of evil win? At times they seem to win, but God sent one man and raised him from the dead, not a temple or a building or even a nation, but one person. The final verdict of God's triumph is in! We live in the hope of actualization and endure the contrasts.

Can you see the contrasts in your own life? The author of I Peter said to the early church, and thereby, to you and me, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people...Once you were no people but now you are God's people." Remember Jesus' words at the last supper, according to John, when he told his disciples, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you who believe in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will you do."

You have the capacity for greatness, but too often the aspiration for greatness is contrasted by sin and feelings of inferiority, doubt, inadequacy, and even evil. When you attempt to reach greatness, when you attempt to make a sacrifice for something you know is right, when you commit your life to doing something significant, when you feel closest to God, are you not then attacked by the devil? Do you then begin to doubt your opinion, doubt your ability, doubt the validity of your perspective? Do you begin to trivialize and lose a sense of excitement? Does church become boring, or same old stuff, or habit without joy? Sometimes when a person gets too close to greatness, the devil tempts him/her to do something stupid and lose it all! I wonder if these dynamics were operating within Gary Hart whose leadership is now lost to the nation? How many great persons, or persons who were on their way to greatness, have let themselves be sabotaged and destroyed! Look within you and you will see contrast; opposing forces pulling at you.

Don't be discouraged by contrast! Don't give in to the forces of temptation and evil. The author of I Peter gives us our ideal, our calling, our identity: a royal priesthood, a chosen race, a holy nation, God's own

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people. Jesus told us we could do even greater works than he. Because we so readily see the contrast of pettiness, doubt, bickering, fighting, arguing, trivializing, don't discount the validity of the call. You have the possibility of greatness. You can do something very significant with your life.

Our church has the possibility of greatness. We have the chance to create a church of God's vision and ideals, a church where people love, support, and encourage one another; a church which stands with the needy, the oppressed, and unjustly treated; a church which reaches out to the needs of the world; a church which stands for peace. Yes, there is always pettiness, bickering; yes, someone will always say something to put you down and hurt your feelings, but don't give up! Even the Church of the Holy Sepulcher has to be administered by Muslims!

Don't give up! Paul's letters to the churches are letters of encouragement: hold fast, fight the good fight, we shall overcome. We are confident because God has given the sign of ultimate victory through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and Jesus promised, "Even greater works will you do." Sisters and brothers, recognize your greatness. Rejoice in the resurrection for there is our power. In spite of the contrasts, believe in the victory.