

Changed Lives

A sermon preached by Theodore S. Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Easter Sunday, April 19, 1987. Scripture Lessons: Jeremiah 31:1-6; Psalm 118:14-24; Colossians 3:1-4; Matthew 28:1-10.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

I wonder if our Epistle lesson seems to put a damper on our Easter celebration. We began with triumphal music from flute, piano, organ, brass instruments, bells and choir. We joyfully sang of the risen Christ. Our Old Testament lesson assured us of God's everlasting love. The Gospel lesson told us about the discovery of the empty tomb and the appearance of the Risen Christ. Everything has been upbeat but the Epistle lesson.

"Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you once walked... But now put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and foul talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another."

It seems a little morbid for Easter Sunday. Why not some other Epistle lesson that talks about the joy of eternal life? Why does the church assign this lesson to be read on Easter morning?

Maybe the answer is this. The pagan world in which St Paul lived was most impressed with how the Gospel changed the lives of men and women. Most people in those days had no problem believing in miracles. They believed in all sorts of miracles and wonder-workers. We'd call them superstitious. But the ancient world did have a difficult time believing that ones life could be fundamentally changed. And so they were utterly amazed when they discovered men and women who no longer lied as a way of life, who stopped cheating, who stayed faithful to their marriage partners, who sacrificed wealth to rescue unwanted children abandoned on the city dumps. People's lives weren't usually changed like this in the ancient world. There was a strong feeling that the stars and fate determined what kind of person we are and what would become of us. But

here was a fact that the pagan world had to face. A sizeable number of men and women were breaking free of the moral and ethical corruption of the ancient world. Their lives were being radically changed and they were changed by the fact of the resurrection of Jesus. Changed lives were the strongest evidence for the resurrection of Jesus.

Changed lives are *still* the strongest evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. About 18 years ago I told the Presbytery of New Brunswick, which was examining me for ordination, that I felt a special call by God to minister to people who questioned and doubted the Christian faith. I left seminary armed with all sorts of arguments for the existence of God, the resurrection of Jesus and the authority of the Bible. I was on the prowl for atheists and agnostics. There was only one problem. I couldn't find any. I had all this ammunition and nobody to fire it at. When I got into my first parish I discovered, to my disappointment, that nearly everybody was a convinced believer. Few people came to me with theological questions. Instead they came to talk about everyday problems; problems with alcohol, with marriage, with children. The teenagers, especially, had all sorts of questions about sexual morality. The fact of the resurrection was taken for granted. But what did that fact have to do with everyday living?

This pastoral experience has deepened my understanding of the Christian faith. Christian faith *is not* merely believing that Jesus rose from the dead. Christian faith *is* trusting that we've been raised with Christ to newness of life; that "we've put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature." Unbelief, on the other hand, is living as if God is dead; as if Jesus isn't alive; as if our lives can't be changed.

Many people are hopeless about changing their lives. Some *don't want*

to change but others, maybe you, have simply given up and dropped out because you've really tried to change but failed again and again. You feel trapped in self-destructive habits or patterns of life. You've proved to yourself that you're *unchangeably* irresponsible or compulsive; *uncontrollably* self-despising or self-indulging; or *constitutionally unable* to trust and commit yourselves to anyone, including God. You feel fated to continue in self-destructive kinds of behavior because of influences on your life over which you have had no control. It's little wonder that so many give up on themselves and on others. We begin to think of ourselves or others as "hopeless cases" for whom nothing can be done.

But Christians bear witness to a God who raises the dead. ~~Do you dare believe that? Because Christ has died and risen again, we believe that~~ there are no "hopeless cases". So we refuse to give up on others or ourselves. Christians are people who believe that what is humanly impossible is nevertheless possible with God. We bear witness to this faith by living with ourselves and with others in confidence that change and new beginnings ^{are} possible. This hope has nothing to do with naive optimism about human potential. It's based on hope in the liberating and transforming power of God who raised Jesus from the dead.

Of course this power also works through human efforts. But Christians believe that God's power will continue to work even when our very best efforts fail. "Our life is hidden with Christ in God", Paul says. The new life that God has given us is so often hidden even from ourselves to the point that we wonder if we really have put on a new nature. But even when it's hidden from ourselves and others we stubbornly hope and work for Christlike change in our own lives and in the world.

These changed lives don't happen overnight. As Shirley C. Guthrie Jr. has pointed out in his recent article in *The Presbyterian Outlook*, sometimes we preachers give false hope. We promise that if people just "turn their lives over to the Lord" or "accept Christ as their Lord and Savior" their lives will be miraculously transformed overnight; all their problems instantly solved; all their needs and desires immediately satisfied. But the Christian gospel doesn't promise instant perfection or immediate victory. It promises that through the risen Christ, through his Spirit, the power of God is at work in us, renewing us after the image of our creator.

This morning I'm appealing to you, on the basis of our Christian faith in the resurrection of Jesus *to live* changed lives; *to believe*, on the basis of Christ's resurrection, that it's possible to let the Risen Christ begin to change your life. Christ is risen! Christ is alive! Christ is present this morning in this sanctuary. The presence of the Risen Christ is in your lives, a presence you can know and trust and obey. I ask you, therefore, to renew your faith in Christ this morning. Nothing else will change your life so radically, nothing else will alter death utterly and forever. Only what God did on Easter Day, only faith in what God did on Easter Day- he created newness of life as a gift for everyone who is willing to receive it.

Let me close with a familiar story of a rebellious young man; a modern prodigal. He'd messed up his life, run away from home, committed crime, been convicted, sentenced and jailed. In anger and rebellion, he'd cut off all contact with his parents who had no idea what happened to him. But as he sat there in prison month after month he began to think about home and he began to change. He began to appreciate some of the things his parents had tried to do for him. He began to miss his Father's house. And near the

end of his prison sentence he decided to write home. He wrote,

"Dear mom and dad,

I know I've bitterly disappointed you and caused you pain and agony. After I left home I got in trouble with the law. I've spent the last year in jail. My sentence is almost up and I'd like to come home if you'll have me. I plan to take the train. Since the tracks go right behind the house before it gets to the station I'd like you to let me know whether I should stay on the train or get off and come home. If you'll let me come home just hang a white sheet on the clothes line and I'll know its alright to come home. If there's nothing on the line I'll keep riding.

Love...

As the train rounded the bend and approached that young man's house he was half afraid to look. Finally he gave in. He looked and he saw the clothes line and the branches on all the trees covered with white sheets. Not only was he allowed to come home, but his mom and dad were welcoming him home with open arms.

We are all so much like that young boy. We've left our Father's home. We've erred and strayed from his ways like lost sheep. We've followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We've offended against his holy laws. We've left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we've done those things which we ought not to have done. *And we're half afraid to come home to the Father;* afraid that he'll reject us; afraid that we just can't live up to his expectations; afraid of failing and going astray again; afraid of our old nature; afraid that not even God can change us. But on that first Easter Sunday, God hung out all the white sheets for us. And the Risen Lord says to us, "Do not be afraid. I've come to take you back home to your Father. You've been away too long. I've missed you. I have loved you with an everlasting love. Do not be afraid."

O God, who for our redemption gave your only-begotten Son to the death of the cross, and by his glorious resurrection delivered us from the power of our enemy: Grant us so to die daily to sin, that we may evermore live with him in the joy of his resurrection; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Almighty God, you brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, ~~Christ~~ the glorious Prince of Salvation, with everlasting victory over hell and the grave; grant us power, we pray, to rise with Him to newness of life, that we may overcome the world with the victory of faith, and have part at last in the resurrection of the just; Through the merits of the same risen Saviour, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, world without end. Amen.