

The Christians' Opened Mind

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the third Sunday after Easter, April 20, 1988. Scripture Lessons: Acts 3:12-19; Psalm 4; 1 John 3:1-7; Luke 24:35-48.

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

Jesus opens our minds to understand the Scriptures. The minds of the disciples were closed. They didn't understand what kind of king Jesus was. They didn't understand that his throne would be the cross. They didn't understand the necessity of his death. They didn't understand that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in Christ's name to all nations. They had the Bible. In fact, Jesus spoke about the necessity of his death on many occasions but they didn't understand until the Risen Christ opened their minds. *The amazing thing that this passage teaches is that we can be a true Christian and yet have very little understanding of who Jesus is and what he wants us to do.*

Sometimes real Christians don't understand the Christian faith very well. They don't understand the Old Testament with all those sacrifices and battles and God telling the Jews to destroy whole nations including women and children. They don't understand how it was necessary for Jesus to die in order for us to enjoy peace with God. And they don't understand that "repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in Christ's name to all nations". That is, they don't sense any urgency about evangelism or the missions. And yet they're Christians.

Thank God that we aren't damned by the doctrines that we don't understand. Thank God that we aren't saved by the doctrine of the atonement or the doctrine of salvation as important as those doctrines are. Thank God that we *are* saved by Christ, crucified and risen from the dead.

Despite how little some of us understand, so often I discover, when I talk with you, that you've experienced something of the joy of the presence

of the Risen Christ just like the disciples in our Gospel lesson. You believe in the resurrection. You enjoy Christ's presence in worship. You have a real faith in Christ however groping and feeble and uninformed it may be.

You are the people I want to talk to this morning. The rest of you can listen in, but I want to talk most of all to people who have a hard time understanding the Bible, who just don't understand why it was necessary for Jesus to die, who just can't understand that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached. Sometimes you may come to church for years without understanding. And because you don't understand maybe you slowly drift to the periphery of church affairs. After all, why read the Bible or go to church if you just don't understand? Sometimes you drift away altogether. You may go on like this for years. But then something happens in your life, maybe something wonderful, maybe something tragic, and your mind is opened to understand the Scripture.

I think of something that the Scottish Biblical scholar, William Barclay, wrote in his autobiography. He said that he had often heard the story of how Jesus stilled a storm on the Lake of Galilee in AD 28, but it meant very little to him. "So what!", he thought. "What does that have to do with me?" He couldn't understand. And he had a somewhat skeptical turn of mind and just couldn't believe it. But one day his twenty-one year old daughter and the boy she was planning to marry were both drowned in a yachting accident. In thinking back on that tragic day, Barclay said, "God did not stop that accident at sea, but he did still the storm in my own heart, so that somehow my wife and I came through that terrible time still on our own two feet." Christ used that tragic experience to open his mind to understand the truth of that passage of Scripture. He began to understand how that in any storm of life there is, in the presence of Jesus,

confidence and calm; that Jesus does still the storms in the hearts of men and women so that, no matter what tempest of trouble or pain or sorrow may blow on our lives, with him there's calm.

Christ opens our minds to understand the Scripture. This is a great encouragement to me in my ministry. I really do care about people growing as Christians and coming to a better understanding of what Christ wants us to believe and do here in Oxford and around the world. I really pray that all of us would discover the part we can play in building Christ's kingdom through witness and service. Sometimes I get frustrated trying to figure out how to open the minds of people to understand what God wants us to believe and do. And so often I find that I don't understand some things in the Bible or don't know what I should believe concerning some controversial issues that disturb Christians. But every once in a while I see Christ opening the minds of his people to understand what the Scriptures teach us to do and believe.

I think of a very quiet, shy, junior-high school girl in Portsmouth, Ohio where I served as an assistant minister. She didn't have much to say in Sunday school. I figured she was there because her parents made her come. I wondered if she got anything out of the class or my sermons. One morning I preached from Paul's letter to the Galatians, the third chapter. Paul wrote,

"... before the time for faith came, the Law kept us all locked up as prisoners until this coming faith should be revealed. And so the Law was in charge of us until Christ came, in order that we might then be put right with God through faith. Now that the time for faith is here, the Law is no longer in charge of us. It is through faith that all of you are God's children in union with Christ Jesus."

She didn't understand that sermon when she heard it as a young junior high student.

But Several years ago she sent me a letter. She was a graduate student in a doctoral program at the University of Michigan. She told me how she

had graduated from high-school and gone to college. Near the end of her senior year in college she discovered something about herself that she didn't like... something she had great difficulty accepting... something that filled her with fear and self-loathing (She never told me what that was and I never thought it was any of my business to ask and, besides, it doesn't make any difference). At any rate, at that time something or Someone led her to turn to her dusty Bible and she began to read Paul's letter to the Galatians and when she got to the third chapter she began to remember the sermon I had preached years before. She quoted sentences, word for word from that sermon (That's amazing since I couldn't remember them until I looked them up on my sermon manuscript). Christ opened her mind to understand the Scriptures. And through that passage of scripture she was able to begin the process of accepting herself knowing that God accepted her, not on the basis of law, but on the basis of faith in Christ. It was a moving experience just to read her letter and I've saved it and will always keep it.

And so it may be with some of you. Sometimes you don't really get much out of Sunday school or worship or the sermons. You have a lot of questions about what you believe and what you should be doing. Maybe you're like the disciples who spent three years with Jesus without understanding that it was necessary for him to die or that repentance and forgiveness should be preached in his name. Maybe you're here only because your parents made you come. Or maybe something or Someone brought you this morning and keeps bringing you back. You *don't* have to come to church. You could stay home. You could sleep in. But you've been drawn here. There's so much you don't understand. But God is at work in you, planting the seed and watering it. And down the road someday, maybe in a worship service, or when you fall in love, or when you lose in love, or

when you hold your new-born child, or while you're fishing, or late at night when you can't seem to get to sleep... the Risen Christ will open your mind to understand Scriptures you've heard so many times before and then, like those disciples in our Gospel lesson, you will become witnesses of Christ's resurrection and others will come to know, through you, the presence of the Risen Christ. Amen.

Let us pray: O God, whose blessed Son open the minds of his disciples to understand the Scriptures: Open our minds to understand, in our own experience, that Jesus died for us and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning in Oxford; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.