

What Happens When Christians Meet The Risen Christ?

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, on Easter Sunday, April 19, 1992.
Scriptures Lessons: Luke 24:1-12; 1 Corinthians 15:19-26.

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

The women came creeping in the pre-dawn dark to the tomb of Jesus on that first Easter morning *not to greet the Risen Lord, but embalm his dead body.* When they got there they discovered the stone rolled away and no body. They were perplexed. What happened to the body? Two men in shining clothing stood beside them. The women fell to the ground in terror. 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 he must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." And they remembered. But how could they forget? How could they forget that Jesus said that he would rise from the dead. How could anyone forget such a claim?

The same way that we can go to church all our lives and not remember we're saved by God's grace and not by our good works. We can go to church all our lives and not remember that Jesus said that he is the way and the truth and the life apart from whom no one comes to the Father. Drew told us this morning how he went to Sunday School and church and must have repeatedly heard the Gospel but never remembered it until he committed his life to Christ in high school in a Young Life meeting. It's sad but true that some people can go to church all their lives, never miss an Easter service, hear the Gospel read and preached and still not remember what Easter is all about.

But sadder still, some can't remember the Word of Christ because they've

never heard it. You can't remember what you never heard. Nearly 50% of the people in any town in the United States do not hear the Word of Christ read or preached on a regular basis. How can they remember what they've never heard or heard so little of?

We're here this morning, not because Jesus healed the sick and gave us a wonderful example to follow. Nor are we here because Jesus was a wonderful teacher who told beautiful stories; the story of the lost sheep, the lost coin, the prodigal son. We're not here because he preached the Sermon on the Mount with its ethical teachings which we all admire but can't seem to obey. Nor do we gather here this morning because Jesus died on the cross. If the tomb had not been empty and if Jesus had not been raised from death's cold prison we would not celebrate his death. The reason we meet this morning and every Sunday morning is because on the first day of the week nearly two thousand years ago the tomb was empty and Jesus really rose from the dead. We're here seeking the Living and Risen Christ among those who are alive in Christ.

Let me explain briefly what Christians mean when we confess that Jesus rose from the dead. We don't simply mean that the spirit of Jesus lived on after his death. We don't believe that the resurrection is a symbol for the immortality of the soul. We don't believe that the resurrection was merely a subjective experience the disciples had. We believe in a bodily resurrection. The tomb was empty. Christ arose. The resurrection is not a myth. The empty tomb is not just a symbol. If it's not a fact, Easter is meaningless. Jesus was really dead and he got

up again alive. He left the tomb. He appeared to his disciples. He ascended into heaven. He is Lord of the Universe and Hope of this world.

It's because the tomb was empty and Jesus rose, bodily, from the dead that we've come here this morning seeking the living Christ. We follow Christ's example of healing the sick, feeding hungry people, and visiting prisoners but only because Jesus rose from the dead. We call men and women to repent and believe the Gospel but only because Christ is risen from the dead and Savior. We have courage to face death not because we have a vague hope in the immortality of the soul but because the tomb was empty and Christ showed himself alive. If Christ had been raised from the dead he would be remembered, if at all, only as an obscure Palestinian messianic pretender.

But how do we move beyond simply believing the resurrection in our heads and move to believing in our hearts so that this belief really makes a difference in our lives? Jesus tells us that he's present whenever his people gather around his Word. We're most likely to meet Christ when we seek him among those who gather to remember his Word.

Emile Cailliet was professor of Christian philosophy at Princeton Seminary before his death. He also became a patron of the Young Life movement and wrote a book commending it to Presbyterian ministers. But he wasn't always a Christian. Far from it, he was raised in a thoroughly secular home in France. He was a brilliant scholar with a degree in philosophy but he was able to go through high school and college without ever having read the Bible. The Bible and Christianity

were simply foreign to him even though he grew up in the nominally Christian nation of France. One day, however, his wife was walking down a Paris street when she passed a small French Reformed church. On a whim and out of curiosity she entered in, the door being unlocked. She had never been in a Reformed church before. There she met the minister, a man with long white hair and a full beard. They talked for a while and as she left she asked, "Do you have a Bible?" The minister gave her a Bible and she took it home. Her husband, Emile, was waiting for her when she returned home and spied the Bible. Being a man who loved books he asked, "What's that?" "It's a Bible." "A Bible? Let me see! I've never read the Bible."

It's hard to believe that a man so well educated had never read the Bible before. Cailliet took the Bible and entered his study. He opened it and began reading. In all his reading of history and philosophy, he had never read anything like this. Listen, in his own words, to what he said about his first encounter with reading the Word of God in Scripture.

"I continued to read deeply into the night, mostly from the gospels. And lo and behold, as I looked through them, the One of whom they spoke, the One who spoke and acted in them, became alive to me.... the providential circumstances amid which the Book had found me now made it clear that while it seemed absurd to speak of a book understanding a man, this could be said of the bible because its pages were animated by the Presence of the Living God and the Power of His might acts. To this God I prayed that night, and the God who answered was *the same God* of whom it was spoken in the Book. A decisive insight flashed through my whole being the following morning as I probed the opening chapters of the gospel according to John. The very clue to the secret of human life was disclosed right there, not stated in the foreboding language of philosophy, but in the common, everyday language of human circumstances."

If you want to encounter the Risen Christ it may happen anywhere but he has promised to speak to us through the Word of God written and preached.

But what if you've already encountered the Risen Christ? What difference

has it made? What difference will it make? Leo Buscaglia sometimes assigns his classes at the University of Southern California to write a paper in response to the question. "What would you do if you had just five days to live?" The answers are always interesting. Some say, "I would go to those to whom I feel very close and remind them of how much I love them." Others say, "I would seek someone I have wronged in the past and seek to put things right with that person." On and on the answers go but what I want you to understand is this; Buscaglia does not grade the paper. he simply writes across the top of the page: "Why don't you do these things now?" (Eddington, *A Call to Renewal*).

What would you do if you met the Risen Christ? How would that make a difference in your life? How's your Easter faith lived out? There's a little piece of poetry written about twenty years ago, during the Viet Nam war, by a young woman about her boyfriend. It's about putting off the things that matter in life. It's called "The Things You Didn't Do." I want to share it with you.

Remember when I borrowed your brand new car and I dented it?
I thought you would kill me, but you didn't.
Remember when I dragged you to the beach and you said that it would rain and it did?
I thought you'd say, "I told you so," but you didn't.
Remember when I flirted with some other guys in an effort to make you jealous and you were.
I thought you would leave me, but you didn't.
Remember when I forgot to tell you that the dance was formal and you showed up in jeans?
I thought that you would drop me, but you didn't.
There were a lot of things you didn't do.
But you put up with me, and you loved me and you protected me.
And so there were a lot of things that I wanted to make up to you
When you returned from Viet Nam.
But... you didn't.

Don't wait! If Christ is indeed alive he wants us to seek him now. And if you've met him he wants you to follow him. If Christ is already in your life than

there's some word of love or encouragement or appreciation that you need to speak to someone, some act of kindness that you need to perform, some change you need to make in your life, some broken relationship which you need to restore. If there is a Risen Lord, Jesus Christ then don't let this moment pass. The time to decide is now (Howard Eddington). Seek him while he may be found. Seek the One who was dead but who is now alive and has the keep to death and heaven. "Seek the LORD your God, and you will find him if you search after him with all your heart and soul" (Deut. 4:29).

Bow your heads with me, and if you want to begin or renew your relationship with the Risen Christ will you pray this prayer with me?

I come seeking you, Lord Jesus Christ, risen from the dead. As much as I know of me I now trust to as much as I know of you, my Lord and my Savior. Amen.

Prayers of the People

Eternal God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ whose resurrection from the dead we celebrate this morning, we lift up our hearts to you. We have come here this morning to seek the living Lord Jesus Christ. Help us to know, in a profound way who you are. Help us to remember what Christ has told us and to believe and obey. If we have sought Christ in the past and have not found him, give us grace to keep on seeking remembering Christ's promise that those who seek will find. Save us, O Lord, from a privatised faith which doesn't connect in mission in your world. Keep us from a false zeal that makes church members but does not make disciples. Give us your Spirit to attempt things that only you can do, and then depend on you. Enable us to see you more clearly, love you more dearly, and follow you more nearly, day by day.