

Of First Importance

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Easter Sunday, April 3, 1994. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 25:6-9; Psalm 118:1-2, 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.

There's a story going around that ministers tell one another. Three persons died and stood before Saint Peter at the pearly gates. Saint Peter asked each of them the same question. "Explain to me what Easter's all about." The first person responded, "Isn't it something about an event in November which features a turkey dinner and cranberry sauce?" Saint Peter shook his head in discouragement. The second person replied, "It's an event in July with a lot of red, white and blue bunting, bands, picnics and fireworks." Saint Peter fell into deeper despair. The third person said, "Easter's an event in the spring in which someone died and was buried in a tomb." Saint Peter perked up in anticipation. Finally, someone had some notion of what Easter was about. Then the person continued, "Then, several days later an angel rolled the stone away and someone came out, saw his shadow and went back in for six more months of winter."

We wonder if that's an appropriate way to begin an Easter sermon. But many today are quite fuzzy about the meaning of Easter. Back when I was in Princeton Theological Seminary, in the late 1960s, one of my professors used to say that we're living in a post-Christian era. He said, "Don't assume any longer that even church members will know much about basic Christian beliefs and practices." He said, "You can't even assume that everybody will know what happened on Easter." He said, "Even Christians have a tendency to confuse basic Christian beliefs with national and cultural myths."

My message, therefore, is designed to declare, without equivocation, that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead and to comment on the relevance of that fact for us today. Kay, my wife, told me to keep it short and simple. Kay is my most valiant defender when others criticize me. But she's also my most ruthless critic. When we're riding home from church on Sunday she'll often say to me, "Ted, what exactly was the point of what you were saying?" So, this morning I want to proclaim what is of first importance in the message of the Gospel.

Point one: God created all of us in God's image. Red and yellow, black and white; male and female - we're all created equally in God's image. God created us good. In fact, he created us very good. God created us to live a full and meaningful life in fellowship with God and with one another. He made us to live together in peace and justice and love for God and one another.

Point two: Something terrible has gone wrong. Something has broken the intimate relationship God created us to enjoy with Him and that has affected our relationships to others. Something has gone wrong in my life and it has gone wrong in your life. We don't have to look far to see evidence of this. We see it in wars, conflicts, divorces, physical and sexual abuse, labor-management disputes, unwanted pregnancies, racial prejudice, ethnic cleansing, crime, drugs, environmental pollution. War, violence, hatred, prejudice, starvation and all that's evil in the world and in ourselves are not God's intention. Something terrible has gone wrong.

None of us is perfect. None of us can save ourselves. We can't restore the

intimate relationship God wants us to enjoy with Him. We try to bridge that gap through good works, through religious practices, through philosophy, through psycho-therapy, through international diplomacy, and through all kinds of philanthropic activities but we always fall short. We're still alienated from God. The most religious persons in the world are in the same boat with the rest of us. Mother Theresa, Pope John Paul II, Billy Graham would be the first to admit this. We're incapable of restoring the broken relationship with God which is at the root of all our other problems.

Imagine that for some reason everyone of us wanted to get across Niagara Falls. It's probably about a quarter mile across the chasm that separates Canada and the United States at Niagara Falls. Let's imagine that each one in this sanctuary lined up and, one by one, tried to jump across Niagara Falls. If Carl Lewis, the greatest broad jumper in the world, were there, he'd get farther than any of us. Some of us would probably trip and fall before we even got to the jumping point. Most of us would end up somewhere in between. But none of us can jump across Niagara Falls. And none of us can bridge the gap that separates us from God. No matter how hard we try, we fail. Our efforts are commendable but they lead either to self-righteousness or to utter despair.

Point Three: God still loves us despite our failures to be reconciled to him and to one another. God comes to us in the person of Jesus Christ to reconcile us to himself and one another. Saint Paul wrote, "I handed on to you as of first importance... that Christ died for our sins." The resurrection of Jesus confirms

that this, in fact, has happened; Christ died for our sins. This is something that has happened objectively, once and for all, whether we believe or not. The fact that Christ died for our sins does not depend on our response. God unconditionally forgives sins through the death of Christ.

When I was a boy, Preston McGinnis broke the living room window in our house when we were playing baseball in the yard. Actually, it wasn't all his fault. I pitched the ball. Preston hit the ball. Eddie Grandel didn't catch it. We all ran for cover. But my mother was omniscient. She knew everything. She found us hiding in the back yard. We added to our guilt by lying. We denied the crime and said we hadn't the slightest idea of who did it. When my mother didn't buy our lies, we started blaming one another. "Eddie did not!" "No I didn't! Preston did it!" "No, it's Teddy's fault. He threw the ball." Not only our relationship to my mother was broken, our relationship to one another was broken as well.

"I told you not to play there!" mom said. "I should spank all of you!" But she didn't. We were plainly in the wrong and she didn't minimize our sin. She forgave us unconditionally but it cost her something. She cleaned up the mess herself. She bought a new window pane and put it in all by herself, cutting her fingers in the process. But that wasn't all she did. She just didn't restore the broken window. After she replaced the window, she baked a batch of chocolate chip cookies and invited all us miserable sinners to the back porch for cookies and milk. And when she handed us the cookies we could see the band-aid on her cut hand. She restored our broken relationship with her and with one another.

That's what God does for us in Christ. God comes to us in Christ to forgive our war madness, our hatreds, our prejudices and all the evil in the world and sin in our lives. God comes to us in the risen Christ holding out to us his wounded hands saying, "You're forgiven, unconditionally! You're reconciled to God. It cost me my life to achieve this. Join with me in my new community, the church. Join me in building a community of forgiveness and reconciliation."

The Risen Christ says, "I'm making for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear, and I will destroy the shroud that is cast over all people, the sheet that is spread over all nations; I will swallow up death forever. Then I will wipe away the tears from all faces."

Friends, Easter means that the Risen Christ has been loosed upon the earth. Christ is not dead! Christ is alive! In our imperfect way, this church proclaims the Risen Christ who goes before us and who's always way out ahead of us. We're a family of Christians dedicated to proclaiming the unconditional love and leadership of the Risen Christ to Oxford and to the whole world. Come join us and help us to this more effectively. We need you! We need everyone of you to help us! Amen.

God of glory, fill your church with the power that flows from Christ's resurrection, that, in the midst of the sinful world, it may signal the beginning of a renewed humanity, risen to new life with Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.