



DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

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The Glory of Easter
Duke Gardens
Easter Sunrise
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Last year I was out in California at the Crystal Cathedral. At the Crystal Cathedral they have a huge Easter pageant that plays to a packed house for a couple of weeks. "The Glory of Easter." Angels on high wires. Live camels on stage.

"We work on the Easter show all year," Dr. Shuller told me. "It takes a hundred actors, three camels. The stage director used to work with Spielberg. What do you do for Easter at Duke?"

I thought. A week before we rent the sound system, we call the gardens, get a few folding chairs. Hardly enough for the glory of Easter.

William Sloan Coffin tells of attending an Easter Sunrise Service on the rim of the Grand Canyon. As the rising sun gradually turned the gray canyon to vivid pastels, some great bass voice read the Easter story over the loudspeaker. When they got to the part where the stone was rolled away from the tomb of Jesus, this huge boulder was pushed over the side of the canyon. The hundreds of worshipers watched as that great stone thundered down the sides of the canyon.

Dramatic, impressive. Perhaps a bit overdone, but it's Easter. How is it possible to do liturgical justice to Easter? We can't overdo it.

Last year I spoke at a great gathering of Christians in Florida, ten thousand of them. A gigantic choir, full orchestra opened the service. As their second anthem reached crescendo the pulpit at which I stood moved forward, hydraulically lifted upward as a gigantic banner descended behind me. With thundering finale the anthem ended and I spoke.

My little Southern accented voice crackled out into the auditorium. I sounded like wind blowing through a splinter on a telephone pole!

I was clearly in over my head, inadequate to the task.

And so am I this morning.

It's Easter. It's about God stepping in, moving decisively, rolling away the stone, vindicating dead Jesus, reversing the course of death, defeating evil.

I'm supposed to stand before you and describe, explain, somehow add to Easter? Forget it.

If it is true, if it is that God has moved, has acted, intruded and death is defeated, if the forces of evil do not have the last word, then words fail. Imagination fails.

I think that's why you get such variety in the way the evangelists attempt to bring Easter to speech. So Matthew tells of that great stone rolled away and Caesar's soldiers scattered. John speaks of the earth heaving. Mark depicts stupefied silence. Luke says, "He's back! This thing isn't over. It's just beginning!" Paul proclaims the defeat of the last enemy, death.

Most good sermons, we teach in the seminary, make contact with some area of the listener's experience, and build upon that. But what to say for an event outside our experience? Death is what we experience--in this world, all that lives, dies. What is born, decays. All whom we love must eventually go down that dark way. Caesar is omnipotent. The jaws of death are

omnivorous. Who can fight City Hall? It was a good campaign while it lasted but we did not get him elected Messiah. This we know.

Here, Easter, Resurrection is something we do *not* know, something we did not devise, conceive. Here is something that came to us, something larger than us, something beyond our powers of comprehension. *And that is its glory.*

So we get up before dawn, knowing enough to know the uniqueness of this morning, we come in darkness to the Duke Gardens, something we do on no other Sunday of the year. And even this is not weird enough for Easter. *And that is its glory.*

I cannot hope, by my frail words, to explain, to argue, to describe. I can only announce, "Christ is Risen!" *And that is Easter's glory.*

When I first visited the Grand Canyon I was a junior in High School. And I remember the stupendous natural wonder of the canyon. But most vividly I remember standing there watching others exit their buses and rush to the canyon's rim, watching their reactions at their first glimpse of that glory. And how well I remember the woman who rushed to the rim, camera in hand, checking the film, checking the exposure meter and when she got to the rim and looked at the Grand Canyon she, her mouth opened, and she quietly put her little camera away, never took a picture, just stood there awestruck with wonder at the glory.

She knew no snapshot could do justice to such glory.

"Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!" and that I know not how adequately to say it, and you know not how to hear, to respond to it is for us the proof of Easter's reality, our mute testimony to the glory. Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!