

Where Have We Put Jesus?

An Easter Sermon by Joe Hoffman

March 23, 2008

I want to acknowledge my gratitude to Yvetter Flunders and her Easter sermon entitled “Someone Has Stolen Jesus” for helping inspire what I say today. And also Jan Richardson and her Easter meditation in her book [In Wisdom’s Path](#). Both of these women have helped me see Easter in a new way.

On Easter we come to celebrate that life is stronger than death. That love is stronger than fear or hatred. We come to give thanks, to sing our alleluias

But we come to Easter with life experiences that challenge these affirmations of faith. We come aware of how hard life can be. How unfair life can be. If you haven’t read this morning’s paper yet, I encourage you to read the front page of the Forum section. An editorial written by our own Leslie Boyd as she talks about her son – who is Michael – age 33 – and he is dying of cancer. He is dying because he did not have health insurance. Could not get the care he needed when he needed it. We know that life is hard and often unfair.

If you come this week to Room in the Inn and have a chance to sit and talk with some of our guests, listen to their stories, you will again know that life is hard and often unfair.

If you’ve ever been around someone who experiences deep depression, with chemical imbalances or whatever it might be, you know that life is hard and often unfair. So we come on Easter with those realities and we come needing to find Jesus and what we find is that Jesus is not only dead, but he is now also missing. Why is it, I wonder, that when we need Jesus the most, when we need God to be the most visible and the most present, why is it that often what we find is emptiness?

Mary went to the tomb that morning filled with grief over the death of her friend. She needed to see him one more time. There were things that she needed to say. You know, there is something about death – and often times death brings out in us things that we haven’t had the opportunity or we didn’t know how to say when someone was alive. We go to the graveyards where our loved ones are buried – and we talk with them. We ask forgiveness of them. We finish conversations that didn’t get finished before. Mary went to the tomb, knowing that everything was now going to be different, just trying to find some way to bring the last few days to an ending that she could somehow live with.

But what she finds is emptiness. Jesus is not in the tomb. Now more than ever she needs Jesus to be where he is supposed to be, but he is not there. After his death, he had been placed in a safe place. There was a big stone placed in front of the tomb. The Romans and the Jewish religious leaders wanted to be sure he stayed put. And Jesus' followers wanted Jesus to be in a place they could find him.

On this first Easter morning everyone is surprised. Everyone wants to know where is Jesus. They begin to ask one another – where did you put Jesus? On Easter morning everyone was asking the same question – everyone wondering what trick someone else had pulled that took away the body. But no one even thought that Jesus might be alive. But that's the good news today. Death cannot contain those who want to live.

Unfortunately, it is hard to live with a risen Christ. A risen Jesus does not lie around waiting on us to come visit when we want to. A living Christ is not static. Is not bound to our ideas or to our ways. A living, risen Christ must be found among the living, not the dead. The good news is not that the tomb is empty, but that love continues to live. That death cannot stop God. That hatred is never the last word.

But we do better when we can have some certainty in life. The question for us, a people of Easter faith, is where have we put Jesus. Is our need to find Jesus in the way of seeing Jesus where Jesus is? Do we need a Jesus that makes sense to us, so we cling to a definition of Jesus that makes it hard for us to continue to know Jesus? Where have we put Jesus?

Some of you, before joining our church, have a conversation with me in which you ask – what do I have to believe about Jesus in order to be a member here? And I say to you – there is no one particular thing you have to believe. But whatever you do believe, I hope you will continue to learn and grow and change. I hope that what you believe today will not be the same in a year – I hope the experience of being here will continue to allow you to see Jesus wherever Jesus may be. To experience the living Christ in our midst in whatever form that takes.

For some of us, that is good news. But for others, that is pretty hard to take. First of all, we haven't been given permission by the church to think for ourselves, so it is a little scary. And some of us need to keep Jesus in a safe place so we can find Jesus when we need Jesus. And so we put Jesus in places that are comfortable and familiar to us. We aren't so sure that we want Jesus to still be stirring things up in our lives. It's a good story. It was good that he did it once upon a time, but we aren't so sure that we want Jesus messing with our politics, with our economics, with our religion.

We have put Jesus into beautiful sanctuaries like this one behind the stained glass that makes us feel good. We go to holy places to find Jesus because it seems appropriate that he have a holy

place to reside. We take the life of Jesus that was always out on the edge, that was dynamic and on the move and we try to put Jesus in some calm and quiet box. And when we do this, we put Jesus in places that Jesus is not very familiar with. Where have we put Jesus – and why? And is it possible that our need to have Jesus in a place that we can find Jesus quickly get in the way of our seeing where Jesus already is? Where have we put Jesus?

Some of us say that Jesus is the platform of our politics. Jesus is the motivation of our lives. Jesus is the moral head of our society. Jesus is the one we carry into battle proclaiming our cause just and moral. We have Jesus where we want Jesus – wrapped up in our prejudices and in our own limited realities. So I ask us today - Where have we put Jesus?

And some of us have turned Jesus into a great teacher, but have stripped away the power that Jesus has to save us by love and grace. We know he is with us in the cause, but we don't allow him the power to make the difference that we long for. But at least we have him where we can find him. We have him under control.

Ever since that first Easter morning we have all been trying to find Jesus – and we have tried to put Jesus in some of the most unusual places. The religious institutions have tried to put Jesus in our rules and our dogmas and our doctrines – and most of us know it just doesn't fit so well. The political leaders have tried to put Jesus on their side, and in so doing they have taken the words of Jesus to obscene places, justifying the greed for money and power in the name of the one who came to live among the poor and the powerless. We all have to ask ourselves – where have we put Jesus?

Some of us have Jesus locked up in memories from the long ago past. Childhood memories of a Jesus in a storybook doing the things we like for Jesus to do – like welcoming the children, smiling, and feeding the hungry. Jesus is under control when Jesus is just a good memory.

So, today on this Easter Sunday, I ask you – where have you put Jesus? Are we more comfortable with a dead Jesus that is kept in his place or a living Christ that continues to be on the move? And can the religions of our day hold a living Christ? Can we find that Christ in our churches? Can Jesus be contained by one faith – by Christianity alone? Or is Jesus larger than any of our characterizations? Can any of us have exclusive rights to Jesus? Or is Jesus on the move and calling for us to quit holding on to what once was and to come and join with him in the places where pain calls out for healing, where injustice calls for someone to cry out for justice, where slavery to economic systems calls for someone to turn over the tables of greed and open a way for all to be fed and nourished and cared for.

It is hard for each of us to let go of the Jesus that at some point helped us to be free. And it's equally hard for others to trust a Jesus that has been wrapped in such hatred and prejudice that we were left out.

Yvette Flunders reminds us that if we embrace a living Christ we will face challenges that will be hard. She says: "Imagine the struggle for some quiet Protestant church folks watching some African American folks dancing in the spirit well into the night. I'm sure someone felt the need to ask the question, "How dare those people try to claim my Jesus? They may have a Jesus, but it is not my Jesus. I've got a picture right here to prove it.

"Imagine a group of patriarchal religious folks watching a group of men, women, and children who are not gender or orientation limited rejoicing in their Savior in perfect freedom. I'm sure someone would say, "What have they done with our Jesus? Surely he would not condone what I cannot condone."

(Where the Edge Gathers, in her sermon – Someone Has Stolen Jesus)

Where have we put Jesus ?

Friends, Jesus is out of the grave. He will not be contained by our hatred, by our prejudice, by our bigotry, by our need to be in charge. He will not be limited by our hurt, by our fear, by our reluctance to try again when we fall short. Jesus is alive and doing what Jesus has always done. Bringing joy to life. Bringing laughter. Bringing hope. Touching our hurting places and inviting us to be well again.

So I invite you to come with me again to the tomb and see what has happened. Just linger for a moment. And when you see the empty tomb, listen for your name to be called. Don't hold onto the past, but hear Jesus say those words: "Let me go now. Things are going to be different. Now is the time to give testimony, to bear witness, to invite the world to know that death is not the final word. That Jesus lives. Christ is risen. That this is resurrection time. But we must decide. Do we need to put Jesus someplace where we can find him easily and quickly? Or are we able to let Jesus be who Jesus is? Easter is not a memorial service, this is a celebration of life. It is about a love that continues to be the way, the truth, the light of the world.

Do you see that the tomb is empty? Do you hear your name being called? Do you notice that something is happening? There is a stirring about us. Will you follow? Will you let go and see where this love will take us? Will you let Jesus be Jesus again?

Friends, Christ is risen. Alleluia! We are not alone. So may it always be.