



April, 2017

Dear brothers and sisters,

Easter Sunday comes after Good Friday. We remember the Jesus Christ's resurrection from death on this day, as Apostle Paul said, "if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins." Thanks be to God that Jesus has risen from death and when He comes again, we shall all be resurrected into a new body, full of glory like Christ's. Therefore, we sing joyfully on this day of resurrection that "To God be the glory, great things He hath done." Despite this heavenly hope, we still have to face numerous ups and downs, sunny days or rainy days, in our life. The truth of Jesus' resurrection helps us as believers stand firm in the midst of our life's changes and learn to handle inequities and difficulties in our journey. Let me now share with you a most unforgettable Easter that my wife and I experienced.

That Easter was spent while we were on a boat some forty years ago, although the scene remained vivid in our mind on every Easter since. The Vietnamese war was just over and the iron curtain befell in that region on earth. More than a million Chinese people were businessmen before the Vietnamese liberation. After Vietcong unified the south and north Vietnam, they conducted purges of capitalists with Chinese facing the ill fate first. Waves of persecution followed. This was exasperated by Vietnam's military confrontation with China that drove its troops across the border. In retaliation, Vietnamese government released their anger on ethnic Chinese. To avoid persecution and run for freedom, my wife and I together with our 4-year old daughter boarded a Chinese fishing boat, which was hardly fit for sea voyage, to begin our journey over raging waves of the South China Sea.

The ocean was dear to me as a child. My parents went to Vietnam from Hong Kong to do business in my childhood and we lived close to the beach. In those days, we hardly had toys. The treasures that my siblings and I had were all things picked up from the beach. When weekend came, we would rush to finish our homework and beg our elder sister to take us to the beach. We did not know how nor dare to swim in the sea. But we joyfully combed the beach to pick seashells and raced to get the most beautiful, intact ones. While my siblings bent their heads as they walked on the beach to pick shells, I carried a small shovel and a plastic pail to dig into sand holes to unearth those clams in hiding, for I knew that pretty and intact shells could only come from live ones. Those shells washed up from the sea were mostly broken and lacked the lustre of live ones. Those live shellfish I dug up, less than an inch long but kaleidoscopic in color and so treasured by me, had their shells shut so tightly that one could not open them with razor blades. If the flesh inside were not removed, it would soon stink. They would naturally open if boiled but the shells would lose their sheen, certainly not a good way. This is a general problem for all live clams, including small ones dug up from the beach or those harvested at sea. There was no way to dig out the flesh hidden deep under the spiraling shell without damaging the shiny surface. I eventually learned a cruel way to deal with these shells: to put clams or other types of shells in a dry pan and expose them to sun for a day. One then leaves the pan under the tree near an ant's nest. Within two days, the ants would clean up the flesh inside and return to me colorful and shiny shells!

The ocean was also a place for my rest. My college was on a hill overlooking the vast sea. In the evening, one could see lights in fishing boats. Fishermen were catching cuttlefish in coastal water. In the morning, while the sea was veiled in clouds, fishing boats sailed away from the port. At dusk, as the crimson sun gradually set in the midst of its glorious glow, it turned the sky into a colorful painting. At the end each examination, I would throw myself into the bosom of the sea, floating leisurely on the water, meditating with eyes closed and letting the warm seawater wash away my toils. Watching the sea was also my favorite pastime. The leisurely clouds in the sky, the joining of the sea and sky at a distance...I still dreamt of the lights on the fishing boats, seagulls, clams, waves and beaches years later.

The ocean, seemingly gentle and calm, had in fact an angry side. I will never forget the night when our fishing boat, the hope of our escape to freedom, navigating gingerly to avoid Vietcong patrol boat, finally reached the open sea which I never saw before. The color of the deep sea was no longer blue as I used to see in coastal waters but was dreadfully black. Other than the water and the sea, not even a bird was seen. We realized then that the ocean was like an unstable giant. We were constantly in anxiety, even when the sea was calm, worrying if it would become furious the next moment. When that happened, we could be thrown into air and then fell into abyss, an utterly frightening experience. In addition, the boat lost its direction. There were five hundred and seventy-four people in the boat, which consisted of three levels made with wooden planks. People could only crouch on the floor even when they fell asleep. Only a few spoonful of fresh water was rationed to each person per day and there was no food to eat. Those couldn't make it were thrown into sea by their fellow refugees. After two weeks at sea, all one could see was still water and sky with no land in sight. Besides the lack of food, fresh air and water, an even bigger challenge was to make sure the boat was leveled to keep it afloat, for an overloaded vessel could easily capsize, taking its passengers into the deep black sea.

There was a radio on board. One day, the usually silent radio suddenly awoke with sounds from a station in Hong Kong. Everyone became jubilant! It broadcasted the arrival of Easter. That evening, we saw dolphins jumping in the sea. Experienced sailors shook their heads for they knew that a typhoon was looming. Surely, raging waves came that night, tossing the boat up and down like a tiny piece of wood. Freezing cold seawater rushed into the boat. I hugged my wife and daughter, humming a familiar hymn "It is well with my soul," and prayed "Lord, we are dying, please make the sea calm." Afterwards, our daughter fell asleep while gust and rain continued with the waves still raging, beating on the boat as if determined to shatter it. People were hopelessly awaiting their final destiny with only a breath remaining. A giant wave then struck the boat, caused it to shake violently. That awakened my daughter. People were amazed and said, "little girl, how could you sleep under such dire situation?" My daughter was quite puzzled and replied, "We already prayed and God listens to prayers. How come we could not sleep?" My wife and I were astonished, remembering what Jesus said, "unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." The simple faith of a four-year old child was plainly manifested in the midst of danger.

The long night was finally over and roaring sea returned to tranquility. The sun steadily rose in the eastern sky, spreading its glorious rays across the ocean. In fact, the storm actually saved us. It forced the lost ship to re-chart its course toward to the winds to prevent being beaten broadside, thus arriving safely. It then dawned on me that our Lord indeed listened to prayers but He did not follow our will to make the sea calm. Instead, He led us to safety via the waves. The refugee boat was then led by Hong Kong police vessel and sailed into harbor. Upon surviving the ordeal, we celebrated the passing of the suffering in the overcrowded boat. The morning sun and the glorious dawn rejuvenated our hope. As our little boat slowly moved forward, a familiar hymn was heard over the airwave, "Low in the grave He lay, Jesus, my Savior, Waiting the coming day, Jesus, my Lord! Up from the grave He arose, with a mighty triumph o'er His foes, He arose a Victor from the dark domain, And He lives forever, with His saints to reign." The shore was in sight as Easter was dawning.

Thank God for listening to prayers and watching over even sparrows. Thank God for not listening to our own will in calming the storm; we then would have continued being off course at sea, to be lost at last. His will was above ours. He calmed the waves, led the lost boat into safe harbor. My wife and I are especially grateful to God on Easter. In fact, it is God's gift to us everyday of our lives. We live in an unpredictable world and no one knows about tomorrow. Through the storms, we realized that everything is under the control of the everlasting God, He protected us to walk through the valley of the shadow of death and He will lead His people through their life's journey, for our God is never wrong. More importantly, we know that Our Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. Jesus has risen indeed; our hope is no longer in this world!

Serving with you in Christ,
Rev. Calvin Chan