

THE RESURRECTION OF THE SON OF GOD

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Easter Sunday, April 11, 2004
 Scripture: 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.

When I was about ten my dad took me to work with him. He was a railroad engineer so we set together in the locomotive. We left the station in Philadelphia on a passenger run. As the train sped up dad said, "*If you want to start a new religion all you have to do is die and rise again.*" I have no idea where that came from. It had nothing to do with anything we'd been talking about. I was surprised because *although dad was a good man he wasn't particularly religious.* I never heard him talk about his faith and he never went to church until years later. I've wondered many times what prompted his words. But whatever he meant, he was right. *If you want to start a new religion all you have to do is die and rise again.* Jesus died and rose again and became the source of a new religion called "Christianity".

We can all agree that Jesus died. Even the most skeptical scholars agree that Jesus was an historical figure crucified during the reign of Roman Emperor Tiberius when Pontius Pilate governed Judea. Mary Magdalene *knew* He had died. When other disciples had fled in fear she stood by the cross on Friday and watched Him die. And early on Sunday morning she stumbled through the pre-dawn streets of Jerusalem to His tomb.

Why does Mary come? Why do any of us go to a cemetery or return in our thoughts to a loved one whose ashes we've scattered? One thing is sure: Mary came expecting to find a dead Jesus; she wasn't expecting a resurrection. All over the Middle East were myths of dying and rising gods like Osiris in Egypt but none of them were actual historical figures. Educated Greeks and Romans knew these myths were metaphors of the annual rebirth of nature. But *nobody* expected a real person to rise from the dead. That's why Mary assumed someone had stolen the body of Jesus when she saw the stone removed. She runs back through the city gates to tell Peter and "the other disciple whom Jesus loved" whom I presume was the apostle John. "They've taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have laid him." Peter and John run to the tomb and inspect it. It's empty except for the grave linens looking for all the world like a gigantic cocoon from which a butterfly has emerged. They're puzzled. Why would a grave robber take time to remove grave linens? They return home trying to make sense of what they'd seen.

Meanwhile Mary Magdalene stood weeping at the tomb. She bent over to look in and saw two angels in white who asked, "Why are you weeping?" Then something prompted Mary to turn - perhaps a shadow the risen Christ cast. Maybe she heard the quiet shuffle of His feet. Maybe the two angels gave away His presence by looking at Him? She turned and saw Jesus *but didn't recognize Him*. He asks Mary, "Whom are you looking for?" *I believe* all of us are looking for the risen Christ though we may not recognize it. All of us are looking for something or someone to make sense out of life. Does my life have any meaning? Why do I have it so good when others have it so bad? Or what has become of my beloved child or spouse ~~now~~ that he or she is dead? As St Augustine said, God has made us for Himself and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Him. *But on a more profound level I believe that long before we seek Him, He seeks and calls us.* Jesus tells us in His parables He's like a woman who sweeps her house in search of a lost coin. He's like a shepherd who risks the dangers of the desert in search of a lost sheep. He's like a father who waits for his prodigal child to return home and runs without judgment to welcome him.

The Risen Christ seeks and calls us in many different ways. Sometimes it's through a sense of failure, shame or guilt. It may be the deep, dark pit of depression, or the void of existential despair that awakens our ears to hear His voice. It may be our joy when we hold our first child or our fear of death. If Jesus is alive than He's not merely a figure from the past. He seeks and calls us. Mary Magdalene came seeking a dead Jesus but encountered a living Christ who had already sought and was calling her. The Risen Christ became the source of her new found faith. What my dad said is true: *If you want to start a new religion all you have to do is die and rise again.*

The death and resurrection of Jesus is the source of my faith. I believe in a *real, bodily* resurrection. Jesus didn't merely survive death in some kind of ghostly form. He conquered death. I can't *prove* it even though *I believe* there's ample historical evidence. So lacking absolute proof I make a leap of faith. Some things we can know only through a leap of faith. There are no guarantees.

Last week I talked with one of our members, Steve Chimchirian about his paratrooper training in the US Army. His comments threw light on a *leap of faith*. Steve had to undergo intensive training, learning how to fall from platforms five and ten feet off the ground - little leaps of faith. He then took some bigger leaps of

faith. He slid down a cable from a 30-foot tower then parachuted from a 250-foot tower under controlled conditions. After weeks of training he had to make five big leaps from a plane, the last one at night -- leaping into the darkness. Despite all the ground training he wasn't prepared for the terror he experienced before his first airplane leap. "Will my parachute work?" Statistics say that only one in a million parachutes *don't* open but every paratrooper fears he or she may be that one in a million. They can't be sure. All that training can't prove the parachute will work. You simply have to take a leap of faith.

It's the same with faith in the risen Christ. Neither the authority of the church or Bible, nor threats of hell or promises of heaven can create the inner personal assurance we want. *We have to take a leap of faith.* That leap may entail talking frankly about your questions and doubts with friends. One man who had taken the leap said, "I'm still not sure about whether Jesus rose from the dead." "That's okay. Just believe what you can and struggle with the rest." A leap of faith involves prayer. A young woman prayed, "God, I forgive you for the rotten hand you've dealt me." Blasphemous! No! For the first time in her life she was really praying. She had taken a leap of faith. A leap of faith may involve going where Jesus said he'd meet us: in the poor, the hungry and the imprisoned. Our church plans yearly mission trips for this purpose. Don't let religious shysters sell you a false bill of sale by promising immediate absolute certainty at no risk. We can't know for sure that the leap of faith will bring us home to God until we've followed Christ to the end of our lives. As G.A. Studdert-Kennedy said, "How can you prove a man who leads, to be a leader worth the following, unless you follow to the death...?"

I bet my life on Christ crucified and risen from the dead. Because Christ is risen I'm betting that death will not have the final word. ^{Neither} Cancer, Alzheimer's disease, crime, drug addiction, rampant evil in the world or the sins we struggle with all our life will have the final word. Not hatred, but love; not war, but peace will win. God is going to win despite all the evidence to the contrary. And God wants all of us to share in His victory. God's final victory is seen already in the resurrection of Jesus. Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia.

Let us pray: Almighty and ever-loving God, we are creatures who cling to the gift of life, yet know we must die. Our lives slip gradually from us, and we know there's nothing we can do about our mortality or that of our loved ones. We need hope outside ourselves. We need saving from the grip of death. We need resurrection. On this Easter Sunday you promise to give us what we need. Jesus has burst the bonds of death and shown us the way from death to life. Amen.