

Suddenly Jesus Met Them

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson at Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Easter Sunday, April 4, 1999.
Scripture Lesson: Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; Matthew 28:1-10.

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

What's happening in Kosovo reminds me of something that happened in ancient Rome. On July 19th, AD 64 (about 35 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus) a fire broke out in the city of Rome. The Roman historian Tacitus described the conflagration in terms reminiscent of what we see on television coming from Kosovo. Rome, a city of 1.5 million, burned for nine days. Two thirds of the city, destroyed. Thousands of refugees streamed, homeless, out of Rome. Many people blamed the emperor Nero for the fire. "He started the fire" it was rumored "because he wanted to rebuild and rename Rome after himself." Nero, to divert anger from himself, scapegoated a hated minority living in Rome. In one of the earliest references to Christ in secular history, Tacitus wrote, "Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty (i.e., was crucified) during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea... but even in Rome." What does this have to do with Easter? Tacitus says that the crucifixion of Jesus checked the Christian movement. But, he says, "*it broke out again.*" What caused it to break out again? I'll tell you what caused it. An earth shaking event. Jesus broke out from the tomb. Jesus turned frightened disciples into brave witnesses.

And that brings me to my main point. Remember what I'm about to tell you! Everything else I say is merely commentary on this main point. Here it is! *Easter is not primarily a religious event. Easter is primarily a political event.* You heard me right. Easter is a political event. The *bodily* resurrection of Jesus is a political declaration that the Neros, Hitlers, Saddam Husseins and Milosevics of the world will not have the final word. The Risen Christ is Lord. This *most mischievous superstition* that Tacitus referred to, may be *checked for the moment*. But

it will never be finally checked. It will break out again and again and again throughout history because the crucified Jesus is the Risen Lord.

Don't turn the resurrection of Jesus into some kind of private, spiritual, religious experience. When the early Christians talked about the resurrection of Jesus they talked about something ^{spiritual} ~~that~~ ~~that~~ ~~happened in history~~ ^{happened in history}. The early Christians were *emphatically* not talking about some kind of spiritual experience. Jesus rose *bodily* from the dead. The tomb was empty. He appeared, not as someone who merely survived death, but as One victorious over death. One who will judge you and me and ^{all the rulers of this world,} ~~Nero and Milosevic and President Clinton.~~

Oxford scholar, N.T. Wright, says, "If Easter faith is simply about believing that God has a nice comfortable afterlife for some of us, then Christianity becomes a mere pie-in-the-sky religion instead of a kingdom-on-earth-as-it-is-in-heaven religion. If Easter faith is simply about believing that Jesus is risen in some *spiritual* sense, leaving his body in the tomb, then Christianity turns into a let-the-world-stew-in-its-own-juice religion, instead of a kingdom-on-earth-as-it-is-in-heaven religion. If Easter faith is only about me and you finding a new dimension to our own personal spiritual lives in the here and now, then Christianity becomes simply a warmth-in-the-heart religion instead of a kingdom-on-earth-as-it-is-in-heaven religion. It becomes focused on me and my survival, my sense of God, my spirituality, rather than outwards on God and on God's world that still needs the kingdom message so badly."

The celebration of Easter in a world of starving refugees, exploding missiles, and ethnic cleansing makes a powerful political statement. Followers of the Risen Lord are not prepared to tolerate these things. God will not tolerate them! And the followers of the Risen Christ will work, and plan, and pray, and vote with all the energy of God to implement the victory of Jesus over the world.

Remember the old jibe of Karl Marx that "religion is the opiate of the people"? Christianity, he said, lulls people into being content to look ^{on} ^{with a content} on other people's misery and injustice because it speaks only about a spiritualized heaven in the future and a spiritual experience here and now. That jibe is a fair critique of a watered-down Christianity that denies the *bodily* resurrection of

Jesus. Too many Christians have been lulled into thinking that God isn't really concerned with this world. Too many Christians have come to believe ^{bodily existence} *falsely* that the Resurrection of Jesus is *not* about something that happened in this world. Too many Christians have come to believe that the only thing that matters is my private otherworldly salvation?

Take away the bodily resurrection of Jesus and Karl Marx was probably right. Take it away, and Sigmund Freud was probably right to say that Christianity is a wish-fulfillment religion. Take it away and Friedrich Nietzsche was probably right to say that might makes right. The bodily resurrection of Jesus ^{as a powerful political statement} declares powerfully that the weakness of God seen on the cross is stronger than terror, stronger than bombs, stronger than hatred, stronger than death.

When Christians say *Christ is risen*, we're saying that Jesus is *Lord of all* ~ of this world and the next. The Risen Christ is Lord of nations as well as heaven. C.S. Lewis wrote, "A man may have to die for our country: but no man must, in any exclusive sense, live for his country. He who surrenders himself without reservation to the temporal claims of a nation, or a party, or a class is rendering to Caesar that which belongs to God." That's what many Christian Serbians have done. They've surrendered themselves to the temporal claims of their nation. May that not be true of American Christians. I'm a loyal, flag-waving, American. I pray for the safety of our fighting forces in Yugoslavia. I pray for victory. But please don't identify the military efforts of our nation in Yugoslavia with the mission of the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ is not on the side of Serbians despite their Christian heritage. Neither is the Risen Christ on our side. The Risen Christ is walking with those homeless refugees. He is the unseen companion of Sgt Stone, Staff Sgt. Ramirez and Specialist Gonzales.

In our closing hymn we'll sing,

Christ is alive...
Not throned afar, remotely high,
Untouched, unmoved by human pains,
But daily, in the midst of life,
Our Savior in the Godhead reigns.

In every insult, rift, and war,
Where color, scorn, or wealth divide,
Christ suffers still, yet loves the more,

And lives, where even hope has died.

In the name of the Risen Lord are we ready to take action on behalf of those who are being crushed in Kosovo and right here in America? Think of the growing hate crime in America: against Blacks, against Jews, against homosexuals. Who will speak up against hate crime? Too often we think ~~of~~ ^{only in terms of hearing} Easter enables us to have a personal relationship with Jesus. Yes! But Easter is about more than you and me and Jesus. Easter is about the re-creation of the world. The church claims that, beginning with Easter, the re-creation of the world has begun.

Do you believe that ethnic cleansing will have the last word? Do you believe that Cruise missiles will have the last word? One of the reasons I'm here, as your preacher, is to help you wrestle with those questions. I believe the Risen Christ will have the final word and his final word is *peace*. He's the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. Judge of the Serbians. Judge of the Kosovans. Judge of NATO. Judge of Americans. And the Risen Christ sends us out into the world to preach "peace by Jesus Christ ~ he is Lord of all."

Whether you realize it or not, we've all come seeking the Risen Christ. And the Easter Angel tells us that he's ~~not here~~. He's out there in the world, going before us. He's out there with the refugees in Kosovo. He's out there with prisoners of war. He's out there with prisoners of fear. The Easter Angel sends us out into the world to meet the Risen Christ. Leave this sanctuary looking for the Risen Christ in ^{or send} the world. Look and you'll see the Risen Christ. You'll meet the Risen Christ here in Oxford as well as in Kosovo. When you meet him take hold of his wounded feet and worship him. Obey him! Go out into the world and tell others where to look for Christ.

Tomorrow at work somebody will ask you, "How was church yesterday?" And you'll say, "Well, it's hard to say. The minister said that Easter is not a religious event. Easter is primarily a political event. I don't understand. How could it be a political event?" It's all right if you don't completely understand. Tell what you've heard and seen. Bear witness. Don't be afraid to talk about Christ. Go and tell your brothers and sisters about the Risen Christ and where they'll see him.