WHAT CAME OUT OF EASTER

Pilgrim Church, Duluth Easter, March 26, 1978 Royal F. Shepard, Jr.

Let me begin by asking you to do something. Close your eyes for a moment and try to imagine the church you attended as a child. If you went to several churches, as I did, then pick out the one that first made a strong impression on you. Close your eyes and try to imagine what the building was like on the outside and on the inside. Then try to picture the people who were there and some of the happenings that took place. Finally, try to bring back some of your feelings about this church you went to as a child.

Each of us has our own memories of the church. In many instances, I suspect, our oldest memories concern things that do not seem to have much to do with religion. For example, among my earliest memories of church is a set of large, wooden blocks I played with in the nursery. My mother always said that she was going to get me some blocks like that, but she never did. Still, the aspiration lingered. The time came at last when I knew I was rich enough and had room enough. I went into a toy store on Wisconsin Avenue in Milwaukee and ordered a large set of wooden blocks for my daughter Melanie. We still have them, although she doesn't play with them very much. But here is an example of how those aspirations engendered in our first contact with the church may work out to fulfillment. Would that we could say the same with confidence about certain moral and spiritual aspirations we try to engender there!

Our first encounters with the church have shaped us, molded us, helped to make us what we are. Some years ago my family and I were riding down a Missouri freeway on a Sunday morning. Suddenly a church loomed beside the highway. It was a United Church of Christ of the Evangelical and Reformed background. We drove off the freeway and went inside the sanctuary waiting for the service to begin. A very earnest young layman in a jet black suit was running around performing his duties as Sunday school superintendent. Then the church filled to the rafters with farmers and villagers. The service was rather liturgical, reflecting its essentially Lutheran heritage. But a guest singer from the Church of the Nazarene offered a gospel hymn to the tune of "O Sole Mio."

Afterwards the name of that town, Wright City, stuck in my mind. Suddenly I made the connection. That was where the Niebuhr brothers, Reinhold and H. Richard, were born. Their father was pastor of that congregation. Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr became towering figures, both in Protestant thought and in practical politics. I said to myself, "From now on whenever I come across the word 'church' in their writings, I shall know that lies behind it." No matter how sophisticated their ideas, that kind of church is the basic reality that shaped them.

But to speak of brothers is to acknowledge that memories are shared as well as individual. Some of your earliest church memories are shared memories. Some of you grew up in this church and hold together a common remembrance that goes back ten years, twenty, even fifty years and more. Such memories provide a linkage between us. Just before I moved to Duluth I was asked to take communion to an elderly woman whom I had never met. I agreed to go. I noticed the picture of a white frame church on a table in her living room. She told me that this was a picture of her church in Missouri, the one that was there before the present brick building was put up. I told her that I once drive across Missouri on a Sunday morning and stopped to go to church in a place called Wright City.

"That was my church," she said. "That is where I was born."

It turned out that she knew the Niebuhr family. She once corresponded with Ursula Niebuhr, she told me. Then she got out her baptismal certificate, written in German and signed by the elder Niebuhr.

So there was a linkage between this old lady and me.

In the communion service there was still a deeper linkage. In that service we are reminded that all of us in the church hold shared memories. These memories gather up a spiritual heritage that reaches back to the events surrounding the life of Jesus. In some way beyond words the impact of those events has been handed down to us from generation to generation and from person to person. These all come to a focus on the day we call Easter.

No one knows exactly what happened on the first Easter. Church people hold widely differing ideas and beliefs about Easter even within the same congregation. There is one thing, though, that we can say about Easter with some certainty. Whatever happened, something came out of it that is a matter of definite historical record and which is still with us today. That something is the Christian Church.

The Church came as a surprise. It was a surprise to the authorities in Palestine, both religious and secular. They thought that calvary put an end to the whole business. But Easter proved them wrong. It remains a surprise to historians. The great church historian of Yale, the late Kenneth Scott Latourette, speaks of the "unpromising" circumstances surrounding the rise of the church in the Roman world. Yet unpromising or not, the church did rise. It is still a surprise to some of us that the church keeps going.

From the beginning it was a unique community. It was unique in its universality. Though its roots were in Jewish culture and always shall be, very soon the church became international, interethnic and interracial. Criticism has been directed to the church in recent years because of its bondage to European and American culture. Our missionaries have been described as the advance agents of western imperialism. There is considerable truth to such charges. Still, we should not overlook the fact that the church began in Asia and that all of us here today are here today because of a missionary movement that moved initially from east to west and from south to north. Here in Duluth we have all these Scandinavians with their thin veneer of recent civilization covering all those millenia of savagery. They are as white, northern European as you can get. Yet the Christian Church was established in Ethiopia many centuries before it got to Norway, and in India long before it made it to Sweden. Indeed, there are many more church goers in India now than there are in Sweden. That is true not only because the small minority of Indian Christians far exceeds the total population of Sweden. It is also true because the involvement of Indian Christians in their churches is much greater than the nominal affiliation that characterizes most Christians in northern Europe.

The church is unique too in its tremendous diversity. In some ways this is a disadvantage. We deplore the quarreling that lies behind many of our divisions and we regret the wastefulness of denominationalism. In that passage from Acts that we heard this morning, it is said that in that very first church gathered in an upper room, people "devoted themselves with one accord to prayer' Can it be said today that Christians devote themselves with one accord to anything.

Still this diversity has led to an incredible richness of variety. And underneath there still lies a common ground. Underneath lies that Easter experience. Egyptian Coptics, Puerto Rican Pentecostals, Dutch Mennonites and

Transylvanian Unitarians all look back in their own singular ways to that common source of inspiration.

The church is remarkable too in its heritage of heroism despite all the pettiness and meanness in the church from the very beginning, we do have our heroes. There was Paul in prison writing his friends,"For me to live is Christ and to die is gain." That gay blade, Francis of Assisi, throwing up everything he had known for a life of hard discipline and humble usefulness among the poor. There was the refined Quaker lady, Elizabeth Fry, venturing into the stinking prisons of London. There was Theodore Parker, writing his sermon with a pistol on his desk while a runaway slave hid in his study closet There was Martin Luther King, Jr., marching ultimately to his death at the head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. We remember these people and we take pride.

Still it was neither the far-flung universality of the church, nor its great heroes, that you brought to mind when I asked you to picture the church you attended as a child. What you remembered was some local group of Christians, a "gathered church," our Congregationalist forebears called it. That is what church means to most of us most of the time. As we look back into our childhood we grow nostalgic about this local church. But when we come up to the present some of us have misgivings.

In recent years many of us either have grown indifferent toward the church because we felt it served no useful purpose, or we have grown hostile toward it because we felt it did more harm than good. That is understandable. The church today requires radical criticism, yet such criticism is constructive only if it is accompanied by a faith in the church equally unreserved.

It was just about ten years ago that a rebellious Franciscan priest and I were invited to speak about what was wrong with the church to a coffee house gathering in the downtown section of a western city. The coffee house was sponsored by churches in the area, but it was full of anti-establishment types ready to egg us on. There was also a newspaperman present whose column I rather wanted to send up in smoke. So the priest and I did a fair job of raking the church in all its forms over the coals.

When I got through talking that night I was feeling great. I sat down at a table across from two high school girls. I waited for their congratulations. The two girls looked at me very soberly and said, "You can't give up on the church. Don't you see that it is people like you whom we look to in order to make the church what it ought to be?". I argued with them and refused to accept what they said. But I knew in that instant that they were the church and that they were ministering to me. I never saw those girls again, but I shall live each day of my life knowing that I stand in their debt

Someone else sitting in that coffee house was a Congregational minister some years older than myself, Robert L. Carlson. The church he served was a constant trial and to this day I don't know how he stood it. This was a big, old downtown church with a proud past, a fading present and a dreary prospect. It had an aging and declining membership. Once I attended a meeting there - I was about thirty-five years old at the time. I looked around, turned to my wife and said in a state of panic, "Everybody here has at least thirty years on me!" There were some younger people in Bob Carlson's church. In fact, he started a series of rollicking Sunday evening services replete with rock band, chalk talks and balloons. But at the core this church impressed me as hide-bound and reactionary. A few years earlier they had refused to admit a black family to membership. One Fourth of July weekend I preached there and made

some mild remarks about good and bad kinds of patriotism. Afterwards one of the ushers said he was afraid I came on too strong. I knew that Bob preached more on social issues than I did. I wondered how he could survive from one Sunday to another.

Last week I looked in my file marked "Church" and was surprised to find there an article that Bob had written for that church newsletter in 1966. He headed his article "The Glory of the Local Church." He said that many people felt that such churches had had their day, but he wanted to list a few reasons why they remained important. Here are his reasons:

It is the local church that proclaims the good news of God's love in Christ and administers the sacraments.

It is the local church, working hopefully in close cooperation with the family, that nurtures children and youth and adults in their understanding of the Christian faith.

It is the local church that gives to innumerable people the opportunity as followers of Christ to bear each other's burdens and to rejoice in each other's victories.

It is the local church that solemnizes marriage"in the presence of God and this company" and stands for the sanctity of the home.

It is the local church that has the opportunity to bring the transforming, reconciling word of Christ to bear upon the crucial problems in the community in which it finds itself.

It is the local church that provides the resources for personnel and substance to implement creative ministries in the nation and around the world.

It is the local church that prepares people to meet in faith the inevitable summons of death.

It is the local church that gives people the opportunity to share in the corporate worship of almighty God.

It is the local church that provides a setting in which people can discuss with one another the ultimate issues of guilt and forgiveness, life and death, meaning and purposefulness.

Of course, we all know that on any given day the local church may fail to do any or all of those things very effectively. Still the opportunity to do them is always there.

And then in that same file, like Easter, another surprise. Just as I came to Duluth a young man named Mike enrolled in the Pacific School of Religion where I had recently received a doctoral degree. Some years earlier I had welcomed Mike and his family into a church I served in Wisconsin. Here was another of those strange linkages. But even more startling links appeared. Mike met Bob Carlson's daughter, Cathy, in Berkeley. Subsequently they were married and both were ordained as ministers of the United Church of Christ. It has been so long since I have seen either of them, that I doubt that I would recognize them, but since these coincidences occurred we have corresponded from time to time.

Last week along with Bob Carlson's newsletter I found in my file some quotations from my 1963 confirmation class. At the head of the list was one by Mike, who was then in the eighth grade.

"I believe that the church is the halfway mark between heaven and people."

Now I shall have to send that to Mike and say to him, "Surely you have learned the hard way by now that this is an overstatement. You must have known times already when you came to the conclusion that the church is more than halfway between people and that other place." Yet perhaps Mike's naive description was not altogether wrong. For in the church we continue to remember one who brought into the world a higher dimension, a heavenly presence. In a way we cannot comprehend he left that presence among us as a lasting bequest. Out of it the church was born and continues to live. Most of the time I find it very hard to view the church as the halfway house to heaven. But I will say this: "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it!"