

God-in-a-Box

Pinegrove, Easter, April 5, 2015

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"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 comes from? Right, it's the opening lines for "A Christmas Carol" by Charles Dickens. In that 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.

Those famous opening lines would also be a great opening for our Easter story: "Jesus, like Marley, was dead as a doornail. This must be distinctly understood or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going to relate."

No, I'm not being disrespectful here; because seriously, unless Jesus is completely and totally dead to begin with, there's nothing much to tell on Easter. Mary Magdalene came to Jesus' tomb on Easter morning *knowing* that Jesus was dead. She'd been there at the crucifixion from beginning to end. She saw him die. She saw him taken down from the cross and she followed as he was placed in a tomb. The end of a heart-breaking story.

We don't exactly know *why* she returned to the tomb that Sunday morning, but we *do* know what she expected. She expected to see Jesus' dead body. Instead what she found was an empty tomb, and she is confused, afraid that his body has been stolen. She runs to get the disciples, and they are just as confused. Of course they are, wouldn't you be? The other gospel stories even tell us they are scared. No dancing in the streets, no Easter celebration like we have today - just utter confusion and fear.

Just when everybody thought the whole horrific ordeal was finally over, something else throws a big monkey wrench into the works: Christ's body is gone - um, Houston, we have a problem!

Now, if they *had* found Jesus' body it *wouldn't* have been a problem. Of course, it would've been gut-wrenchingly painful, but at least it's something we can understand and can deal with. But... a LIVING Jesus? That is something else entirely! That is confusing and frightening; it was confusing 2000 years ago, and still is for us now. Or rather, it should be.

One of our biggest mistakes, one of our biggest *sins* if you will, is we try to mold Jesus into someone who will fit *our* expectations. A nice, predictable Jesus we can feel comfortable with. A Jesus who, if we're honest with ourselves, a Jesus who is kinda, well, like us. Which makes it really easy for us to decide whom God loves (people like us) and doesn't love (people not like us).

Jesus knew that and told his followers to quit thinking of him that way. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus promises his friends that when he reappears it will be as - *not* as a glorious king or the sweet Jesus we know from Sunday school pictures - but as the filthy beggar, that creepy stranger, the sick person or the appalling prisoner. Not exactly the Jesus his friends thought they knew!

Lucky for us, Jesus has no problem ignoring all our preconceived ideas. The risen Jesus comes and goes as he pleases, locked doors cannot stop him. He appears in the most unexpected forms (beggars, strangers, the sick, prisoners), and always reminds us to not be afraid, because his peace is with us.

That is the repeated message of the Easter story. Jesus is not just here, in this little box we call church! He's already out there in the world, speaking to his followers, to us, waiting for us to catch up with him, and to listen and to finally recognize him. The Holy Spirit and God's love are not limited by what *we* think they look like and how they work; the Holy Spirit couldn't care less about who *we* say is loved by God and who not!

Mary Magdalene mistook Jesus for the gardener. Cleopas and his friend on the road to Emmaus mistook Jesus for a fellow traveler until he broke bread with them. When Jesus stood on the shoreline and called out to his fishing disciples, Peter and the others could not recognize him. When the eleven disciples first saw the risen Jesus, they thought it was a ghost. None of them were expecting to encounter the risen Christ. Christ was dead, in the tomb. In that little box that fit their expectations. End of story.

So how about us? Did we come here to pay our respects to a man who died almost 2000 years ago? Did we come here thinking we have Jesus all figured out? Did we come here expecting a safe, predictable Jesus? Well, that Jesus is not here. He is risen and has gone ahead of us, and chances are he's not doing the things you expect, or even looks the way you expect - flipping tables and calling people thieves, telling righteous people they are snakes, forgiving prostitutes, befriending corrupt minions, breaking religious protocol, and on and on it goes. He may appear in the form of someone you don't like much, he may be saying things you don't want to hear... He may even not be a Christian.

No, the Easter message is *not* safe and predictable, it cannot be boxed in and compartmentalized. Instead, it's filled with confusion *and* delight, with fear *and* amazement. It tells us that God is still in the business of wowing us, still knocking our socks off and still bowling us over - but only, only if we're willing to expect the unexpected. Who says church is boring?!

Jesus *WAS* dead, dead as a doornail. But that was only the *beginning* of the story - not the end. In one fell swoop Easter shattered all our neat little religious boxes. It tells us to expect the *unexpected*.

So don't be too sure where the living Jesus will show up next, or where he will lead us. All we know is it will be an adventure. A risky adventure at times, but with Christ travelling with us it's so well worth it.

Amen.