

*Preached at Trinity United Methodist Church, Gainesville, Florida
Easter, 1998*

THE LIVING CHRIST

TEXT: Mark 16:1-8

“Old Marley was dead as a doornail. This must be distinctly understood or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going to relate.” Who knows where that line comes from? It is the opening two sentences from “A Christmas Carol” by Charles Dickens. In the Dickens story, Scrooge experiences a spiritual resurrection as a gift from his friend Jacob Marley who returns from the dead as a ghost and warns him to change his ways.

As I thought about the Easter story, these opening lines of Dickens seemed to introduce the story about as well as anything. Jesus, like old Marley, was dead as a doornail. This must be distinctly understood or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going to relate. There’s nothing much to tell on Easter unless Jesus is completely and totally dead to begin with. The women who came to Jesus’s tomb on Easter morning knew that Jesus was dead. They were there at the crucifixion from beginning to end. They saw him die. They saw him taken down limp from the Cross and followed as he was taken and placed in a tomb.

When you watch someone executed and see that person taken to a grave and buried, you make certain assumptions and come away with certain expectations. Foremost among those assumptions and expectations is that if you return to the grave in a couple of days, the body will still be there. It will perhaps be in a little worse shape than when you last saw it, if there have been no embalming procedures, but it will still be there and it will still be quite dead.

This is what Scrooge expected of Marley and this is what the women expected when they came to the tomb of Jesus on Sunday morning, and we can hardly fault them for it. It’s a basic law of physics...bodies at rest remain at rest, and it’s hard to get more at rest, at least in a physical sense, than being dead. The only concern the women had that morning was how to move the big rock that had been used to seal off the tomb. As they approached, they discovered that someone had taken care of moving it, but they still generally expected that the body of Jesus would be inside, and they entered to do what they had come to do...to anoint Jesus’s body with burial spices and pay their last respects.

When they got inside, however, things were not the way they had expected. No dead body...just an angel with the strange news that Jesus was alive and gone on ahead of them into Galilee. How do the women respond? If you’ll excuse the pun, they were scared stiff. Verse 8 is how the oldest manuscripts of the book of Mark end. They discover Jesus is not in the tomb, and they are afraid. No dancing in the streets—no celebrations of resurrection—fear. Just when everybody thought they knew what had happened, something else throws a wrench into the works.

Now, that’s not to say that the women and the other disciples were not devastated by Jesus’s death or that they wouldn’t eventually be overjoyed to have him back among them. But the fear of the women when Jesus is not where he is supposed to be is typical of our response to the unexpected and the unknown. We may not like the situation in which we find ourselves, but at least if it will stay the same, we can learn how to live with it. When we know what to expect, we can plan and have some sort of stabilizing routine in our lives.

If there is one thing that was true about Jesus from the day of his birth to the day of his ascension into heaven, it is that you could expect the unexpected from Jesus. Nobody expected the Messiah to come as a baby in a manger...born to a poor carpenter family in Nazareth. The people were expecting something much more grand and impressive than that. At the age of 12, his parents did not expect to find their son, who they thought was lost, perfectly at home teaching in the Temple. Throughout Jesus’s ministry, people were surprised to see the kinds of people that Jesus chose to associate with. They didn’t understand why he broke Jewish law. The disciples didn’t understand what he was doing talking with a Samaritan woman, and finally the whole city of Jerusalem turned on him because he refused their expectations that he be an earthly king who would overthrow the Romans.

Any Jewish scholar could tell you that the Messiah would not and could not be crucified, and even the simplest child could tell you that dead bodies sealed in tombs don't get up and go anywhere. Sure, Jesus raised a few...but they had done it only with the assistance of Jesus...who was alive at the time. They were raised by an outside power. Even in death, Jesus stubbornly refused to do what all convention and protocol said he should do—namely to stay dead. He had been that way in life, and death was no different. Imagine raising Jesus—not from the dead, but as a child. I'm sure that Mary must have had gray hair very early on.

As we sit here on this Easter morning some 2,000 years later, I would like us to think about the ways that we are like those women who came to the tomb—or for that matter, like any of the people who found themselves puzzled, offended, scandalized, and frightened by the unexpected Jesus. Scripture tells us that “it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” A dead God is not a problem. A dead God is predictable, and we can come to reverence the memory and anoint the body without having anything disrupt our plans. But a LIVING God. That is something else entirely. The women were afraid. So, often, are we.

One of the primary ways that we fall into sin is by trying to mold God into a God that will meet our expectations. We seek to mold God into an image we are comfortable with and put God in a tomb-like box where God can be examined, controlled, and contained. We tend to feel much more at ease when we are sure we know exactly what God thinks about every issue; when we know exactly how God will act in every circumstance; and when we can find the absolute boundary for who is going to get into heaven and who is going to hell.

We are often most comfortable when we can keep our religion in the church, go there when we want to pay our respects, and be reasonably sure that God is not going to leave that place and go intruding in our day to day lives. We can come to the Cross, weep at the feet of Jesus, and feel righteous, but before we leave, we do want to be sure...he is *nailed* up there isn't he? I mean he won't be getting down again, will he? I can just put this behind me and get on with my life, can't I? Most of us, if we are honest with ourselves, are very uncomfortable with a Jesus who is missing from the tomb—a Jesus who is not where he is supposed to be.

And yet it is the job of the church, and therefore my job, to instill in you some of that same sense of uncertainty that the women felt on Easter morning. Did you come here to pay your respects to a man who died 2,000 years ago? Did you come figuring you have Jesus all figured out—that you can spot him anywhere—because you are sure what he will and won't do or who he will and won't associate with? Well, he is not here. He is risen and has gone ahead of you to Galilee, and chances are he's not doing the things you expect or is even in a form you would immediately recognize. Even Jesus's closest disciples had trouble recognizing Jesus after the resurrection. Verse 12 of chapter 16 says he appeared in different forms.

The news of Easter morning is grand and glorious news. But it is unsettling news, because with Jesus now alive, we never know where he is going to pop up or what he is going to be doing next. When we are primed to expect him to be the conquering savior, he lets himself get crucified. When we expect him to lay low in the grave, he is resurrected without a soul being there to witness the fanfare. When we expect him to act with dignity and decorum, he charges through the temple like a madman, overturning tables and calling people thieves. When we expect him to cast judgment, he says “Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more.” When we expect him to approve the righteous, he calls them vipers and unwashed tombs.

Jesus is alive. We serve a living God...a dynamic God...an unexpected God. If you can figure out all the ways of God, your God is WAY too small. The God of the Bible is vast beyond our comprehension. Everything that any human being can say or think about God is at the very best incomplete. God is too big to fit in our brain—as amazing an organ as it is. As much as we might like to, we are not going to completely figure God out. Not now, not ever.

Just before Easter a few years back, there was a big scandal in New Jersey when a church there put on a passion play. The show ran for quite a while, and every other night, the man who portrayed Jesus was played by a black man. People were scandalized. It wasn't what they were used to. It wasn't what they expected. Just when people thought they had God figured out, here came somebody to upset the applecart. No, as best we know, Jesus of Nazareth wasn't black. We can be even more certain that he wasn't white with golden hair. He was a Jew from northern Palestine, most probably with olive skin. If we are only coming to pay our respects to the dead body, then I suppose we shall have to limit our portrayals to olive-skinned actors. But if we worship the Jesus who rose from the dead...the living Christ...Jesus might be in any form at all.

When we serve a living Christ, we should expect to see Jesus in unexpected places and in unexpected forms. Would Christ shun the form of a black man? Or a transient? Or a woman? New Jersey hasn't seen scandal until they let a woman portray Christ. In his life on earth, Jesus was always confusing and scandalizing somebody by doing or not doing something that did not fit in the God-box that had been built for him. What is God going to do with the souls of those young men and women a couple years ago who committed mass suicide to join the UFO they believed followed the Hale-Bopp comet? What is God going to do with Muslims or Buddhists? And even more uncomfortably, what does God think about the gay and lesbian community?

If you are sure you know, be very careful. God may scandalize you by doing something you don't expect. God might decide to offer mercy to someone you don't think should get it. Jesus may appear in the form of someone you don't like much. God does not have to stay inside anybody's box...even if that box is Bible-shaped. Have I scandalized you yet? God doesn't care whether you're liberal or conservative...God has been known to take the sacred cows of both and turn them into gourmet burgers.

There is nothing more upsetting than a God who refuses to stay where you put him—a Jesus who won't stay dead—even when you seal him in the tomb and post a guard at the entrance. Jesus Christ lives and loves, eats with sinners, breaks religious law, and can no more be contained and controlled than the wind. He is not here. He is risen. He lives. Do you understand what that means? So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them.

The Easter message is filled with both fear and delight—terror and amazement. To know that Jesus is alive is to know that Jesus is still in the business of doing the unexpected...and there is delight in that. God has delightful surprises in store for us. With a living Christ, church should never be boring. While we model the eternal nature of God with traditions that are passed through the ages, we should also model the unexpectedness of God and learn to see God in a variety of forms and styles. We can experience God in many different ways, and if we don't—chances are we have missed many of his appearances.

But to be excited and thrilled by the newness of the Easter message...the message that he is not dead but has risen...the message that we serve a living Christ...we must abandon the notion that we have God completely figured out. We have got to take our personal or denominational God-box and open up the sides; we have to roll away the stone from the tomb. To every person in every age, Jesus will continue to appear in unexpected ways...in ways that may seem to us to be a scandal...heresy...even damnable. It certainly did to the Pharisees, and it got him crucified. Don't fall into the trap of thinking that we are so different.

God is bigger than us. God is bigger than we can comprehend. We can't ever know for certain what shape God's love will take. Jesus WAS dead as a doornail. But that was only the beginning of the story. The wonderful news of Easter is that Jesus lives—even now he lives among us. We won't ever be absolutely sure where the living Jesus will show up, or where he will lead us. But if you're up for the adventure, if you're brave enough to face the fact that the tomb is empty, then come on...let the grave clothes be...He is risen, and he's gone on ahead of us to Galilee. Can you, WILL you serve the LIVING Christ?

Amen.