

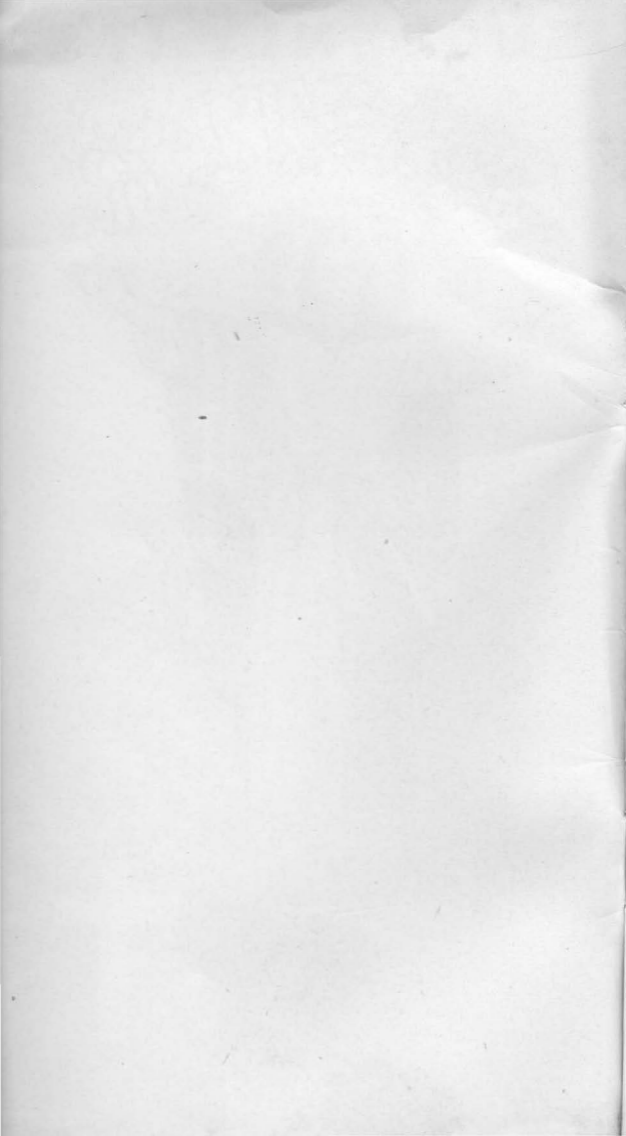
SUDDENLY IT'S

EASTER

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by Daniel A. Lord, S.J.



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It's Easter

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Suddenly It's Easter

By Daniel A. Lord, S.L.

THIS IS A BOOKLET of happiness
and hope

*That in Your Soul
There May Be the
Springtime of Grace and
Easter's Glad Alleluia*

is the sincere good wish of

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Suddenly It's Easter

By Daniel A. Lord, S.J.

THIS IS A BOOKLET of happiness and hope.

Yet, as happens often enough in life, it must start against a background dark and stormy. Light has a way of shining brightest when the room has been dark; the sunrise can be most beautiful after a moonless night.

ALMOST FROM THE DAWN of history men have lived under a cloud of fear.

Fear, threatening shadow of an advancing enemy, has been man's constant companion. Indeed, as is characteristic of shadows, the brighter the day—or the age—the clearer has been the shape of the shadow of fear.

Men and women have feared the approach of sickness. They have frantically clutched their possessions as the shadow of poverty's black hand reached out to deprive them. In times of peace they have dreaded the far-off thunder of war's approaching storm cloud. They have apprehensively watched the eyes of friends for the gathering film of boredom, distrust, suspicion, dislike. They have been

terrified by the enemies they knew and dreamed up enemies who bore no names and had no recognizable features.

They have feared the known and dreaded the unknown.

Summer days have been blackened by fear's pursuing shadow. The opaque darkness of the night has been made more terrible by fear's silent footfall.

Apparently no hero however brave has totally escaped the dogging footsteps of fear. Certainly the saints have needed to call upon their deepest faith and clearest hope to conquer that relentless foe of man.

Yet it would seem that all fears are really one fear—the fear of death. That great, overwhelming, brooding fear spawns all other fears. For every other fear, whether the fear of sickness or poverty, the fear of losing friends or winning hate, the fear of loneliness, the fear of sin, is a foreshadowing of that ultimate and final fear, the fear of death itself. We dread to lose the other things because they are like preludes to the total loss in death. We find in poverty or sickness or friendlessness or sin a foretaste of death, perhaps a direct opportunity for the coming of death.

SO THE RICH MAN CLUTCHES his money in the frantic certainty that he will someday lose it all through death and in the futile fiction that as long as he possesses it he can buy off the relentless reaper.

The bridegroom looks into his bride's eyes and swears that his love will be deathless... while in the moment of most intense love he has the frightening certainty that someday death will cut them apart.

The athlete dreads the first faint sigh of skipping pulse or paling cheek. The beauty searches the mirror for the first signs of approaching death in the wrinkles around her eyes.

The young run breathlessly, knowing that in the end the slow, steady stride of death will overtake them. The strong struggle to retain their strength, knowing that they will one day meet the wrestler before whom they will fall for the last time.

DEATH REMAINS IN HISTORY and to the human race the plainest fact and the most terrible.

Those tall gladioli that wither on the banquet table are just as much symbol of the ending of life's feast as was the ancient skull that marked Egyptian feasts.

The fall of the House of Usher is merely external sign that the Ushers of the world must also fall.

Nations that rise to vigorous strength and beauty carry within them the root causes of their ultimate collapse. Their destiny is a tomb in the pages of an encyclopedia.

And men and women at the very instant of their birth begin to die.

TODAY, like every age in history, we have our special fear.

We tremble in the shadow cast by the brightest light ever struck by human genius—the appalling blaze of the atomic bomb. We have seen how, after that blistering blaze has died away, there rises a shadow so terrible that cities wither in its deadly nightshade, and houses melt to welded rubble, and tens of thousands of men fall like leaves under the lava of a spouting volcano—and sickness utterly without cure rides the breezes of the next decade as death comes astride his newest charger, the radioactive waves.

We fear, we who live in history's most amazingly resourceful age, the inventions we have created, the wars that only we can evoke, the next depression caused by the very skills that aim at labor-saving, work-destroying machines, the godless enemies who

grew strong out of our own loss of faith in God and our contempt for the protective laws He has given.

We fear the enemies of Christ because so many of us are no longer Christ's friends and followers.

Yet in Christ and only in Christ is the ending of man's ugliest haunting ghost, the death of fear itself.

For Christ came for that purpose, to destroy our greatest fear, the fear of death.

*W*HEN JESUS WAS ASKED who He was, He answered in words that were the greatest possible reassurance to His followers:

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life."

His explanation of His mission, His platform, His major objective, was precisely what human hearts craved and what no other leader had ever been able to give:

"I am come that they may have life and may have it more abundantly."

The more abundant life . . .

How amazingly modern is that need! How wonderfully reassuring is that promise to fearful, death-surrounded mankind!

To confirm His words with deeds, He performed miracles that were like well-directed blows at our major fears. From His hands came the never-ending gift of life. Both His promises and His works were deeply, powerfully reassuring.

*H*E TOUCHED DEAD LIMBS, and they leaped with fresh, eager life.

He laid merciful hands upon eyes long dead to light, and they opened to look upon the earth and the sky, and the faces of loved ones never before beheld.

He spoke divine mercy over dead souls, and they woke from the death of sin to the life of grace.

He took the limp hand of the dead son and gave him back in the vigor of young manhood to the widowed mother, who in grief was following him to the grave.

He summoned from the tomb of swift decay the dead, shrouded body of His friend Lazarus, and Lazarus walked forth into life.

*T*HEN CAME the terrible disappointment of Good Friday.

Christ Himself fell before the always resistless enemy, death.

Over the heavens swept the terrifying shadows of Good Friday's storm. Over the hearts of those who stood on Calvary swept the brutal shadow of the ancient fear.

Was there perhaps less of taunt and more of hope in that apparently cynical challenge from beneath the cross, "He saved others; Himself he cannot save"?

Was there a twisted mixture of hope at least in the secret souls of the simpler people as they shouted, "If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross"?

Was there almost a frantic appeal from the people to the Father to save this man who had promised life to all and given life miraculously to many, this man who had said that He was the Son of God?

*M*ORE HUNG ON THE BALANCE of the cross than just the life and death of a single man, Jesus of Nazareth called King of the Jews.

Suspended between heaven and earth was the hope of all mankind balanced against the age-old oppressive, paralyzing fear of death. In Jesus the people had sensed the champion who would meet death in the lists and throw him from his skeletoned charger.

Was He too to fall beneath the blows of death's leveled lance?

They had seen in Him the one man in history who had defied death. He had showered life about Him with a divine prodigality. He had called Himself life itself and without reservation had promised life to those who accepted Him and His mission.

He had fed the body with miraculous, life-giving food, striking at the desperate fear of hunger. He had fed other thousands with truth, dispelling the parallel fear of ignorance and lies. He had mercifully forgiven sin, driving from the soul the fear of sin and the dread of the demons who through sin became the cruel masters of the soul. He had cured the sick, banishing the fear of sickness.

He had promised a treasure that rust could not corrode or moth consume or thief pilfer, thus striking at the fear of want.

He had lifted the dead to life, by these miracles destroying the very root of all fear.

"I am the resurrection and the life," He cried, in a glad assurance that has made the funerals of His faithful followers totally different from those of others who come to the gates of death.

*A*ND NOW . . . Jesus hung upon the cross, over which hung the storm clouds that rumbled with earth-shaking fear.

The crowd stood watching more anxiously than they themselves knew. They were literally on tiptoe at this crucial moment in their hopes. What would happen to this giver of life? Would the death He had conquered for others now conquer even Him?

Over them, as happens at all executions, swept the nauseating fear of death. They watched greedily. Deep within them was the hope that in the end the execution would fail completely. He would suddenly leave the cross, and they would see this champion do what no other man had ever done—defy and conquer the age-old enemy, death.

Or must He too die? Did He too have deep in His soul the fear of death?

*C*HRIST THE MAN, like ourselves in all things save sin, had known that fear of death.

He had willed in obedience to His Father's command to die as all men must die. But He had dreaded death, as all men dread that enemy.

Had they been with Him the night before, they would have seen Him

pass through the very fear of death that has contracted human hearts since Adam—and worse than any fear that they could ever feel. For He had looked into the brutal eyes of death, had wrestled to a final fall with man's enemy until He lay gasping in a sweat of blood.

Incredibly He seemed to beg His Father to spare Him the horrible ordeal, if such was His Father's will. But He knew that the will of His Father was inexorable and that He would rise from His prayer to meet the oncoming death in a traitor's kiss and the hedge of arresting lances. He lay as if dead upon the blood-soaked earth.

WHAT THE PEOPLE NOW SAW amazed them. They, the men and women who had heard His life-giving words and watched His life-compelling miracles, now saw death creeping upon Him irresistibly, with a despairful finality. And as the familiar shadow settled about the cross, hope died within them, and they turned away and went despairfully back to their homes.

Death had triumphed again.

The shadow of their fear was now blacker than ever.

Even this triumphant teacher and miracle-worker had failed to escape man's greatest enemy. Could anyone ever hope to outrun, outsmart, or outfight by force or innocence or virtue or wisdom or divine power the ever triumphant, completely resistless enemy of all mankind?

THE APOSTLES DID NOT LOSE their faith on Good Friday. What they lost was their hope.

The memory of His miracles and the unforgettable wisdom of His teachings were still too strong for a collapse of their faith. Somehow, they believed, out of this apparently total fiasco His work would continue, His teachings live, His law take root, His Church find its dim beginnings.

But for themselves the future was bleakly hopeless.

Dreading the very shadow of fear, they ran wildly away from His death, which had shattered their hope of life, and hid in dark places.

Most typical of this reaction was that of the two disciples whom the risen Lord was later to accompany along the way to Emmaus.

On that Good Friday these two had seen what they thought was the end. To them He was still the greatest of

the prophets. But the fierce hope they had once had in Him was now dead. His enemies, chief among them the enemy death, had hounded Him out of life. These two, like the other followers, prepared to return to the dull, shadowy lives they had known before, lives that would move with downgrade acceleration to death and the tomb.

Christ was dead indeed when the final blackness of Good Friday settled upon the earth.

THE SCOURGING HAD PREPARED the way for a swift execution. The heart-bursting ascent of Calvary under the killing weight of the cross had worn away much of what was left of physical resistance. The crucifixion had about it a grim finality . . . the imprisoning spikes and the spears of the watching legionnaires. Then at the end almost with superfluous cruelty the lance blow of the centurion placed the final period after His sentence of death. The last pale drops of blood and water poured forth from His veins, and His body was emptied completely of life.

In triumphing over this life, death had triumphed over the Lord of life.

A tomb folded its cold arms around the lifeless sacred form.

Men crawled back into the bleak and terrifying shadow of fear.

THEN SUDDENLY IT WAS EASTER. No need to report to those who have read and heard them a thousand times the glorious facts. No need to remind ourselves how carefully history attested this world-centering fact as no other fact in history has ever been marked and related and retained in exact memory.

But a very real need brings us recurrently back to break the mystery again and discover its inner core and meaning.

As dawn ended the dark night that covered the waiting tomb, as spring split the bleak earth in the rebirth of glorious nature, so life opened the sepulcher of death. And the Savior, who had promised life and granted life, Himself came forth alive.

He, who like all members of the human race had been conquered by death, now unlike any of the human race turned the tables and conquered the conqueror.

He was dead . . . and suddenly He is alive.

He was cold in death . . . and behold He lives!

EASTER IS FAR MORE than just a day of renewed life.

Easter is the day of days that guarantees life.

And that guarantee is what mankind had always craved and sought.

Men somehow knew that there was life after death and that the apparent finality of death was one of life's strangest illusions. But what final and convincing proof had they of this life after death? What tangible, palpable conviction within the range of sound and sense?

They knew God as the life-giver. But they wanted more than just this knowledge.

FROM THE BEGINNING God had promised life and had poured it out upon the world and His beloved sons and daughters.

Out of cold, dead chaos and the hot gases that destroyed all possibility of life, God had summoned by creative power the life of flowers and fruits, of birds and fish and animals. He had filled the universe with living creatures.

He had made first in dignity among His visible creation a man and a woman, breathing into them the breath of life. Carefully He had fashioned

their exquisite bodies. He had wakened their minds to vital power: They thought; they willed; they dreamed; they planned; they reasoned.

In a final and magnificent gift of gifts He poured into their immortal souls—souls destined to live forever—His life of grace. They shared His godlike powers; they were marked as His beloved sons and daughters; they were the heirs to His eternal kingdom.

*A*LL THIS WAS HISTORY. God's clear revelation had slowly unfolded before the eyes of His chosen people the glorious facts.

Pagan religions remembered enough of the truth (they once possessed it more fully) faintly to echo it.

Philosophers who had never seen the sacred Scriptures came by the light of reason not too far from the glorious truth—that there was a life-giving God, who had shared with His human creatures a life not too unlike His own, who promised them in the demands of their own natures a life after their life on earth.

Yet against all this stood the stark appalling, brutal, unforgettable fact of death.

The most beautiful and the strongest human body slipped irresistibly into a rotting grave.

The eager, questing minds of poet and philosopher too swiftly grew dull, inert, and to all seeming dead.

The human being craving, as he did, life after life knew, as all must know, the paralyzing kiss of physical death. His eyes went dead to the light; his lips ceased to respond to challenging words or the caress of the beloved; his will that once had dared the mountain peaks of human achievement stopped suddenly as does a watch that crashes upon stone flagging.

In terror the nations soon learned to build their most durable monuments less to house living kings than to shut away from sight and smell the corrupting bodies of dead heroes.

DEATH WAS CLEARLY the end of life. It was the horrible negation of man's finest dreams and desires.

So the pagans believed. . . . Yet all of them, however crude their religion or nebulous their philosophy, held fast to the hope that the physical death they saw did not mean the end of everything, that there was more, something else, after the last gasp on earth.

Their whole nature and their deepest reason cried out that the earth could not continue its way while man and woman, for whom the earth had been

fashioned, ceased to exist. The light of the stars could not glimmer serenely after the light of love had perished forever. The mysteries of visible creation could not continue their challenge while the mind of man, alone of all creatures able to understand them, fell into premature death.

So they dreamed of life after death.

They imagined Olympus and the Elysian fields, Valhalla and the happy hunting grounds, the Islands of the Blessed, and the eternal banquet of heroes. They buried their kings in tombs that could defy time, tombs symbolically defying death. They placed at the feet of the dead food and coins for use in the next world.

They painted or sculpted on the walls of their sepulchers scenes from the judgment that they were sure followed death. They pictured the delights that awaited the good and the penalties that would be meted out to the wicked.

But in and around all these contrivings was the shadow of their incessant fear. . . . The threat of death was all about them.

THEY BELIEVED. But with what guarantee?

What certainty had they that their imaginings were true?

What proof was there that the God who gave life meant never to take it away?

What heart-warming, fear-expelling conviction could shatter their doubts and give them the certainty that death was not the end? They longed to know beyond cavil that life, man's only real possession, was not in the end to be snatched away. They longed to know that all human hope and desire were more than illusions, imaginings.

If death was the end, then the God who had placed in their souls the craving for happiness without end was cruel. He had let His best creatures fall in love with life—only to snatch that life away. He had briefly lent them the power to see, and He meant in the end to strike them eternally blind.

He had let them taste life, and He meant to wither their power to love. He had set them searching curiously the exhaustless universe; and when they had lifted the smallest curtain and plumbed the least of the world's wonders and caught some faint glimpses of truth, He meant to strike them into immobility and death.

*L*IFE WAS A TORMENT if it was only a brief loan.

Tantalus was patron saint (or demon) of all mankind if at the end of life there

was the futility of unawakening death, if at the end the things that life had taught men and women to love were snatched away forever.

What men wanted was less life than a guarantee of continued life.

Men had not asked to be given life. But once given the precious possession, men demanded that their God-given yearning for life should not be thwarted. In the brief span of their years they had only tasted the sweetness and promises of life, its implications and possibilities.

If with its blasting breath death blew life away, then men were tricked indeed.

So many a pagan thought. So many a pagan thinks.

A God who gave life only to snatch it away would be a cruel God indeed.

Did God mean to do that?

*W*HAT WAS THE FATE of man when the grave closed and the tomb was sealed and death had won the victory over physical life?

Then came the answer. For suddenly it was Easter.

All the things that men had hoped were proved true. Men's deepest

dreams became dear realities. They looked in at the door of the opened grave, and they caught a heartening glimpse of the world to come. The risen Savior walked in a garden, and men knew that they should one day walk in the eternal gardens of paradise.

WHAT A MORNING was that first Easter!

Against the springtime background of earth reborn, Christ rises. God had revisited the dead earth and waked it to the glory of bud and flower and blossoming tree. And into that springtime world comes the triumphant Christ.

He breaks His wintery tomb.

The powerful, untouchable seal of Rome's power melts before Him.

The Savior of the world walks the earth He had saved, consoling the sad, reassuring the fearful, the glorious conqueror of man's most hated enemy, death.

Though His body had so completely sunk in death, Jesus rises to the fullest life that a man can ever know.

For the first time in history burial was, not final, but a brief translation from mortality to immortality.

Over death He had won the victory of the Resurrection.

The battle of Calvary had not ended in a rout; it had been won by the surprise attack that followed apparent defeat.

To the great human hope of life after death is given the guarantee of the risen Savior.

AS WE COME TO UNDERSTAND the heights and breadths of Easter's meaning, we come to the end of rational fears.

Note that we say *rational* fears.

For there was to be even in the heart of the most loyal believer a certain emotional fear of death. Saints whose vision of supernatural truth has been particularly vivid have welcomed death as the gateway into heavenly bliss. They saw the angel of death, not as a black thing swinging a killing sword, but flame-colored and bearing aloft a torch to light the brief dark passage that leads to eternal glory. The Church in the prayers for the dying begs that the benign and joyous face of Christ greet the departed soul.

But in the heart of even the most faithful there has been a personal fear. Would death find him ready? How would his soul look to the just judge?

Would the measure of his life's achievement merit for him the incredible bliss that awaited those who had been good and faithful servants?

This kind of fear was natural enough.

But it did not work against the glorious certainty of Easter. It was merely a cloud no bigger than a man's hand, not a black, stormy, enveloping cloud of uncertainty and dread.

For with Easter the basic fear of death was ended.

*M*EN at last received what they had asked — the guarantee of life after death.

They saw a man come back from the grave.

They glimpsed His splendor and His glory.

The question whether after death there was any hope was answered with convincing finality.

And the heart of man was deeply, durably glad.

In the light of Easter truth becomes brilliantly clear.

Death is the entrance to life unending.

The grave is merely the black gate swinging freely onto the opening path to paradise.

The tomb is really the antechamber to heaven.

The last act of a man or a woman is, not a stumbling exit, but a grand entrance; not a dying fall, but an ascent to glory.

After life's earthly story is written, not a cruel, totally unsatisfactory "The End," but a challenging "To Be Continued."

We know that death is not the severing of love; for the soul was made to love; and there is ahead the beautiful God and—however secondary in importance—reunion with friends. The mind does not, like some spent toy, wind down to a dull halt; it pauses briefly before it begins its real life, with all of God's truth to explore and all the mysteries of God's universe to see and know and understand.

Christ moves among His friends, loving them, seeking them, comforting them.

Christ knows no barriers of space and time, no limitations of body, no obstacle to easy progress.

Christ moves swiftly toward His eternity with the Trinity.

And as He, so too we.

FOR EASTER IS THE TRIUMPH not alone of a single man, Jesus Christ, the risen Savior.

Easter is the triumph of the human race.

Saint Paul knew that when he exultantly reminded the faithful of his day that the Resurrection of the Savior was the pledge and guarantee of our resurrection . . . that if Christ be risen from the grave, our faith is a living, glorious fact, and we shall one day know the life unending that is His.

His death is our salvation.

His Resurrection is our guarantee of life eternal.

Because of Calvary we know that we shall not die forever.

Because of Easter we are certain that we shall live as long as God is God and Christ is the triumphant king.

JESUS CHRIST LIVED as the perfect representative of the human race. He was the Son of God, who beyond all else loved to call Himself the Son of man.

Like us He was born—though unlike us miraculously of a virgin Mother.

Like us He lived and labored, knew friendship and the threat of enemies, weariness and joy.

Like us in all things save sin He knew death.

As we shall do one day, He rose from the grave.

We are more accustomed to put that last thought the other way: "Like Him we shall rise from the grave."

But the parallel is true either way. The basic pattern of the life of Christ is the basic pattern of all men and women—birth to death, life to labor, resurrection and immortality.

As Christ, so we.

His way is our way. His Resurrection is the guarantee of our resurrection. Like Him we shall know life after life, light after darkness, the brief transition that is the grave, and the compelling fact that the tomb cannot hold captive the immortal soul that He has redeemed.

Like Him our souls will leave our bodies to find the fuller life. Like Him one day even our bodies shall know the glory of the resurrection.

... always supposing of course that we have walked His way and obeyed His law and served Him in purity or in penitence.

WHEN GOD GAVE MAN the great gift of life, He gave Him the fundamental gift on which all other gifts are based.

When Christ promised to give us the more abundant life, He knew the deepest cravings of the human soul. To our natural immortality He added the joys of supernatural life.

When on Easter He rose from the grave, He gave us that certainty that alone makes love worth the having and alone guarantees the just and passionate cravings of all mankind.

Here was that more abundant life.

Here was the pledge that that life was to be our eternal possession.

Like Christ Himself we too shall taste Death.

Like Him we shall know the brief ordeal of our passion.

Like Him we shall have, if we are faithful and true, the Easter that begins with death and lasts for all eternity.

We walk, we who follow the Savior, in the springtime footsteps of a Savior who died briefly but who lives forever. We serve the conqueror who took from death its sting and from the grave its terror and who gave to life its full meaning and the guarantees that alone make life worth the having.

YES . . . SUDDENLY IT'S EASTER. Christ rose from the dead to prove His divinity. By the same splendid miracle He proved again and most convincingly our life after death.

Suddenly our workaday world is flooded with a light from heaven.

Suddenly we stand face to face, not with the suffering, but with the world-conquering king and Savior.

Men without faith still stand almost with deliberate choosing of the darkness in the shadow of their fears. We who have faith can see even through the transient clouds of war or storm or blasting atom bomb the eternal blue of God's Easter sky.

As Christ stood in the garden on Easter morning, the duration of His Passion must have seemed infinitesimally short.

As He looked ahead, the continuance of His Easter must have seemed—as it truly was—eternal.

Again as Christ, so we.

The fears of our Gethsemani are the ticking of seconds—long at the time, brief in retrospect.

The longest passion is on the calendar of God hardly the duration of one swing of a pendulum.

But from the moment of death onward stretches the endless glory of the resurrection, the eternal triumph of redemption, the bright gold and scarlet of the Easter sky, which knows no bound of time and no closing in of horizon.



THE QUEEN'S WORK

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