

This Is The Good News

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the fifth Sunday in ordinary time, February 8, 1998. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 138; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11.

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

I wonder if you ever struggle with faith issues? Some people don't. I can't imagine my parents ever struggling with questions of faith: they simply believed that Jesus died for their sins and God raised him from the dead. That's not been true for me. Faith in Christ has never been easy for me. I struggle daily with my faith. I sometimes lie awake at night and question my deepest beliefs. I sometimes worry that what I believe may not be true and that my whole life is based on a giant hoax. I struggle to understand what I believe. I struggle to try to commend what I believe to others who don't believe or who doubt. My faith in the Risen Christ is assaulted every day when I read obituary columns. Faith in the Risen Christ would be a whole lot easier if the obituary columns were followed by a resurrection column. But I've never seen one.

Like many college educated people I've imbibed a world view which is highly prejudicial against the Christian faith. I don't see how any Christian can read David Hume (*Inquiry into Human Understanding*) or Immanuel Kant (*Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*) - which many of us had to do in college - without struggling to answer their objections to the very possibility of knowing God. But you don't have to read Kant and Hume to struggle with the Christian faith - if you've ever had a loved one ripped tragically and prematurely from your life, or watched as a loved one suffered a slow painful death, despite promises in Scripture to those who pray in faith, then you very likely know what it is to struggle with faith issues. If you've ever sunk low and turned to the church for hope and for help and found none there - you very likely know what it's like to struggle with faith. EVEN THOSE WHO SEE MOST CERTAIN, CONFIDENT OFTEN HARBOR SECRET STRUGGLES THEY FEAR SHARING.

Everyone who struggles with the Christian faith comes sooner or later to the resurrection of Christ. Nothing is more foundational to Christian faith than the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Take away the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the Christian faith crumbles. We find the earliest

record of the resurrection in the first verses of the fifteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians. It probably dates to about A.D. 55, about 25 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. But Paul dusts off a "tradition" that goes back further. "I handed on to you what I in turn had received," he says. Paul is handing on a tradition which very well goes back twenty-five years to Jerusalem, to the earliest Palestinian Christians. He's handing on a primitive Christian creed. "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, he was buried, he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures. He appeared to witnesses."

Paul adds that Jesus also appeared to him "last of all." The word translated "appeared" might better be translated "was disclosed". The word is rarely used of hallucinations, or daydreams, or inner visions (Willi Marxsen). It's often used for *a manifestation of unseen supernatural beings* (Buttrick). So the earliest tradition says that the risen Christ was disclosed to a number of people with such vividness as to prompt their confession, "The Lord is risen!" But there are many things we don't know about the resurrection event. Paul doesn't tell us what the risen Christ looked like. The only additional information we get from Paul, later in the chapter, is that the resurrection body is as different from the body which was placed in the grave as a maple seed is from a maple tree. So what happened to Jesus wasn't a mere resuscitation of a dead corpse but a resurrection to a whole new dimension of human existence.

But what did happen? The Gospel accounts don't seem to agree. For example, did Jesus appear first in Jerusalem or in Galilee? Did the women get to the tomb while it was still dark or when it was light? Did the women see one or two angels at the tomb? Were they angels or men? Why didn't anybody recognize Jesus when he first appeared? And what kind of clothes did Jesus wear? Jesus invited Thomas to place his hands in the wounds in his body, but what kind of body allowed Jesus to enter rooms through solid walls and locked doors? So many unanswered questions. But all the accounts agree that God raised Jesus from the dead and that he appeared to his disciples.

I struggled in seminary over these discrepancies. I shared my faith struggles with Dr. Metzger, one of my professors at Princeton Seminary. "How can we believe in the resurrection

of Jesus when these accounts are hopelessly inconsistent?” He said to me, “Ted, did you know that there are several contemporary accounts of Hannibal of Carthage crossing the Alps to sack Rome?” I didn’t know that. Dr. Metzger went on, “Did you know that the accounts can’t be reconciled. They don’t agree on what route Hannibal took. There’s no agreement on the number of elephants and soldiers that accompanied Hannibal. Historians can’t reconcile the accounts. But,” he said, “we don’t conclude that Hannibal never crossed the Alps. We conclude that a number of witnesses wrote about the same event independently of one another. Likewise,” he said, “the discrepancies and contradictions in the resurrection accounts shouldn’t lead us to deny the resurrection. Rather they support the Christian belief that Jesus rose from the dead. The discrepancies bear strong witness to independent accounts of the resurrection of Jesus.” Dr. Metzger helped me to resolve some of my struggles, but the Christian faith is a journey where new faith struggles arise from time to time.

The records of nearly every historical event...

Let me share with you briefly something of how I understand faith and where my faith journey has taken me. Everybody has faith. Everybody has some kind of faith. Some people have faith that there is *no* God. Some people have faith that there *is* a God. But everybody has some kind of faith. Some people believe that the world is like a machine where everything can be explained mechanically and where miracles are excluded. Others believe that the world is more like a dramatic play where anything can happen. What we believe is not based on evidence. Rather we believe or *find ourselves believing* and then look for evidence to support what we believe.^{*we all have a tendency to take on the prevailing faith systems of our culture.*} A person who believes the world is a machine will find all kinds of evidence for their belief. A person who believes there is *no* God will find evidence to support their belief. But it comes down to a choice. We choose what kind of world we believe in. Or we allow our culture to choose for us. I choose to believe that God has created a world of wonder where anything can happen. I believe that the most wonderful event that has ever happened is when God raised Jesus from the dead. My belief in the risen Christ is an act of rebellion against a mechanistic universe. When I confess my faith in the Risen Christ I’m shaking my fist in the face of rationalism that sees the world as a machine. I choose to believe that God raised Jesus

And if he was raised ... work for peace, the kingdom

from the dead. My faith in Christ is not irrational though. Once I choose to believe that God raised Jesus from the dead I find ample historical evidence for my belief. ^{or I see ...} And so I challenge you to choose! Choose Christ crucified and risen from the dead!

Furthermore, I believe in the *bodily* resurrection of Jesus Christ. The early church bore witness to a bodily resurrection. My belief in the bodily resurrection is also a choice. It's a protest against a form of Christianity that devalues the body. The human body has great significance for me. I am 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. When I choose to believe in the bodily resurrection of Christ I'm affirming that God promises, not mere survival, but victory over death. I protest against a Christianity which is concerned only about saving souls but feels no compulsion to minister to the bodily needs of men and women. I'm not interested in a gospel that asserts that God can save the soul but can't save the body. I'm committed to a gospel that's good news for the whole person. I believe that God raised Jesus *bodily* from the dead and is concerned about our bodies and souls.

That's where my faith journey has taken me. Where has your faith journey taken you? My hope is that the Oxford Presbyterian Church will be a church that's friendly towards those who struggle with their faith. Faith is a lifetime process of development that involves the complete transformation of our lives. If you're struggling with your faith I invite you to become a part of a small group of fellow strugglers. If you've never struggled with faith issues begin today. Christian faith isn't supposed to be easy. After all, Jesus calls his disciples to leave everything and follow him. That's not easy. I invite you to come forward as a conscious choice to begin or to continue your struggle with others. Don't struggle on your own. Make your faith search a priority in your life. Make it "of first importance." I can't promise that if you come forward your struggles will cease. They probably won't. I hope they don't. My struggles have not ceased and I hope they never do because when I cease to struggle I will cease to grow spiritually.

Let us pray: