

Will Jesus Be In Church Today?

Sermon 56 | Greystone Baptist Church | April 12, 2020

Matthew 28:1-10 & Colossians 3: 1-4

A man was driving his children to church one Easter Sunday, and he was trying to explain the significance of the day. Long before the bunny and the egg hunts, Easter was a day of celebration because Jesus defeated death and rose from the grave. "Jesus, has risen from the dead and he is alive!" the dad instructed his kids in the car. Just about that time, the three-year-old piped up from the back seat, "So, will he be in church today?"

It is a fair question. After all, church is exactly where we would expect the resurrected Christ to be, is it not? Especially on Easter Sunday. That's why the pews are packed, the flowering crosses are full, the brass players are in place, and the offering plates overflow. We wake up early, get all dressed up, and gather together for one of the holiest of days in our Christian year, because Jesus is alive! And we've all come to church to see for ourselves.

Except this year, unlike every other year... we didn't.

This year, instead, we find ourselves reading the story of Mary Magdalene and the other Mary who went to see the tomb. [Perhaps sounding a bit like the kid from the back row of the SUV... "Will Jesus be in church today?"] And perhaps like the two Mary's we are a little stunned when we arrive to find the church as empty as the tomb. There's not a soul in sight this Easter Sunday. The disciples are gathered in their homes waiting for a sign that the coast is clear and everything can get back to normal.

I wonder if the disciples, both Mary's and the others who didn't accompany them to the tomb, I wonder if they really believed things would get back to normal? They'd already uprooted their lives once to follow Jesus around Galilee, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and raising the dead. They'd been listening and learning from this Jesus who taught them about God's love and mercy and forgiveness. They knew with their minds that he would suffer and die, because he had told them it would be so. And now, I wonder, did they wait for Jesus to walk back into their lives, just as he'd done before, so that they could pick right back up where they left off?

Whatever they were expecting, the way the story unfolded seems to have taken everyone by surprise.

The earth quakes and an angel appears. The guards - overwhelmed with fear - faint and just before the women do the same, the angel speaks: "Do not be afraid. I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified... come and look, he is not here."

When the women recognize that things are not as they had imagined, that the tomb was empty and Jesus was not where they expected him to be, they heeded the words of the angel and they quickly changed course. The action of the story dramatically speeds up as those who came to see the tomb, to sit outside it and to remember what was lost are now

running in the opposite direction, back to their homes and neighborhoods with the news that Jesus is not where they'd expected him to be! Jesus wasn't in the tomb on that first Easter morn!

Yet despite our reading of this Gospel account over and over again, many of us are surprised by the fact that Jesus is not in church today. The church is as empty as the tomb!

Like the first two disciples, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, we had our own set of expectations, defined by our own understanding of what was possible. Just a few weeks ago we were planning choral anthems and rehearsing children's choirs. We were preparing our Easter dresses and deciding about whether the flowering cross should stay inside the sanctuary or out on the front lawn for all to see. We even had a baptism scheduled for this morning!

Just a few weeks ago we were planning our holiday lunches and dreaming of an Easter just like the ones we've grown accustomed to. We were counting on an Easter like a revised version of years past, maybe with a few improvements here and there.

But now, given recent events, nothing will be anything like years passed. Nothing will be even close to what we had expected.

Everything is different now.

So this year reading from Matthew's Gospel, we know the story in more than just an intellectual sense. We know the story with all of who we are. We can feel the grief, the shock and the fear right along with Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. We know what it is to find and follow Jesus in all the conventional ways... but now the very hub of those conventions is closed until further notice.

Maybe in lieu of our flowering cross we should have posted a sign on the doors... a sign that simply said: "He isn't here!"

Like the father in the car, another kind of Father, a priest, gathered with his parish on Holy Saturday for an Easter Vigil, as was the custom in Nicaraguan Catholic Base Communities. As the sun began to peak above the horizon they read the same Gospel lesson that we read this morning. As was their custom they began to talk about the text, to interpret it together and to apply it to their own lives as poor laborers, living in Nicaragua in the 1970s. Considering the resurrection they remembered that everything was different after the brutality of the cross. ...that there was no way for things to simply return to normal. And that if the women wanted to find Jesus on that first Easter morn, they, too, were going to have to get on the road to Galilee.

Christ isn't going to be in the tomb, the Nicaraguan peasants intuitively understood. Christ is risen and is back on the road, up ahead of you, headed to Galilee, where the work of feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and liberating the oppressed carries on. Christ is risen and is alive in the hearts and lives of all who desire a New World.

Christ isn't in the tomb and Christ isn't in the empty church... Christ is up ahead, on the road to Galilee, to Greystone Village, to Cedar Point, to Stonehenge, to Springmoor, to Falls River, and Whispering Pines; Christ is risen and has left the building... to get on the road to live and dwell amongst the people.

Just like the women who discovered the empty tomb, we, too, are called not to linger beside that which is gone, but to get ourselves on the road to Galilee. "He's up ahead of you," the angel said, "on the road to Galilee, go and tell the others that he will meet you there."

Don't cling to the tomb, don't weep too long and focus on what might have been... instead, get back on the road and let's get back to where the people are... let's get back to building that new world, focusing on things that are of God - as Paul says in the letter to the Colossians. When we do that, our lives reveal the glory of God through kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and compassion. And as these begin to flow forth from our lives, we participate in resurrection... in the words of Paul, we "rise with Christ."

Thinking back on that three-year-old who bravely asked the question, "Will Jesus be in church today?" I can't help but think about how I might have answered that question in years gone by. *Of course! And you'll see him in the hearts of the people whose lives bear witness to the resurrection... they will be gathered in the church, all around you.*

But this year, nothing is how it used to be. In fact, we wouldn't even find ourselves in the car, heading to church... would we?

And still... if from the voice of a child that brave and persistent question rings out longing to know if Jesus will be in church today...

Perhaps we can point to the tremendous displays of self-giving love shown by medical workers, teachers, and grocery store workers who put their own lives at risk to ensure that our communities are cared for and nourished in these unprecedented days.

Perhaps we might remember those who cannot work from home, whose businesses were closed down, and whose incomes immediately stopped - so that the community might not suffer.

Perhaps we might join others on the road to "Galilee" as they work to ensure that all are fed, all are sheltered, all have access to healthcare, and no one is forgotten in this season of confusion, distance, and isolation.

And perhaps, as we wait for the New World to open up before us... we might get back on the road to Galilee, risen with Christ, practicing resurrection through simple acts of kindness with our neighbors.

Because today, we know that Christ is risen, but he isn't in the church.

And the hope of Easter is that Christ is up ahead in Galilee; Christ is alive and working through the hands of essential workers,

Christ is risen; and as we all get our footing in the chaos of this season, we can trust that indeed, Christ is up ahead, working to build a new church for a New World;

but Christ is also right where we are, meeting us on the road, in our homes and in our neighborhoods as we take those first steps of resurrected faith, placing our own feet on the road to Galilee, embracing this season for what it is and continuing the work of God in this world.

The hope of Easter is that

Christ isn't in the church today, but rather is on the road to Galilee...

Christ isn't in the church today, but is with us as we make cloth masks, deliver food, and learn how to homeschool.

Christ isn't in the church today but is with us in our moments of chaos, worry, and despair.

Christ isn't in the church today, but is resurrected in displays of love for our neighbors.

Christ isn't in the church today but in all new ways, we are experiencing that Christ is indeed alive, and with us, today and tomorrow the same...

Alleluia,

Christ is risen, Christ is risen indeed!