

## Suddenly Jesus Met Them

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Easter Sunday, April 15, 1990. Scripture: Matthew 28:1-10.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

When the doctor first told me that I had cancer my initial reaction was fear. Terror would actually be more accurate. I had to wait several days after the surgery to find out what kind of cancer I had. Fortunately the doctor assured me that it was a type that's easily cured and destroyed by surgery and radiation. But in those few days before I got that good news I thought, "I could be dead in a couple of months" not thinking that that's true of every one of us. I began planning for my own immediate funeral.

What happens after death? How can we escape that question on Easter Sunday? Of course I believe in the resurrection of Jesus. I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. But when the doctor told

me I had cancer terrible thoughts forced their way into my mind like a band of Iranian terrorists taking my thoughts and feelings hostage. "Is <sup>a living</sup> Christ really Lord?" I found myself thinking. "Did Jesus really Rise from The Dead?"

<sup>That these questions came to mind.</sup> I felt guilty ~~at my lack of faith~~. I've been a minister for 21 years. I've preached the resurrection of Christ as a real event which gives us hope of resurrection. I've stood by the death beds of parishioners and spoken to them of Christ's promise of eternal life. And now I ~~found myself~~ <sup>asked</sup> heard voices inside me questioning, "Is it true?" "What if Islam is true and I end up in hell because I believed and taught that Jesus is God in the flesh?" <sup>in I will tell them about Jesus...</sup>

But eventually more comforting thoughts came to mind. I thought of Jesus in Gethsemane. The Bible says he trembled in the garden as he thought about his approaching death. He, like me, was in deep anguish. His sweat was like great drops of blood. He prayed for his cup of suffering to be taken from him. Jesus, too, feared death and hell.

And I remembered back to my college years when I was taking classical Greek. We translated Plato's, Crito, which describes the trial and death of Socrates. Socrates, like Jesus, faced execution but, unlike Jesus, Socrates wasn't afraid. I remember how surprised I was to discover how serenely this pagan philosopher approached death. He calmly drank the hemlock poison and talked to his friends as if he were at a cock-tail party utterly certain of immortality and longing for release from his body.

How odd I thought. Jesus, the Son of God, our Savior and Lord, faced death with anxious fears. Socrates, a pagan philosopher, faced death calmly and serenely. And I thought, "I sure can identify more with Jesus than I can with Socrates."

The Christian faith takes death far more seriously than paganism ~~because Jesus took death seriously. Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus.~~

He never treated death as a friend. He treated death as a hated enemy. Death is God's great enemy. <sup>is called</sup> ~~The Bible calls~~ Death the Prince of Terrors. The Bible doesn't romanticize death. Death mocks the living God. Death is a great stumbling block to faith in the Living God.

It's not Christianity but paganism that teaches that death is a natural transition from this life to the next. Dr. D. T. Niles, a great Christian missionary who was a president of the World Council of Churches, once summarized what the Christian faith says about death:

First, death is the consequence of sin.  
Secondly, death is God's provision for sinful (human beings).  
And thirdly, death is already defeated.

Because I believe this is so, the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is an event of supreme importance for me.

I've never seen God but I believe that on the cross I have the very best picture of what God is like. I believe that, on the cross, God took upon

himself the consequences of my sins and sins of the whole world. I believe that death is God's provision for sinful human beings. And I believe that the Risen Christ defeated death on that first Easter morning.

"But do you know for certain?" you ask. There are very few things anyone knows with scientific or mathematical certainty. You can know with certainty that  $2+2=4$  but what comfort is that when you're about to enter the grave? You can know that the sum of the angles of a triangle is always  $180^\circ$ . But what comfort is that when the life of a loved one hangs in the balance? I can't think of one thing of which I am absolutely certain which gives me any comfort in life or death.

You see, all the most important things in life involve trust, not absolute certainty. No one knows when they take their marriage vows if ~~the marriage is going to work. Some who feel most certain have broken up~~ within a year. We don't know for certain but we trust. After fifty years, though, you begin to feel pretty certain it's going to last. No one knows when they hold that infant in their arms how that child is going to turn out. Yet we continue to bring children into a world that contains so many uncertainties because we have a degree of faith and hope in the future.

The same is true of faith in the Risen Christ. It's kind of like testing the ice in the winter. You put one foot on the ice to see if it'll bear the weight of your foot. If your foot doesn't go through, you put both feet on the ice to see if it will hold you. If it does you gingerly take small steps out onto the ice. Your heart stops when you hear the ice creak and crack. Eventually though, through experience, you may discover that the ice is strong enough to hold you. You glide confidently over the ice when there's 8 feet of water beneath you. Some people misplace their faith and fall through the ice, but the person who has a faith that tests the ice will be

safe.

Faith in Christ is like that. Like the women in our Gospel lesson, you respond in obedience to the good news of the angel that Christ is risen. You trust a little of your life to Christ and discover that he's trustworthy. Sometimes that initial faith in the Risen Christ is expressed simply in coming to church week after week even though you have questions and doubts.

You trust more and more of your life to Christ. Maybe you're baptized and confess your faith in Christ within the life of the Church. Maybe you begin to tithe your income simply as an act of faith that the Risen Christ is trustworthy. Maybe you decide to remember the sabbath to keep in holy, trusting that the God who created you doesn't need you to be a workaholic. ~~Maybe you step out in faith and volunteer to be a teacher or give up a week~~ of your vacation to go on a mission project. Each cautious step of faith you take gives you increased confidence and your assurance grows.

But you must keep stepping. You can't have a living faith in the Risen Christ unless you're moving forward. It's like riding a bicycle. You can't ride a bicycle unless it's moving. You'll fall to the left or to the right unless you're moving. Faith in Christ is like that. A living faith is constantly taking risks.

I don't know where you are right now in your life, but I do know that when the time comes that we stare death in the face, if we don't have faith in the Risen Christ, there's nothing left. If you're rich, what of it? If you have a wonderful family, even they can't help you when it's your turn to endure serious sickness and suffering. Only the Risen Christ can help you.

What, then, must we do on this Easter morning? Well, each one of us

must confess his or her sins. We must admit to God, that no matter how good we are, we haven't loved God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind nor our neighbor as ourselves. We can't trust Christ unless we're utterly honest to God about this. Each of us must understand that there's no way one can pay for one's own sin. Each of us must be willing to admit that because of our sins we're worthy of the very wrath Jesus bore on the Cross. Receiving God's salvation begins with confession.

And then each of us must believe in this risen Christ. He's the eternal Son of God who has become one of us in every way, with the exception of sin, and He's paid for ours sins. Each of us must believe this.

And then we must trust in this Jesus for our salvation. We must trust him for our resurrection. No matter how afraid you are, no matter how sick you are, if you believe in Jesus, he'll take you through the valley of the shadow of death to victory. You have to lean, lean, lean on Jesus Christ.

*Risen. I'm betting my life on it. That faith is the very center of my life.*

I believe that Christ is ~~Lord~~. I believe that no one is in heaven because they were sincere, or tried real hard to be good, or because they were innocent. I believe that all those who are in heaven are there solely because God loves them and Christ died for them. When Jesus arose, death was conquered; and eternal life became a reality for all who believe in him. Therefore I urge you to trust in Jesus Christ as the Risen Lord. I invite you to trust in Christ, the risen Christ. BbzZBbzZ

Let us pray: Almighty God, who through your only-begotten Son Jesus Christ overcame death and opened to us the gate of everlasting life: Grant that we, who celebrate with joy the day of the Lord's resurrection, may be raised from the death of sin by your life-giving Spirit; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.