

## The Living Christ

Text: Mark 16:1-8

*Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on Easter Sunday, April 17, 2022.*

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 and watched the soldiers pierce his side to be sure he was dead before the Sabbath began at sundown. They saw him taken down, limp, from the Cross and they 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. At the top of the list of those assumptions and expectations is that if you return to the grave in a couple of days, the body will still be there.

That is what the women expected when they came to the tomb of Jesus on Sunday morning, and we can hardly fault them for it. The only concern the women had that morning was how they would 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 the stone, but they still 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 as they had expected. There was no 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 and how to handle it, something else throws a wrench into the works.

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 relatable, because it's typical of our own 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.

It's one of the reasons the pandemic remains so hard psychologically. If anything, it's getting harder, because it won't stay the same. New variants, new symptoms, new protocols. As soon as we get used to one thing, there's a new twist. I told some of you this past week that planning church these past two years has felt like a giant video game where you are almost at the end and you step on the wrong square and you have to go back and start over. We humans value at least a basic level of stability, and the last week of Jesus' life had been anything but.

For that matter, nothing about the life of Jesus was typical, nor was it the expected path for a messianic figure. Nobody expected the Messiah to come as a baby in a manger, born to a poor carpenter family from Nazareth. Mary and Joseph did not expect to find their twelve-year-old son, who they thought was lost, perfectly at home teaching in the Temple. Miracles are, by definition, unexpected; and Jesus performed a lot of them.

Throughout Jesus' ministry, people were surprised, and often dismayed, to see the kinds of people that Jesus chose to associate with. The disciples didn't understand what he was doing debating doctrine with a Samaritan woman, or even why they were in Samaria in the first place. They tried keeping the annoying children away from Jesus, so that he could tend to adult matters, but Jesus scolded them for trying to help. 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 and instead let himself be arrested and killed.

The "long-expected Jesus" we sing about did a lot of expectation-busting things during his life. And now this. Even the simplest child could tell you that dead bodies sealed in tombs don't get up and go anywhere. But, even in death, Jesus stubbornly refused to do what all convention and protocol said he should do—namely to stay dead.

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.

One of the primary ways that we fall short in our faith is by trying to shape God into a God who will meet our expectations. We seek to mold God into an image we are comfortable with; a God who looks like us, votes like us, loves who we love, and fights a common enemy. We 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 perhaps most comfortable when we can keep the entirety of our religion in the church building, come here when we want to pay our respects, and be reasonably sure that God is not going to leave here 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?

We find ourselves wary of a Jesus who is missing from the tomb—a Jesus who is not where he is supposed to be. We have crafted large and complex systems to determine, and enforce, where Jesus is and is not allowed to be; who he may and may not bless; who he will and won't admit to Paradise.

We have sealed off those places and situations with heavy stones and set guards at the entrance. And then we show up at one of those places, only to find the stone gone and some strange guy saying, "Nope, sorry, he's not here! Try Galilee. But, really, who knows? He can be hard to track." It's infuriating! And scary.

To be clear, it's not the "He is alive!" part that scares us. "He is alive" is the joy, amazement, and glory that pulls the alleluias from our lips every Easter. Because he lives, we too shall live. Yes! We're here for that. Easter finds us oh so ready to be done with the wilderness of Lent; the theme of things being finished and battles being won fill the hymns of Easter. And yes, the victory over death represented in Jesus' resurrection is a huge deal. But there's more to the angel's message; and it's that extra bit—the "He is not here" part we find problematic.

Part of that discomfort is wondering if Jesus is out doing something heretical again, crossing lines we have expressly forbidden, feeding people who didn't work for their meal or some such thing. But an even worse explanation for Jesus rushing off to Galilee without so much as a "Hey, I'm back!" to

his followers, is that maybe that means It. Isn't. Over. Death might be swallowed up in victory, but it turns out that the work of the living Jesus is only just beginning. To date they have been merely disciples, those who learn from a master. But they are about to become apostles—those who are sent.

Mark tells us about Easter morning, but it is John who continues the story into Easter night, transporting us to a house where all the disciples except Thomas and Judas were hiding behind locked doors in fear of their own arrest and execution. Jesus appears among them, the first they have seen him, but he's not there to chit chat or share fond memories of walking on water. He comes to them with an assignment: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you," Jesus tells them. Then he breathes the Holy Spirit into them.

Think of how those words must have landed, given their previous 72 hours. As amazing as the news of Jesus' resurrection was, the external realities in first-century Israel had not changed. Rome still ruled the roost, and was still bent on rooting out any vestiges of this Jesus movement. In the book of Acts, we first meet Paul while he is still diligently engaged in hunting down and murdering any followers of Jesus he can find.

The disciples were all in hiding, fearing that, as Jesus' most public disciples, they now had targets on their backs. John was the only one who had dared even to show his face at the crucifixion.

And now here's Jesus, somehow alive again, passing the torch. The work that just got Jesus crucified is now theirs to continue, only now the danger is amped up to 11. Uh...thanks? Good news? Most assuredly. But pretty hard to absorb in the moment. And unsettling to think about unlocking those doors and going back outside to a crowd that is no longer in the mood for Hosannas. But, they did. Willingly. Gladly. And here we are because of it.

As far as we know, of the original twelve disciples, only John lived out a natural lifetime.

Jesus was dead. And then he wasn't. The women were afraid; the disciples were afraid. And then they weren't. The living Christ filled them; empowering them to spread the good news, to heal the sick, to set people free, to light fires of loving community that would come to be called the Church. And, in their turn, the disciples passed the torch to those communities. As Jesus sent them, so they sent the church, each in succession down through the millennia.

Every Easter it comes again to us. He is risen, and he's gone on ahead of us to Galilee. The work of Jesus the man is finished. The work of the living Christ goes on. In us. Amen.