

(organ playing)

Male Speaker: Nothing to you all ye that passed by God commendeth His love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Let us pray together. Forbid O God, that we should forget amid our earthly comforts the pains and mortal anguish that our Lord Jesus endured for our salvation. Grant us this day, a true vision of all that He suffered. In His betrayal, His lonely agony, His false trial, His mocking and scourging and the torture of death upon the cross. As Thou has given Thyself utterly for us, may we give ourselves entirely to Thee, O Jesus Christ, our only Lord and Savior. Amen. (organ playing music) (organ playing "Sweet Heart of Jesus") (choir singing indistinctly)

- Let us humbly pray. O God who has brought us to this holy time. Wherein we renew the memory of our Redeemer's passion. We recognized our need of confessing our sinful ways. We often have not taken upon ourselves, the yolk of obedience. And when we have taken it, we did not take it with joy. We really have not loved Thee with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. And we certainly have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We confess under Thee that we often have sought to reap the fruits of success without toil. We have tried to make our way through life by taking unto ourselves the achievements of others. Through the storms of life we sometimes have attempted to stand on our feet without spending time on our knees. We have taken too lightly, the threat of Thy people, the threat to Thy people which evil doers have posed. And we carelessly have allowed men of small vision and of evil heart to make great decisions for Thy children throughout the earth. Oh God, we have sinned against Thee, in many ways and are not worthy to be called Thy children, But Thou O Lord, have mercy upon us. Spare those who confess and repent of their sins. Restore us according to the promises declared in Jesus Christ. As He hung upon the cross, that we may hence forth praise and glorify Thy holy name. O God, who by the example of Thy Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, has taught us the greatness of truth and humility and thus call us to watch with Him in His passion. We are aware that when we have been chastened by the Holy Spirit, and have resolved by His aid to live a holy life. We give Thee thanks for the surge of joy, which has raced through our hearts. As we realized that our sins were pardoned, and that nothing stood between us and Thee. We pause now to receive a new experience of that forgiveness. For Thou does know our need of it. For Thy love in sending Thy Son, Jesus Christ to show forth that love as He walked among men in Palestine, as He died among thieves on Calvary, and as He rose from the dead on Easter, we do humbly give Thee our thanks. We bless Thee for the means of grace, which we find in His church, in the Scriptures and in the halls of learning. We express to Thee now our appreciation for blessings to numerous count or even to imagine. Almighty God whose most dear Son, went not up to joy until first He suffered pain. And entered not into glory before He was crucified. Mercifully grant that we walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and of peace. O God, who in the life and teaching of Thy Son has showed us the true way of blessedness. Thou has to also showed us in Christ suffering and death, that the path of love may lead to a cross. And the reward of faithfulness may be a crown of thorns. Give us grace to learn these hard lessons. And may we take up our cross us and follow Christ in the strength of patience and in the constancy of faith. May we have such fellowship with Him in His

sorrow, that we may know the secret of His strength and of His peace. And see, even in our darkest hour of trial and anguish, The shining of the eternal light Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen. (choir singing indistinctly)

Male Speaker: Hear the Word of God as it is recorded in the 23rd chapter of Luke, Two others also, who were criminals were led away to be put to death with Him. And when they came to the place, which is called the skull, there, they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and one on the left. And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Reviled, despised, forsaken, Jesus hangs from His cross, which stands between the crosses of two thieves. He is with the lost, as so often He was during his life on earth. But the lost were not only those on the crosses beside Him, but those who were responsible for the crucifixions. In this desperate situation, Jesus' first words, give us a deep insight into His nature. Jesus' attitude is that of prayer. And he prays not in despair, but in hope. He prays not for himself, but for others. He prays to God as a Father who is not abstract, distant, but who is near, intimate, very real. We reconstruct the scene in awe for it is almost as though God had offered a prayer and answered it Himself. How we know the Father from this prayer? Jesus praise to the father of the prodigal son, to the good shepherd who goes out into the night to find the lost sheep, to the father who exemplifies the love about which Paul wrote to the Corinthians. Love bears all things. Believes all things. Hopes all things. Endures all things. Though His Son is put to death, the father's love endures. Bears the brutality in the grossness of those responsible for the crucifixion. Endures the pain and the ultimate price of death, in order to reconcile us, to Him. Jesus trusted this love not as an abstract truth, but is the very core of his life. Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon Thee? Alas, my treason Jesus hath undone me. Was I Lord Jesus. I, it was denied Thee, I crucified Thee. Jesus offers this prayer for His people, not for Himself. Jesus identifies with His people, with us at the point of our lowest ebb on mankind's darkest day. What hope and love there is in this prayer? The prayer of Jesus reflects a magnanimousness and a wisdom beyond our comprehension. Nothing stirs our soul, as does this prayer. Without these words of forgiveness the burden visited upon succeeding generations, upon us would indeed have been intolerable. Do we not imagine that we would've been a part of the crowd that day? If not actively condemning Jesus at least passively, allowing this awful thing to happen. I, it was denied Thee, I crucified Thee. Our eternal thanks and praise our due God, for His Son's short profound prayer. If this grave act of rejection can be forgiven, we are not lost. Even who has wondered far, who has fallen afar, sends us in this prayer hope, a richness, an acceptance by the eternal that He could not know otherwise. A prayer we scarcely presume to make, Jesus makes for us. Man's need for forgiveness always looms large, yet it is match by his need to forgive. If Jesus can ask God to forgive men for rejecting Him, for crucifying Him, how necessary it is for us to forgive the comparatively small simple things for which we are afflicted? To forgive is to give up, to release. When we forgive, we release the person forgiven from bondage. Jesus' prayer reminds us that we need to give up not only our hatred, our envies, our jealousies and these are hard indeed to release. But that we must release our grudges, give up a possible defeatist attitude about life, that may cause us to close our hearts to love, God's love. As well as that of our fellows. We are even to forgive the needless, senseless cruelty and hurt of life. For which no one is directly responsible. If we refuse to give love, to forgive, we find ourselves unable to receive love. Whether from God or from fellow man. If we do not forgive, give love, life becomes a contest. A jockeying for position, a hollow mechanical performance. We become things, objects, we lose our identity. Jesus supremely forgives in this prayer from the cross and brings to life the lines of the Lord's Prayer. Forgive us our debts, as we have also forgiven our debtors. How

often we merely recite these lines? How seldom pray them? The willingness to put pride aside, to concern ourselves with welfare of our fellow man, to care enough to absolve Him of our censure. These are acts that require God's assistance. Yet only as we forgive others are we able to be forgiven. For they not what they do. Our real condition, our true state have never been baldly stated. Yet Jesus did not reject man. He knew the burden of reconciling fallen men to God. He knows man, man who acts thoughtlessly, who acts too often out of ignorance and makes his life dark for his fellows. There never really was a place for Jesus, during His life on earth. At His birth, in His church, in His country. Without knowing, without bothering to learn, we turn aside, we ignore each other. How seldom we minister to others? Not just to those at a distance, but to those about us. We do not take time to open our eyes, our ears, to think. There's an abundance of wrongdoing in this world, but its not most it, the result of not caring, of thoughtlessness, of stupidity. Are we not all too often cut off from our fellowman? Blinded, deafened by our selfishness, ambition, pride, greed. Even by too vigorous a devotion to causes which may of themselves be just. It is not only the outrageous, the Selma's, the senseless subway killings, for which we must be forgiven. We must also be forgiven for not taking the time to understand what is about us, the needs of people, whom we see and their concerns. For not taking the time to be persons. Are we ready to let God make us persons, whole persons? There are so much false personalization in society today in which the friendly smile is substituted for real concern. We look to others for a sense of who we are, but find that we are groping for their own identity. How can we put aside callousness and become concerned? We remember Peter at the Last Supper. Refusing to let Jesus wash his feet initially. He said you should never wash my feet. Jesus answered him, if I do not wash you, you have no part in me. Can we humble ourselves enough to let God forgive us, our insensitivity, our stupidity? Only by His grace can we do so and have a part in Him. Only if we let God forgive us of our pride, our self sufficiency, can we become persons. Person who would mean fullness, dying to ourselves and living in Christ. Let us pray. Father thank you for your undying love. Forgive us our alienation, our thoughtlessness, our indifference, our stupidity. Help us by Thy grace to humble ourselves that we may share in Thee. Keep us from ignoring your forgiveness once again, in order that we may keep our pride and push You and others away. O God, O Mighty Father, no one else can we pour out our hearts so utterly. Even those dumb yearnings for which we have no words. Give us victory in our lonely struggle for the good. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen. (organ playing) (choir singing indistinctly)

Female: And one of the malefactors, which were hanged, railed on Him saying, "If Thou be Christ, save Thyself and us." But the other answering, rebuked him saying, "Dost thou not fear God, seeing Thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds. But this man, hath done nothing amiss." And he said unto Jesus, "Lord, remember me when Thou comest in Thy Kingdom." And Jesus said unto him, "Verily I say unto Thee, today shalt Thou be with me in paradise." Those of us who come into this chapel for Easter's services, come because of faith. Faith centered in Jesus Christ, His words from the cross are spoken to us, they're applicable to our times, to our lives. Jesus speaks these second words from the cross, to a suffering man, who hangs by his side. Two thieves are crucified with Jesus. The first one is to the very last, his cynical, rebellious, selfish, attention seeking self. If he has to suffer, he wants others to suffer more. The innocent as well as the guilty, he seeks to bring everyone to his lower level and if possible, to push them below him. The second thief is also enduring great physical suffering. But he knows that Christ is suffering more. Christ bleeding head, is the result of a Roman scourging, which in itself often brought death to its victims. The second thief has no hope for himself, as he pays the penalty for

his crimes. But the crowd, and his fellow criminal shock him, by railing at the innocent Christ. This bestial insensitivity, this cynical mockery and selfish squabbling, even for the clothes of Jesus, sickened the heart of this second thief. He has been amazed by Christ prayer for forgiveness of his tormentors. His patient, undeserved suffering, His great strength of character, His will, His purpose. Fully aware of his own sins, he feels that there's an unbridgeable gulf between him and Christ. He does not think of asking for salvation at this late period of life, but he testifies to the inherent religious sensibilities of man. He asks only to be held in memory. Lord remember me when Thou come in standeth in Thy Kingdom. Jesus looks away from the taunting, morbid, cynical crowd, He focuses full attention on this one man. In His great compassion, He again forgets Himself for another, public rejection, humiliation, scorned and hatred are not new to Jesus. Jesus turns towards this man, He is moved by the words of this dying thief. This unusual man, who has defied the mob, rebuked the cynical first thief and proclaimed the innocent of Jesus. He has startled the crowd by testifying his faith in Jesus as Lord, and by openly praying to Him. Jesus' response is one of the most unusual promises of His ministry. Today shall thou be with me in paradise. Nowhere in His public teachings, had Christ ever used this all inclusive word, paradise. You come now, and go with me. Salvation is not a state of being, but a personal relationship with God. What is heaven? What is hell? Heaven is where God is and hell is a complete absence of God. For many people the opportunity of salvation comes many times. For some, it comes very infrequently. In our modern world, opportunities for salvation are often stifled, a voided and evaded. We are too busy filling our lives with so many substitutes for God that we fail even to recognize God much less to serve Him. The thief was more fortunate. For the opportunity for personal salvation came to him, not only during life but again at the time of his death. It is not difficult to understand the man's rejection of God, for this has been done on a wide scale since man was first created by God. However, man's compounded wickedness in this crucifixion, this killing of the Lord is beyond comprehension of most people. As we think about it, a frightening question haunts us. If our Lord came back to earth to spend the last 33 years of this 20th century, would we kill him again? Would we even let Him live 33 years? What direct/indirect action would be taken to first bring about his repudiation? His trial and His final execution. Modern communication media would have a field day. What of our university? Founded to become one of the great Christian universities of the world, due to have Christ in this second ministry on earth. What would the students, the faculty, the administration do? How would the trustees of the college and all the endowment? The alumni and the friends of the university join in the promotion of His ministry. And in the active defense of Christ, when He was accused. What would we do to prevent this second murder of our Lord, under attack from so many sources. Would any of us participate in subtle and even open attacks? To free ourselves of this uncomfortable confrontation. Would be so busy with our own affairs and with our little intrigues? That we would just ignore Him. Or would we blame others and like Pilate wash our hands of the whole affair? What role will militant atheism play? What of those of little faith do? How many of those who profess a strong faith could really be counted on? We need not speculate further, for Christ our Lord is and has been very much present with each of the 50 generations that have lived on earth since the day of His crucifixion. The priceless gift of salvation is and has been available to each generation as it is to ours today. Each of us must answer the personable question, what will we do with Christ, the Lord? Fortunately for our world, there are many dedicated Christians. A great deal of the meaning of love and the grace of God is missed by us. We spend much time condemning ourselves and our parents for not being better and for lousing up our world. However if we stop to think, most of us would rightly judge ourselves. But the tragedy is, is we stop here. We failed to develop to infinite goodness that is in us and in other people.

A sort of dry rot sets in. And then we start to complain about the emptiness of our dehumanized culture. Well the emptiness of the dehumanized culture was complained about 2,000 years ago. The real message of Easter, is the message of faith, hope and love. Man is essentially good but the goodness within him must be nurtured, strengthened and developed or it would die. Then he like the first thief on the cross, cannot stand being in the presence of goodness. If he cannot ignore it, avoid it or reduce it to impotence, he would kill it. Man must have faith in God as the Creator of Life and of all meaning. We must have an active commitment to seek and accept His direction in our lives. Each of us knows that in losing His life, Jesus won. The courage, mission, faith and victory of Jesus are beyond comprehension. Courage and strength come to those who have right purposes and fixed goals. Faith is difficult to define. Perhaps each person who has a strong faith has to define it in its own way. Maxwell Anderson illustrates this in the book, "Key Largo." A group of young American volunteers were fighting against Hitler's forces in Spain. It is night, they end up on a ridge which they know will be taken in the morning by superior forces. Their chance to survive is immediate retreat. The decision is difficult for if they stay on the ridge and fight, and delay the enemy, they would give precious time to their comrades. The group is leaving all except one soldier name Victor. Who says that something within him would die if he didn't believe that there is in the world a spirit that would rather die than accept injustice. Caught on the ridge that night, it was up to him to prove that that spirit is in man. Victor feels that therefore that he must stay and fight. His buddy argues with him, that in the political strife of the day, real decisions are made by powerful individuals who hide behind slogans to pursue their selfish gains and to keep the common people fighting over empty symbols. There is nothing to win even if you can win it, declares the cynic. Victor replies with words that reach to the core of man's predicament, yes, but if I die then I know men will never give in. Then I know there something in the race of men, that hates injustice more than it wants to live. Because even I had it and I'm no hero. That means that the Hitler's and the Mussolini's will always lose in the end. Force loses in the long run and the spirit wins. Whatever spirit is. Anyways its the thing that says it better to sit here with the moon, and hold them off as long as I can. If I went with you, I'd never know whether the race was turning down to the dinosaurs. This way I keep my faith, in myself and what men are and what we may be. You and I are not holding a moonlit ridge, and we probably won't lead us to die. But we are expected to live and work actively for what we believe. God has a plan for each of our lives. And life lived in companionship with God, transforms frustrations into opportunity and failures into success. Without faith in God, we can divest ourselves of our responsibilities by placing them outside of whatever selfish circle we care to draw at any given time. The circle may include just one, or maybe extended to include the marriage partner and the children. All too rarely the circle excludes Christ. If we include Christ, we need not be concerned about including others. For they automatically come in. Jesus understood His own life and death as bringing about a new covenant of reconciliation between God and man. He could do this, for He was all God and all human. He gave to man a new and sacred concept of the dignity and the great value of human life. When God first created man, he placed in him his Spirit and gave to man the great power of decision. Even God cannot force man to make right decisions, arch to develop his great potentials or to strengthen and to provide the growth of the Spirit of God that is within him. The average individual's so spiteful God's Spirit and becomes so imbued with his own selfishness that both he and his children have less and less chance of carrying out God's plans for their lives. Or developing their great potential for good. As man stifles God's Spirit, he loses all soul and will to govern himself and to help others. Instead he often wants in compensation to dominate others. Not in justice but in injustice. He first willfully misinterprets and then rejects God. He then turns to making his own gods, changing them at will.

The opportunity for man's new reconciliation as brought about by Jesus' life and death are essential to the salvation of man. Those who accept salvation are further strengthened by the Spirit of Christ which is given to them upon acceptance of Him. Of course no human being can be perfect but he can work on his imperfections and accept and discharge his responsibilities in the various areas of life. In a meaningful way, he can begin to put God first, other's second and self last. Life, if really lived, is never easy. Some pass through life clinging to the fringes, some fasten themselves on others like leeches, greatly reducing the effectiveness of all concerned. Others choose to lead a type of indifferent existence in which there is much shadowboxing with reality. Still others, too lazy to insert themselves to seek the truth, or to assume real responsibility, fail to develop faith in God and others are in themselves. The great tragedy in our world today is that its masses never pass through life knowing the richness and the rewarding experiences of the Christian life. The joys of self fulfillment are unselfish service to others. A Christian life is one of unique completeness, for salvation is a continuing process. The Christian experiences many disappointments and has many imperfections, but he is never alone. His burdens, heartaches, compounded problems and disappointments are shared by a personal God. They fall into meaningful perspective and can be approached with divine guidance. It is through acceptance of the gift of Christ love and eternal salvation that man can live life to the fullest. Life becomes broader and more meaningful and in losing selfishness, we find a different self that both we and others can appreciate and live with in happiness and growth. Life presents many choices, many temptations but for the Christian, there is inner guidance and strength. There is dedicated purpose. The great tragedy of the redeemed thief on the cross, was that he never lived on earth after receiving salvation. In many ways, his conversion just before death, is like the sweet remembered kisses of the dead. The love of Christ for mankind is symbolized in the fact that earth's saddest day and gladdest day, are just one day apart. It is only in the acceptance of Christ love for us that we can be sufficiently strengthened to fulfill the purposes of our lives. No one would argue that the thief, who received salvation at death, became a great Christian. But he did take the first great step, acceptance of Christ as Lord. We too often approach Christ under our man made rules. The Christian life is devotion to a person not an abstraction, not a creed, not a system but love of Christ as a person. Who understands and strengthens for He is both human and Lord. The disciples loved Christ as a person and they learned to accept Him as Lord. And to participate joyfully in the reconciliation and salvation. He gave His life for this. This is the message and the challenge to us. In these second words, which are spoken from the cross, this Easter season. Let us pray. Our Father, once more the meaning of Easter comes to us. Open our minds and hearts to accept this greatest of all gifts to man, salvation. Give us the dedication, understanding and patience to carry forward the eternal Christ's cross. Amen. (organ playing) (choir singing indistinctly)