

To Those Who Are Slow To Believe

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson at the Oxford Presbyterian Church on Easter Sunday, March 30, 1986. Scripture Lessons: Exodus 15:1-11, 1 Corinthians 15:20-26; Luke 24:13-35.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Our Gospel lesson opens on two disciples. It's Sunday afternoon in the springtime of the year. They're walking home. They've just heard some wonderful news. That very morning they've heard the Gospel preached to them by some women. These women said they'd been to the tomb of Jesus and found it empty. The women claimed that angels ~~had~~ ^{telling} appeared to them ~~who told~~ them Christ had ~~arisen~~. Other disciples had gone to the tomb and verified that it ~~was~~ really empty. This is tremendous news. Christ is risen. The tomb is empty. Yet our two disciples are walking home sad. They're hopeless. They're confused and troubled about this news. They don't know what to make of it.

These two disciples represent a large number of Christians today. We have the most wonderful news that was ever heard. We've heard the Gospel. Christ is risen. Christ is reigning. Christ is King of kings and Lord of lords. Death has been conquered. Think of that if you've ever ~~stood before~~ ^{lowered a loved one into} a gaping grave! Our sins are forgiven. Think of that if you've ever really felt your sins weighing on you like a heavy knapsack. God loves sinners, he doesn't hate them. Think of that! It really is the most wonderful news in the world and yet, so often, we go home from the worship service unmoved. Our faces are downcast. We look hopeless.

Now compare this with something like hunting or fishing or going to a rock concert. Where I used to live in central Pennsylvania, deer hunting is a big sport. School is cancelled on the first Monday of deer hunting season. The steel mill is shut down. People are eager to get out

there. You rise early in the morning after having worked hard all week. You go out into the cold and snow and damp and sit and stand and listen and watch. It's great fun for the deer hunter. You stand out there in the cold for hours on end. What excitement. There's enthusiasm. And I've listened to those hunters as they walk home. They're talking about the eight-pointer that got away. Despite the cold and wet and snow it was worth it all just to get a shot at a deer. They're enthusiastic about hunting even when they come home empty handed. They'll be out there in the woods early the next morning until they get their deer. They'll take off from work. They're zealous. Their heart is into hunting. They really enjoy it. They're not walking home downcast.

Now compare this with so many Christians at a worship service. We don't have to stand for hours in the cold and snow. We have a beautiful sanctuary. We have heart thrilling music from organ and choir. We have padded seats in the pews. We're surrounded with beauty. But too often we give people the impression that we Presbyterian Christians are sad or angry or sick a lot of the time. I once heard about a man who could tell what denomination a person was just by looking at them. He was leading a song service and afterwards he pointed to one man and said, "You're a Methodist aren't you." The amazed man said, "Yes! How did you know?" "By the way you sang those hymns with such gusto." He pointed to another and said, "You're a Baptist aren't you?" "You're right!", he replied. "How could you tell?" "By the way you clapped your hands when you sang." He pointed to a third and said, "You're a Mennonite." "How could you tell," the woman asked. "I could tell by your beaming smile." He pointed to a fourth person and said, "You're a Presbyterian aren't you." The man responded, "I'm sorry. You're wrong. I've just been feeling very sick all

day." So often we Presbyterians give the impression that Christianity is a tremendously sombre and sad thing that we practice out of duty or tradition or fear.

How do you approach Sunday and the preaching of the Good News that Christ is risen? Do you get up on Sunday morning after working hard all week and say, "This is the day the Lord has made I will rejoice and be glad in it." Do we come to worship with joy in our hearts to hear the Gospel preached? I once heard about a beaming Scottish girl who was seen to be smiling on Sunday morning. Someone asked her, "Why in the world are you smiling on Sunday morning?" She answered, "Because I'm going to the Kirk to see my Saviour."

And what about during the service? Do we complain about the ~~service coming to an end so quickly?~~ Do we ~~listen intently and sing~~ joyfully? Do we go home from the service talking about what happened and what the pastor said in the sermon? Do we say, "Did not our hearts burn within us as he opened the Scriptures to us? Ah, wasn't that sermon too short? Oh, if he could have gone on for another hour?"

Listen to Christians as they walk home on Sunday afternoon. Do they give the impression that they've just come from an audience with the King of heaven? Several years ago the Queen Mother of England visited Canada and came to the little village of Niagara-on-the-Lake not far from where my church was. She worshipped there in the little Anglican church. So many people wanted to be there to see the Queen Mother that tickets were handed out to the parishioners to assure them of a seat. Everybody in town wanted to see the Queen Mother. But do you realise we have someone far greater than the Queen Mother with us every Sunday? We have the King of kings. He's here this morning. He's

olive and present in the preaching and singing of the word, in the breaking of the bread, and in the lives of each one of you who are members of his body.

Now look at these two disciples walking home on Sunday afternoon to Emmaus. Something happens to them between the time they started their journey and the time they ended it. They begin by being sad but at the end of the story everything has changed. They're happy. They turn around and hurry all the way back to Jerusalem to tell their friends the most wonderful news in the world, "Christ is risen and he has appeared to us." What caused this dramatic change? They've had a change of heart. They had been slow of heart to believe but now they say, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures." In the breaking of the bread, they recognize the presence of Christ.

*The same thing has happened in every great revival of Christianity. It has started as a result of a change of heart that takes place within the worshippers. People's hearts become strangely warmed. They begin to recognize that Christ is really present. I think of the great Methodist leader, John Wesley. He went through a time in his life when he didn't *feel* what he was preaching. His heart felt cold and dry. He thought about giving up preaching. He went to a trusted friend for advice. His friend told him, "Don't stop preaching just because you don't feel anything. Keep preaching until you *do* feel it in your heart." Wesley followed that man's advice. One evening he went to a Bible study and heard someone reading a commentary on the Book of Galatians by Martin Luther. ~~Can you think of anything more arid and dry than to listen to somebody read a commentary? But~~ As he listened he felt his heart strangely warmed. He*

was never the same since. Wesley went on to become one of the most influential reformers of the 18th century. Through his preaching working class men and women who had never entered the stuffy churches of their day were converted to Christ. The infamous gin mills were closed down. Men and women converted to the Lordship of the Risen Christ went on to reform all of society. The slave trade was ended. Child welfare laws were enacted. Some scholars say that England was spared a bloody revolutionary largely because of the impact of men and women like John Wesley who experienced a change of heart because they had come to believe in their hearts as well as in their heads that Christ is alive and is Lord.

It still happens today. I remember a young mother who called me one Monday-morning-years-ago.—She-said something-hard-to-explain had happened to her. She was reciting the Apostles' Creed when it suddenly occurred to her, "This is true! I believe it! This is wonderful! Christ is alive! Christ is here. Hallelujah!" The whole service came alive for her. The Creed, the Confession of Sin, the hymns, everything became an offering up of herself in worship to Christ. This woman went on to initiate a small group Bible study. She was instrumental in beginning a ministry for small children. She became the chairperson of the evangelism committee of the session. She began the Bell Tower Society in the church to raise money to repair our aging church. What happened to her? She had a change of heart. In the service of the Word and Sacrament she recognized the Risen Christ.

One of the great needs of the Presbyterian Church is a change of heart. Too often in our churches we're on the wrong side of Easter. We're like those two disciples walking home to Emmaus. We've got great theology. We make tremendous social pronouncements. We've got a

dignified and worshipful liturgy. We have talented and beautiful sounding choirs. But so often we come with hearts slow to believe and eyes that are holden that we should not know Christ. How we would worship, with what joy and eagerness and abandon the sacrifice of praise would rise to God if all of us this morning knew ourselves to be sons and daughters of the Resurrection.

But how can this happen? Sometimes people say that they've stopped coming to church because it just doesn't mean much to them. They don't get much from the services. They don't feel anything so they stop coming. *Keep coming until you do feel something.* Don't stop going to church. It's here in the worship service where the Word of God is preached and the sacraments are celebrated that you are most likely to experience that change of heart and have your eyes opened to see that Christ is alive and present. If you hearts are slow and sad and downcast don't stop coming. Keep coming until your hearts are changed and your eyes are opened. *That change may not come dramatically ... perhaps it will come imperceptibly slowly like a newborn baby slowly coming to recognize the face of mother or father. But change it will because God has promised to ... etc* In a few minutes the choirs will sing, "Have you seen my Lord." Let the answer of our hearts be, "Yes! Thank God, we *have* seen the Lord! We've heard him speak to our hearts." And if you can really say that from the bottom of your hearts the Holy Spirit will give you the same kind of energy that he gave those two disciples to proclaim the good news in word and deed.

~~Lo! Jesus meets us,
Risen from the tomb;
Lovingly He greets us,
Scatters fear and gloom.
Let His church with gladness
Hymns of triumph sing,
For her Lord now liveth:
Death hath lost its sting.
Thine is the glory,
Risen, conquering Son;
Endless is the victory
Thou o'er death hast won.~~