

They Came To The Tomb

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on April 16, 1995, Easter Sunday. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 65:17-25; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; 1 Corinthians 15:19-26; Luke 24:1-12.

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

We come to this cave like sanctuary ~~the resurrection~~ to hear a story. It happened nearly 2000 years ago. ^{but it still affects people today} In Palestine, ^{but the story has changed now.} It's about a Palestinian Jew. He walked the Galilean hills proclaiming the reign of God. He preached good news to the poor. He preached release to the captives. He taught by word and deed. He blessed the children. He healed the sick. He bound up the brokenhearted. He ate with outcasts. He forgave sinners. He called all to repent and believe the good news.

He was unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition. Blasphemy ~~represents a challenge to religious authority.~~ Sedition ~~represents a challenge to political authority.~~ "Jesus was not a respectable citizen murdered by criminals. He suffered the death of a criminal at the hands of respectable citizens." Just think! We Presbyterians often draw our members from the respectable people of our community. Sometimes we get nervous about welcoming into the church people our society deems unrespectable - people like the poor, the politically controversial, victims of AIDS, or whatever. Remember - we put our trust in a Palestinian Jew unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition.

AND THEN Jesus was crucified. On the cross Jesus suffered the depths of human pain. ~~(and gave his life for the sins of the world)~~ Jesus died. He really died. We can't begin to celebrate Easter if we think Jesus survived the cross. He didn't survive.

arguments against civil rights legislation. I heard arguments for. I heard arguments for the war. I heard arguments against the war. It was a perplexing time. But "Not to decide, is to decide!" I wasn't absolutely sure, but I decided. I took a stand. Some of the stands I took created enemies. But ~~my~~^{my} poster reminded me that deciding is not an option. Everybody decides. Everybody has to decide. Everybody decides before all the evidence is in. The person who tries to remain neutral because of uncertainty - because of fear - ^{because of disappointment} has in fact made a decision. Not to decide is to decide.

I ask you this morning - decide for Christ! Decide for the risen Christ! Get up and run with St. Peter to the tomb. Stoop and look in! Confess Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior! Place yourself ^{as an active member} within the ~~family~~ ^{body} of Christ, the Church! Obey his word! Receive the sacraments! Decide! Decide to doubt your doubts. Decide - despite repeated failures to live up to what you know to be right. Decide - despite ^{the resentment you may feel to church people and us.} ~~decide~~ Decide today! Decide tomorrow! Decide daily - "As much as I know of myself I now trust to as much as I know of Jesus Christ, my Lord and my Savior."
And if you decide - for heavens sake tell somebody!

Let us pray: Pour out your Spirit upon us. Raise us to new life. Deliver us from death to life. Deliver us from bondage to freedom. Deliver us from sin to righteousness. Graft us to the body of Christ. Guard us from all evil. Strengthen us to serve you with joy until day you make all things new. To you be all praise, honor, and glory; through Jesus Christ our Savior, who, with you and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns forever. Amen.

God didn't come at the last moment to rescue him. God let Jesus die at the age of 33. He died abandoned by his friends. His heart stopped beating. He stopped breathing. His brain waves ceased. Jesus died.

As the sun was setting on Friday evening Joseph of Arimathea took down his body from the cross. He wrapped his body in a linen cloth and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb. Palestine is rocky. Dead people aren't buried underground. Tombs are carved from rock outcroppings. So the body of Jesus was placed in a dark, damp, chilly, stone cave. A round stone, probably weighing several tons, was rolled over the opening of the tomb. This was a normal procedure. The stones kept wild animals from entering the tombs and eating the dead. They also discouraged grave robbers in search of corpses for their macabre, occult practices. The body of Jesus lay in the tomb Friday night and Saturday night.

Early on Sunday, women came to the tomb with spices. All four gospels agree that women arrived first. Women! Women whose testimony wasn't accepted in a court of law. The women found the stone rolled away and the tomb empty. All four gospels agree that they found the tomb empty. The women were perplexed. Perplexed! Puzzled! Confused! They didn't know what to make of the empty tomb.

Two unidentified men in dazzling clothes greeted the women. The women were terrified. The men said, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He's not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." Before his death Jesus told his disciples that he'd be

betrayed, crucified and raised. They heard but they didn't understand. They heard but they forgot. But now, the women remembered the words of Jesus.

Sometimes I feel frustrated when I fail to communicate the good news of the gospel. Then I think of Jesus. He had the same problem. People didn't understand what he said. They forgot what he said. So I keep telling the story even when I feel I'm not understood. I keep telling the story because a day will come - perhaps as you stand, as these women did, at the grave of a loved one - and you'll remember the words of Jesus. His words will come alive for you. You'll remember - His words will help make ^{sense} sense of your tragedy and loss. But we can't remember what we've never heard. The most important task of the church is to tell the story - tell the story even when people don't understand.

The women returned from the tomb and told the apostles - the closest friends of Jesus. Think of that! In this day when some people still wonder if women should be preachers - women were the first to proclaim the gospel of the risen Christ.

But the empty tomb and the preached word didn't convince the first Christians of the resurrection of Jesus. The risen Christ appeared to them. That's what finally convinced them. The appearances continued forty days. The Gospel writers are careful to say that his appearances weren't visions or dreams. The risen Christ wasn't a disembodied ghost. Jesus didn't simply have a near death experience and return. The Gospel writers all agree that God raised Jesus from the dead, "vindicating his sinless life, breaking the power of sin and evil, delivering us

from death to life eternal."

The Gospel writers are also careful to say there was something different about the risen Christ. For example, the Gospel of Luke tells us that, on that first Easter, two disciples of Jesus were walking from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus, about seven miles away. The Risen Christ joined them. They walked and talked with him without recognizing him. Strange! You'd think they'd have said, "You remind me a lot of Jesus. You sound so much like Jesus." But there was something different about the risen Christ. They didn't recognize him. Not until, at the dinner table, he took bread and broke it and gave it to them.

Luke wrote his Gospel because he wanted his readers to believe in the risen Christ. ^{as a criminal} Luke wants us to know even though Jesus died, God vindicated his sinless life. God began to break the power of sin & evil. Through His resurrection God delivered us from death to eternal life. For nearly 2000 years men and women and children have heard the story

and believed. Lives have been changed. My life has been changed by that story. My life would be vastly different had I not heard the story. I can't remember when I

first heard it. I do know that I was baptized on Easter Sunday in 1945 - my first Easter. I ~~must~~ have heard the story of Christ's resurrection that morning. It ^{the end - you have been buried with Christ & raised...}

meant nothing to me. I was only seven months old. I didn't understand. But the story began to shape my life. ^{As I grew older doubts came... I heard arguments against... I read skeptical literature... but I've never been able to let go}

I don't know when I accepted the risen Christ as my Lord and Savior. It's not important. What's important is this. The risen Christ accepted me. ^{The Risen Christ recognized me when I couldn't recognize him.} The Risen

Christ accepted me when I was a little child. The Risen Christ accepted me before I could believe. The Risen Christ accepted me before I could understand. Before I could respond in any way, the Risen Christ accepted me. ^{The Risen}

At the heart of the Presbyterian understanding of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that the Risen Christ accepts us before we accept him. It doesn't matter how young or how old you are. The risen Christ accepts us before we accept him. The risen Christ accepts sinners. The Risen Christ accepts doubters. The Risen Christ accepts agnostics. The Risen Christ accepts unbelievers. Because the Risen Christ accepts us, we're able to accept him as our Lord and Savior.

For two thousand years the Risen Christ has been in the business of changing lives. Sometimes suddenly. Sometimes incrementally. The Risen Christ is in the business of converting unbelievers. The risen Christ changed those perplexed and terrified women who came to the tomb. The risen Christ is still in the business of converting men and women. This week a friend gave me a poem he wrote.

When I was young, I thought about God
~~Who had a Son, A Son that loves everyone.~~
And as the years went by there were times I strayed
But I always felt his Love pull me back his way.

Then one night all alone in my pain
I got on my knees in a dark corner and prayed.
"You know I love you, but my life seems the same.
What can I do to relieve the pain?"

I heard a voice say, "Ask me in my name."
And I know that night my life had changed
For that night Jesus Christ came,
And took away my pain.

He made a commitment to Christ who had already made a commitment to him.
Commitment - making a risky choice and sticking with it when the going gets tough.

Back in the 60s I hung a poster on my wall. "Not to decide, is to decide."
The 60s - Civil Rights marches. The War in Viet Nam was escalating. I heard