

Our Lord's Mission Design

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson, pastor of the Oxford Presbyterian Church on the Second Sunday of Easter, April 6, 1986: Scripture John 20:19-23.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

It was Sunday evening between 6 and 9 p.m. It was the first Easter Sunday. The disciples had met secretly behind closed doors for fear of the Jews. Jesus had already appeared to Mary Magdalene and Peter, to some other women and to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. This however is the first official appearance to the apostles as a group. The Risen Christ spoke four short sentences.

First, he said, "Peace be with you." This was the customary greeting in Palestine at that time. We would say, "Hi, how are you?" The Jews would say, "Shalom! Peace!" So it's almost a little humorous to think of the Risen Christ appearing for the first time to his disciples and saying, "Hi!" The Risen Christ used very ordinary words on this very extraordinary occasion. "Peace be with you."

What sort of peace did the apostles need at the time? For one thing I imagine they were deeply troubled by the fact that they'd all forsaken Jesus in his time of trial. Jesus wanted to give peace to their guilty hearts with the assurance that he'd forgiven them. But Thomas was troubled by doubt as well as guilt. So when Jesus appeared in his midst he showed them his wounded hands and side to give peace to his doubt troubled heart.

So many Christians are like Thomas. Paul Zahl, a pastor in New York city, went to visit one of his more delightful parishioners who was recovering from a heart-attack. She turned to him and said, "When it comes to the afterlife and God and Jesus, I don't think I believe any of it. I'm not sure I believe any of it." So many of us are like that. We're

faithful members of the church, we love God's people, our worship is sincere. We sincerely believe but we doubt as well. Belief and unbelief war within us and it affects the way we help carry out the mission designed for us by Christ. We long for belief to win the war so that our troubled hearts can have peace.

How do we overcome our doubts? Not usually by reading books and lining up proofs for the resurrection of Christ. Certainly not by dropping out of the church but by placing ourselves squarely in the center of the community of faith. Thomas came to an assured faith when he decided to come to a worship service at the invitation of friends who had experienced the presence of the Risen Christ. He came reluctantly, filled with doubt. Yet in the fellowship of believers Christ made himself known. And he continues to do so today. Christ has designed for us the mission of being a community of glad believers where the reality of the Risen Christ is evidenced in the way we worship.

Secondly, Jesus said, "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." Jesus has designed for us a mission patterned after his own. At the beginning of Christ's earthly mission he said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people."

Our mission is a continuation of Christ's mission. It's a mission of word and action. That's why we as Christ's church are involved in nursing homes and hospitals and neighborhood centers that minister to the physical needs of others. We visit prisoners and seek justice for exploited. We work for peace in the world and bear witness against the

futility of violence. We rebuke, as Christ did, those who oppress their neighbors. Sometimes that mission will bring us on a collision course with the authorities, even as it did with Jesus. Then, if we're true to Christ's mission, we will say with Peter, "We ought to obey God rather than people." The Risen Christ sends us into the world to do what the Father sent him to do.

There's a large statue of Christ in Holland. The hands of Christ were destroyed by gun-fire during WWII. After the war the town's people wanted to restore Christ's hands. After a lot of discussion they finally decided to erect a sign at the feet of the statue which said, "Jesus has no hands but ours." There's truth in that. The church is the Body of Christ. We're his hands and feet to carry on his mission of preaching, teaching and healing in the world today.

Thirdly, Jesus said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Within the church equally committed Christians have differing ideas about what it means to receive the Spirit. Some believe the Spirit is given at baptism. Some believe the Spirit is given at the time of confirmation. Some believe the Spirit is given at the time of conversion. Some believe the Spirit is given at some later time, after one has been a Christian.

I think, however, that we can all agree that the Holy Spirit is none other than the Spirit of Christ, not a spirit alien to Christ. It's a Christlike spirit that we as Christians pray to receive. And the key to receiving the Spirit is in the depth and completeness of our surrender to Jesus Christ. A Christlike Spirit can't fill our lives if we've made an incomplete surrender and some other spirit still dominates. It's a matter of the will. It's a matter of obeying God. As Peter said, "We are his witnesses and so is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that

obey him." Everyday we're faced with little decisions in which we have to decide to follow the way of Christ or the way of the world. When we follow the way of the world a little more of the spirit of the world enters us. But when we obey Christ we're opening the door of our hearts to receive his Spirit.

Fourth, the Risen Christ said, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Erich Fromm the psychologist has charged that Christianity is essentially a guilt-producing religion trying to make people feel guilty so they'll buy the product. That's so often true when the church doesn't follow the mission designed for us by Christ. But the church is in the business of forgiving sins. If the sins of any are retained, we've failed our mission. "Your sins are forgiven. Go and sin no more." What Christ said to the woman caught in the act of adultery is the Word he has given for us to proclaim to a guilty world.

One of my favorite theologians is Charles Schultz the cartoonist. He pictures Charley Brown lieing in bed awake after a baseball game. Charley thinks, "We won our first game of the season... I can't believe it! I wonder how the other team feels...?" Then Charley sits up in bed with a disturbed look on his face and says, "I don't know... When we lose, I'm miserable... When we win, I feel guilty!" That kind of feeling is all too common. The whole world seems to be burdened with a bad conscience; mental institutions are full of guilt-laden souls. But the church has a message that can set people free. "Christ loves us, and by his death he has freed us from our sins."

When I read the Gospels and see how Jesus related to all kinds of sinful people I never get the feeling that he ever tried to make anybody feel

guilty with the one exception of self-righteous people. In fact the Gospels portray Jesus as someone whom all sorts of sinful people enjoyed having in their company? Why? Because in his presence they felt that, despite their sins, they were forgiven. And this joyous sense of acceptance freed them to follow Christ and leave their sins behind.

To summarize, then, these four sentences spoken by Christ on the evening of the first Easter Sunday emphasize four marks of Christian mission. First, it's a peace mission; especially peace for people troubled by doubts. Secondly, it's a mission of word and deed after the example of Jesus. Third, it's a mission that can be accomplished only in the power of the Holy Spirit. Fourth, it's a mission designed to forgive and free the guilty.

This was the risen Lord's design for the infant church when it was still in hiding. My prayer is that his word might be heard again by us today and so bring us out from our closed doors and out into the world to fulfill Christ's mission. As the Father sent the Son, so also the Risen Christ sends us.

Let us pray: Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.