



Westminster Presbyterian Church

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April 8, 2018 Sermon

An Unexpected Savior

Scripture Lessons: John 20:19-31

Jesus often behaves in unexpected ways. He gave up heaven to take on flesh and blood and dwell among us, was born in a lowly stable, lived as a humble carpenter, sometimes told people mum's the word on the healing you just received, surrendered his will to the will of God being obedient to death -- even death upon a cross, and after three days dead was raised to new life. Jesus' behavior is often not what we would expect.

In today's scripture, we meet up with the disciples on that first Easter evening as they huddle behind closed doors. Just that morning, Mary told the disciples she had seen the Risen Lord but they did not believe her, nor did they rush back to the tomb. Even though Jesus told them he would return, none of the disciples believed it. As the disciples demonstrate, it is not easy to live into the reality of life victorious over death. It is not easy to live as resurrection people.

Suddenly, Jesus appears and the disciples are afraid not just because a dead guy showed up, they fear Jesus' reaction.

“After all I did for you, this is how you repay me?”

“I am so fed up with all of you, I never want to see you again.”

“I thought you were faithful disciples?” followed with “I'm just kidding” before anyone lashes out in return. Those are the reactions we would expect from Jesus, right?

“Peace be with you,” Jesus says, using the same greeting God uses in the Old Testament whenever God approaches humans who tremble with fear of punishment. The saying is meant to convey that the Divine Presence means no harm. Jesus, the revelation of God, acts like God acts and responds like God responds-- with grace. ***We need to remember this!*** To this cowering bunch of disciples, Jesus not only reveals himself, he gives them his peace, commissions them to share in his ministry, and empowers them with the gift of the Holy Spirit. Is that what we expected?

Jesus re-appears to his disciples a week later to give Thomas a chance to see and touch Jesus for himself. Jesus says something he means for the rest of us, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” meaning Jesus is not going to tangibly appear among us. If you and I are going to believe, we will have to do so without “seeing.”

Which raises the question – “How?” If we are not going to see Jesus with our own eyes and hear him with our own ears, what evidence is there for us to base our faith upon? What are the signs of the resurrection?

The answer may surprise you, but as the New Testament declares -- the answer is “the church.” The life of the church is to be a witness to the resurrection. The church is to be evidence to the world that Jesus Christ is alive in the here and now. The church is God’s sign to the world that Jesus has been raised from the dead.

The early church became a visible witness to the resurrection when those first disciples realized they were connected to Jesus Christ in a way that allowed the presence and power of the risen Christ to flow through them. Because the Risen Christ was with them, they gave of themselves to the broken and battered, they shared their lives with the least and the lost. The disciples demonstrated deep love for one another, compassion for their neighbors and devotion to God just as Jesus had. The early church was a clear demonstration of the living Christ.

Now, that is not to say, it was a perfect church. The early church exemplified Jesus’ presence but it was no less flawed and human than our churches are. It had its share of conflict and controversy. If that flawed, imperfect bunch empowered by the Risen Christ could live as Resurrection people then we, too, can be witnesses to Christ’s presence among us.

One need only look around to see signs of resurrection present at Westminster. They are visible as we gather to worship, care and pray for those in need, financially support I.D. ministry, work for peace, help persons of all ages grow spiritually and share our energy, intelligence, imagination and love in numerous ways both within and outside these four walls. These are just some of Westminster Church’s actions that demonstrate the Risen Christ is among us.

When the actions, practices and ministries of the church reflect the same ministry and mission of Jesus amazing things happen!

While working as a hospital chaplain I met a young adult woman who admitted herself to the hospital because she was suicidal. As the chaplain assigned to the locked Adult Psychiatric Unit, I was able to visit with her several times during her

hospital stay. The medications and treatment she received enabled her to make good progress. The day before she was to be released, I asked what made her decide to come to the hospital instead of harming herself.

“Well”, she said, “I remembered this song I learned as a child. I did not grow up going to church but I spent two weeks with my grandmother every summer. One of those weeks was Vacation Bible School at her church and I went every year. A song I learned at Vacation Bible School kept going through my mind. It was ‘*This little light of mine, I’m going to let it shine. This little light of mine, I’m going to let it shine. Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.*’ I just kept thinking how disappointed my grandmother would be if I extinguished my light. That’s when I drove myself to the hospital.”

A song, learned at Vacation Bible School during childhood, becomes a lifeline for a young adult woman. Jesus acts in unexpected ways!

By God’s amazing grace, the behavior and practices of the church become the ways we and the world learn Jesus Christ is alive. The ways in which the church lives and moves and has its being is evidence that Easter really did happen, that Jesus Christ is alive!

We all have our doubts, we all sin, we all fail God. Yet, the Risen Christ comes to us with love and forgiveness, breathes God’s Spirit into us and sends us into the world as God’s ambassadors. Whether we fail or succeed, the process is repeated ad infinitum. We may not expect that behavior, and certainly do not deserve it, but it is the way God and the Risen Christ operate. Thanks be to God. All thanks be to God.

Amen.

