

LETTER TO A DYING MAN

Isaiah 65:17-25; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; 1 Corinthians 15:19-26; John 20:1-18

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson
Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA
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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Years ago a dying man wrote to me asking me, "What happens when I die?" I responded with an embarrassingly long letter which he received days before his death. The heart of my reply was not an intellectual argument, but a confession of faith. I wrote, "I believe that because of Christ's resurrection you will not merely survive death, but conquer death. I believe God has destined you to share in Christ's victory over his last and most dreadful enemy, death."

I do not come to you this morning to talk about the resurrection of Jesus as a neutral, objective, passionless scholar. Scholarship is terribly important to me. Intellectual integrity is invaluable. But this morning I come to you simply confessing my faith. I come as one who finds myself on really bad days clinging like a drowning man to the Risen Christ. If I didn't believe God raised Jesus from the dead – soul and body - my life wouldn't make much sense to me, nor would I have hope to carry me through my times of darkness. I believe the soul and body of Jesus, severed by death, were reunited on that first Easter Sunday. The dead body of Jesus was not simply resuscitated to die again, but resurrected and gloriously transformed. Jesus did not merely survive death. He conquered death. If Christ has not been raised I can't help but think that Christianity is a gigantic fraud. If Christ has not been raised then, as Paul said, I am "of all people most to be pitied." And even though I believe in the resurrection of Jesus it will take the rest of my life to let that belief soak through and permeate and penetrate and marinate all my thinking, feeling, and willing life.

When I say I believe God raised Jesus from the dead I mean, first, that our bodies are important. Our bodies as well as our souls are important - to ourselves - to our loved ones and, above all, to God. We love people *with* our bodies and *in* our bodies. We aren't simply souls trapped in bodies. We *are* bodies. We are *somebody*. Whether you're old or young, fat or thin, smart or done some really dumb things you are somebody. Whether you're tall or short, strong or weak, red or yellow, black or white – the gospel of

the resurrection declares that *you are somebody terribly important to God*. The resurrection means hope for the *whole* person, because it's in the unity of body and soul, not in soul alone, that we belong in life and in death to Jesus Christ. When somebody we love dies, we miss them soul and body. We continue to feel their presence and personality even after death, but we long to see them again bodily. Our hearts ache to touch and embrace and kiss them. That's what makes death so terrible, so painful, such an enemy. Death robs us, not only of the personality, but of the bodily presence of people we dearly love. Of course we don't want merely a body artificially kept alive by machines, but the Gospel of the resurrection declares that God raises the dead – he raises us bodily. I don't know how. I don't know when. I can't describe the details or give the scientific explanation of how it can be. Nor can I offer absolute proof. It's even beyond the power of my imagination to conceive. But I believe! I'm betting on an empty tomb and a real body raised to new life and transformed by God's resurrection power. I'm betting my life. I'm betting my money. I'm betting my time and energy and all that I am and have – that God raised Jesus from the dead. And because he lives – one day I'll bodily embrace not only the Risen Christ – but my loved ones, in their bodies, whom “I have loved long since, and lost awhile.”

When I say I believe God raised Jesus from the dead I mean, secondly, that there's hope for *this* world. The Risen Christ is what St. Paul called “the first-fruits,” the first part of the material universe which has been redeemed and is therefore the beginning and sign of God's new creation. In the resurrection of Jesus we hear the Lord proclaim, “I am about to create new heavens and a new earth.” A lot of people have given up on the world. They escape it in meaningless diversions. They “have measured out” their lives “with coffee spoons.” They avoid the world, sometimes in the name of their religion. More and more people don't get involved in politics or in civic associations or labor unions or advocacy groups or even in the Parent-Teachers Organization. They don't even vote. A lot of people have given up on this world. They refuse to take responsibility for the world's future. But the resurrection of Jesus Christ enables us to dream of heavens and earth made new by God's resurrection power. I have a dream of a world where “no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall there

be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime.” Because God raised Jesus from the dead I dream a world where people made new by God’s resurrection power “shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity” for Christ is risen, and God has promised to raise our fallen world. There’s hope for *this* world. Christ is risen, dream a new world! Christ is alive, take responsibility! Jesus must reign, therefore be what God has destined you to become, his agents in the transformation of the world beginning where you are, in your family, and in your community.

When I say I believe God raised Jesus from the dead I mean, thirdly, that God is going to win in the end. You’ve heard me say it before. I hope you hear me repeat it as long as I live. The resurrection of Jesus is a sign that God is going to win in the end. Death in all its form will be destroyed. Drug addiction will not have the final say. Heart-attacks and Cancer will not carry the day. Alzheimer’s disease will not have the last word. Multiple Sclerosis will not prevail. Sin will not win. Life will win over death, good over evil, love over hate. God is going to win in the end for Christ “must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” *And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die.*

Hearing about the resurrection is not the same as encountering the Risen Christ as Mary Magdalene discovered. Examining the evidence of the empty tomb, as Peter did, can be extremely important intellectually, but it’s not the same as meeting the Risen Christ. The Risen Christ is alive. You may actually come upon him face to face and fail to recognize him as Mary did. Or you may have heard the Risen Christ speaking your name this morning. By the power of the Spirit, preaching actually gives to us what it proclaims -- the real presence of our Lord Jesus Christ. Or you may encounter the Risen Christ in the world as Mary did, not in a church, but in a garden. The Risen Christ is present in this world incognito. His presence for the time being is a hidden presence. But he’s given us signs of his presence. Christ tells us we’ll see him in the hungry, the imprisoned, the sick, and the stranger. But we’ll never encounter the

Risen Christ in the sick and imprisoned unless we visit those who are sick and imprisoned. We won't find Jesus in the hungry and thirsty unless we go to those who are hungry with food and those who are thirsty with drink. **We won't meet Jesus in the stranger unless we provide hospitality to strangers in our midst.** My dream is for our church to invite people to join with us as we seek Christ's hidden presence in the world. My hope is that members of the Oxford Presbyterian Church will *ourselves* be signs that Christ is alive and at work in us and in the world.

Every day I look for signs of the Risen Christ - look for signs of new heavens and earth. Will you look with us? He's waiting for you – the Risen Christ, not in strange and mystical experiences but in the ordinary and messy experiences of every day life. And wherever we see signs of the Risen Christ in the ordinary world, those places cease to be ordinary and become holy. If you're unsure about Christ's resurrection ask, knock, seek. Ask, and the Risen Christ will be given to you. Knock, and the Risen Christ will open to you. Seek and you will find the Risen Christ. Go where He's promised to be present. Seek him where He says he'll be found. Wonderful things can happen *in* us and *through* us and *to* us when we go through life looking for signs of the Risen Christ. Ask, seek and knock and you will begin to see the Risen Christ everywhere.

*He is the Way. (W. H. Auden wrote)
Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;
You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.*

*He is the Truth.
Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;
You will come to a great city that has expected your return for
years.*

*He is the Life.
Love Him in the World of the Flesh;
And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.*

AMEN

Let us pray: Glorious Lord of life, by the mighty resurrection of your Son you overcame the old order of sin and death to make all things new in him. Grant that we who celebrate with joy Christ's rising from the dead may be raised from the death of sin to the life of righteousness; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.