

## Christ's Victory and Ours

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Easter Sunday, April 3, 1988. Scripture Lessons: Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118:14-24; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Mark 16:1-8.

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

It was about 15 years ago. I was sitting in my study, in the Manse, in Reedsville, PA. Someone knocked at the door. A young man I barely knew stood there, tears in his eyes. "What's wrong, Bob?" I said. "I want to be born again", he sobbed. I said, "What?" "I want to be saved!" Well, unfortunately, this doesn't happen very often, at least to Presbyterian ministers, and I was speechless. I was scared. It was so unexpected. It took me by surprise. And, I thought, this isn't the way it's suppose to happen.

Now if Bob had come knocking at the door and said, "Pastor, I have doubts about the resurrection of Jesus", I could've handled that. I'd have said, "Come on in. Let's sit down and talk." I'd spell out the evidence: How do you explain why the church changed it's day of worship from Saturday to Sunday except that Jesus rose from the dead on Sunday? How do you explain frightened disciples suddenly preaching the gospel except for the fact that they'd met the Risen Christ? If the enemies of Jesus had stolen the body why didn't they produce it and nip in the bud the rumor of his resurrection? If the disciples had stolen the body and lied about the resurrection how do you explain their courage in facing torture and death for a lie. I could've handled that because, you see, I expect people to have doubts and questions. I think it's normal, <sup>at times</sup> even for Christians.

Or if Bob had said, "My wife just left me and I don't know what to do", I could have handled that. Ministers suspect that a lot of people have problems in their marriage. If he had said that, I'd have invited him in and asked him to tell me what happened. We'd look at his options and perhaps

suggest a professional marriage counselor.

But he said, "Pastor, I want to get saved." That scared me. I didn't know what to say. You see, so often in the Presbyterian Church we don't expect people to get saved like this. We don't expect people to ~~ask~~ to get saved. We don't even like to use the words, "Saved" and "Born Again". They frighten us. We expect people to get saved "decently and in order." We bring our children to be baptized. We nurture them in the faith. When the child gets to ninth grade we say, "Well, it's time for Johnny to join the church." So they go to a communicants class. They study the Bible, Christian doctrine, prayer and the sacraments, worship, and the history of the Presbyterian church. They write a confession of faith and present it to the Session. Then, on an appointed Sunday, they stand up here in front of ~~the congregation and answer formal questions in which they promise to be~~ Christ's faithful disciple until their life's end. That's the way we want it to happen. We don't know how to handle it if it happens some other way.

But Bob said, "I want to get saved *now*." I couldn't tell him to wait several weeks for a new members class. I suddenly remembered I had a little booklet called, "The Four Spiritual Laws". Now, my minister friends and I would make fun of this little book. It's simplistic. The theology is shallow. But somehow I felt that Calvin's Institutes wasn't the place to start with Bob. So I invited him in. We sat down and together we read through this little pamphlet. "First", I said, "God loves you, Bob, and has a wonderful plan for your life. Secondly, we've all sinned and our sin separates us from God. Our good works, our piety, our philosophies can never bridge the chasm that separates us from God. But, third, Jesus died for our sins. He rose from the dead and he's alive today. Jesus is the Bridge over troubled waters. He alone can bridge the chasm that separates

us from God. And, fourth, Bob, you can receive Jesus into your heart by an act of personal faith right now. The Risen Christ says, 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come into them and sup with them and they with me.' And then I said to Bob, "Will you invite Jesus into your life now and ask him to give you new life?" And he did. I was amazed. I was utterly amazed. Afterwards I thought, "God sure must have a weird sense of humor, sending this man to a Presbyterian minister to get saved through the use of that shallow, simplistic booklet that I like to make fun of."

The fear I felt when Bob came to me to get saved must have been something like the fear the women felt in our Gospel lesson. Like me, they should *not* have been afraid. They should have *expected* Jesus to rise from the dead. ~~Jesus had told them repeatedly that he must die and on the~~ third day rise from the dead but they simply didn't believe. They were really dense! The women, the apostles and all the disciples should have ~~been~~ gathered there at the tomb on Saturday night <sup>to wait</sup> ~~waiting~~ for Jesus to break death's bonds. But they didn't. They quickly came to terms with his death. The women came to the tomb, not to greet the Risen Lord, but to cover up the smell of death with spices.

One of the great faults of the mainline churches today is that so many <sup>(what?)</sup> of us have stopped expecting God to raise dead people to life. Like the women we go through the ritual of anointing dead people, never really expecting them to come alive. And when somebody really does come alive we don't know what to do with them. They scare us.

You know, I believe that most young people are very religious. They wouldn't want us old folks to know it, but I believe that among themselves they talk more about God and Jesus than we give them credit for. Why

aren't so many of these young people battering at the doors of the churches instead of dabbling in the occult, experimenting with non-traditional religions? Could it be that we've failed to present the Gospel as a living experience? David H.C. Read, says that so often, instead of bringing people into a vital contact with the Risen Christ and conveying the excitement of life in the Spirit we've tended to offer theology and current affairs.

Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish Philosopher/Theologian, once spoke of a stranger in Copenhagen who was lost. He asked someone how to get to a certain street in the city and was handed a map of the world. He didn't need a map. He needed a guide to lead him to where he wanted to go. When lost people are searching for the living Christ, so often we give them a book of theology, rather than personally lead them to Christ.

Notice, in our Gospel lesson, that the tomb was empty but the empty tomb didn't convert the women. "They went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." That's how Mark's Gospel ends. He doesn't bother to tell us that Mary Magdalene met the risen Jesus, that Peter met him, and James and John and Thomas. Obviously Mark believed that Jesus appeared to his disciples after his death and resurrection. He writes the Gospel from the stand point of a convinced believer who had himself met the Risen Christ. But he ends the Gospel so strangely, with the women fleeing from the tomb in fear and trembling. Some people believe that this simply can't be the way Mark ended the Gospel. There are several longer endings to the Gospel but the earliest and best manuscripts break off with this passage. Most scholars, however, believe that verse 8 is the original ending.

Let me tell you why I believe that this is exactly how Mark ended his

gospel, and how this deliberately unfinished Easter story can be for us today a challenge to our own faith. Just because the story is left hanging it draws us into it. It's an invitation for us to write our own endings-- and that's exactly what happens when a man or woman today makes the discovery that Jesus is alive. The angel in the Gospel said to the women, "Go... Jesus is going before you... you will see Jesus." That's a promise that can be proven only by obeying it and believing it. "Go... Jesus is going before you... you will see Jesus."

Most of us have inherited a Christian tradition and believe, or want to believe, that Jesus rose from the dead. But somehow, sometime, somewhere, each one of us must come to his personal meeting with the risen Lord. Jesus can't be locked up in a tomb and he can't be locked up in a church. But hopefully ~~this Church is a place where we can meet the Risen~~ Christ. Hopefully this church is a church that expects God to raise to new life people who are dead and to lead lost people to the Risen Christ. But the Risen Christ can't be confined to a church. The living Christ is abroad in his world and not locked up in sanctuaries. So I challenge you to "Go!" Jesus is going before you. Go and keep on going with your eyes open to his presence until you see him and come to love and obey him. Amen.