

The Victory Of God

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Easter Sunday, April 12, 1998. Scripture lessons: Isaiah 65:17-25; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; 1 Corinthians 15:19-26; John 20:1-18.

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

Last week I took down my Greek New Testament and reread each of the resurrection accounts in the four Gospels. As I read the stories I recognized how we're profoundly influenced by the skepticism of the modern age. The source of this skepticism is what Sociologist Peter Berger calls *modernity*, which is related to the word *modern*. Modernity has the capacity to discount any story that can't be explained from within the framework of our modern world.

Let me give you an example of modernity in action. I was visiting an elderly man whose wife had recently died. He told me that several weeks after his wife's death he was sitting in the living room. He looked up from the newspaper and saw his wife sitting in her usual chair. She was glowing with health and she spoke to him. He blinked and she was gone. Now, I don't know what he experienced. The point I want to make is how I dealt with his story. I dealt with it as one who's firmly entrenched in modernity. I immediately thought in terms of hallucinations and wish fulfillment. In other words, I responded as I've been taught to respond by modernity. I drained his experience of any transcendent value and tried to explain it rationally and psychologically. And that's exactly what many scholars do with the resurrection of Jesus. Some scholars say the disciples dreamed they saw the Risen Christ. Wish fulfillment. Hallucinations. That's how modernity treats the resurrection stories. Modernity attempts to fit the stories into our world rather than allow the stories to challenge our view of reality.

Let me explain what I'm saying in a different way. I once took an art appreciation course. The professor showed us Rembrandt's painting, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. I looked at the picture for about a minute and I was ready to go on to the next painting. But the professor directed our attention back to the picture for an hour. Notice the hands of the father! Notice the feet of the prodigal! Notice the figures partially hidden in the darkness. She talked about the life of Rembrandt. She pointed out that this was one of Rembrandt's last paintings before his death. And as she spoke I began to see things in Rembrandt's painting I'd never seen before. And that's

what the task of the Christian church is; to point out things which modernity prevents us from seeing.

God is really out there, but we often can't see = like Mary Magdalene when she thought the gardener was the Risen Christ. Modernity blinds our eyes to spiritual reality. For people who pride ourselves on having open minds, our minds are strangely closed, locked, double bolted, to spiritual realities. We just can't see. The stories of the resurrection teach us to look at life and death in a new way. And as we hear the Gospel writers talk about the resurrection we begin to see what modernity has prevented us from seeing. We begin to see that heaven and earth contain far more than our philosophy allows us to see.

As I looked at the resurrection accounts last week I saw some strange things I hadn't noticed for awhile. First, I noticed that in every account Jesus appears first to women. In the Gospel lesson for this morning he appeared first to Mary Magdalene. That's very strange. Women weren't allowed to testify in court yet they became the first to testify that Jesus was risen. That surely created a credibility gap for the early Christians. A made up story would certainly avoid this problem. The fact that the Gospels agree that Jesus appeared first to women gives the stories a ring of truth. Second, I noticed how difficult it is to reconcile the four accounts of the resurrection. For example, John mentions only Mary Magdalene but Matthew mentions two women, and Mark, three. John says Mary came while it was dark. Mark says the women came after dawn. Mark says the women spoke to nobody, but Matthew, Luke and John say they did. The stories just can't be reconciled. But what impressed me is that they all agree that the tomb was empty and Christ was risen. It made me think of the conflicting evidence surrounding President Kennedy's assassination. The stories just don't agree, but we know the president was killed. Likewise, the Gospels don't agree on details = they're independent accounts = but they agree that the tomb was empty and Christ was risen. Third, I was struck by the change of the day of worship from Saturday to Sunday. We can't imagine what the Sabbath meant to devout Jews. It was at the very heart of Judaism, central to Jewish identity. Yet the Jewish followers of Jesus changed the day of worship from Saturday to Sunday. Only something

overwhelming could have led them to do so. I believe it was the resurrection. Fourth, the disciples became willing to die for their faith in the Risen Christ. Before the resurrection they huddled in fear. Later these trembling cowards became martyrs because of their unshakable conviction that Jesus was risen. Fifth, I don't know how else to explain the existence of the Christian church let alone its explosive growth in the first century. Belief in the resurrection didn't slowly develop. It burst full bloom on the scene. Without the resurrection there would be no church.

Of course, the Gospels leave us with many unanswered questions. We're left with questions about the nature of Christ's resurrection body. He appears to be the same as before but there are differences. In almost every account Jesus isn't recognized at first. The Risen Lord tells Mary to stop clinging to him, but his body can pass through grave clothes leaving them behind like a cocoon. I can't explain some things, but two things stand out: the tomb was empty and Christ appeared to his disciples victorious over death.

That leads me to a further affirmation. I believe in the *bodily* resurrection of Jesus. Nearly everybody in those days believed in life after death - the Pharisees, the Romans and the Greeks - but the early church bore witness to a *bodily* resurrection, not simply life after death. Jesus didn't simply survive death. He was victorious over death. I was asked last week why I insisted upon a bodily resurrection. Why not settle for some kind of spiritual resurrection? Well, I believe in a bodily resurrection as a protest against a form of Christianity that devalues the body. I protest against a Christianity concerned only about saving souls but feels no compulsion to minister to bodily needs. I'm not interested in a gospel that asserts that God saves the soul but not the body. The human body has great significance for me. I'm not a soul that simply lives in a body like a hermit crab living in a seashell. I not only *have* a body, I *am* a body. I can't conceive of human existence apart from the body. My belief in the bodily resurrection of Christ is an affirmation that God promises, not mere survival, but victory over death.

I admit that my faith is a gamble. I can't prove it. I could be wrong. But I bet my life on the Gospel of the resurrection. In John Updike's novel, *A Month of Sundays*, there's a parable

about how Christian faith in the bodily resurrection involves a gamble. In one episode, a group of men are playing a card game like poker. Each person is dealt several cards, some of them face up on the table and the others concealed in the hand. In one round, the main character, a man named Thomas, is dealt a very strong hand and he decides to bet heavily. As Thomas keeps raising the odds all the other players drop out one by one. Everybody becomes convinced that Thomas has the winning hand. Everybody, that is, but Fred. Fred *appears* to have a poor hand. His cards showing on the table are “nondescript garbage.” Surprisingly, though, he keeps betting. Thomas is puzzled because he believes Thomas has the winning hand. It isn’t absolutely perfect - he’s holding one bad card - but otherwise his hand seems unbeatable. Why does Fred keep on betting against such odds? At the end of the game, though, Thomas is shocked to discover that Fred has the winning hand. When he compares Fred’s hand with his, Thomas realizes there was only *one* card in the whole deck that could have made Thomas the loser and that was the one bad card that Thomas had hidden in his hand. If Thomas had held any other card, he would’ve won. In other words, Fred was betting *everything* on the *chance* that Thomas held this one losing card.

I look at the hand that world shows us. The world seems to have the winning hand. Death is winning every place. And what kind of hand do Christians have? It seems a rather poor hand; ancient stories of how God became a human being, was crucified for our sins, and raised from the dead. That’s it! It’s a poor hand and the world has much stronger cards showing. I may be crazy I’m betting everything on the resurrection. I’m betting my life on what modernity calls a virtual impossibility, that Jesus has been raised from the dead. So I look at the world in the light of the Gospel. ~~And~~ *Instead of letting modernity interpret the resurrection; letting res interpret modern world.* And the Gospel, like my art professor, directs me to look from a different point of view - and I begin to see things that modernity hasn’t allowed us to see. I see signs of God’s victory over evil, death, and despair through the resurrection of Jesus. I’d love for all of us to see those signs. I’d love for you to bet your life on the resurrection. But I have a feeling that a lot of us are hedging our bets.

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.