

## God in Unexpected Places

Vienna Presbyterian Church  
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James  
Luke 24:1-12

March 27, 2016  
Easter

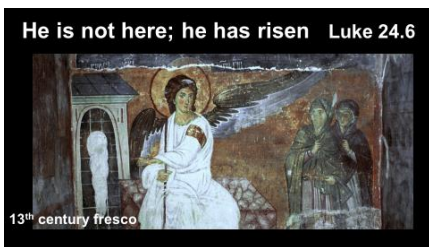
Along Highway 7 in Ontario, Canada, a homeowner communicated the Easter message in big, bold letters on the rooftop of his home, "Jesus is Alive." The man living next door, I'm not sure whether he was doing it for spite or to be funny, posted another sign on his roof, in huge, block letters, "So is Elvis."

Elvis Presley has been dead for 40 years. Rumors still circulate that Elvis faked his death, gave up performing and moved to Hawaii. There have been other Elvis sightings, such as the one in Kalamazoo, Michigan, where "Elvis" was spotted eating a Whooper at Burger King. I can understand why Elvis would go to Hawaii, but why he would go to

Kalamazoo is beyond me. While we may scoff at Elvis-sightings, the most frequently asked question by tourists at his Graceland Mansion is whether Elvis is alive.

The New Testament makes a bold assertion. Jesus of Nazareth, whose followers claimed he had healed people and calmed the storm, was crucified under orders from Pontius Pilate. He died an agonizing death on a cross. After three days in a tomb, he rose from the dead. This is, admittedly a shocking claim.

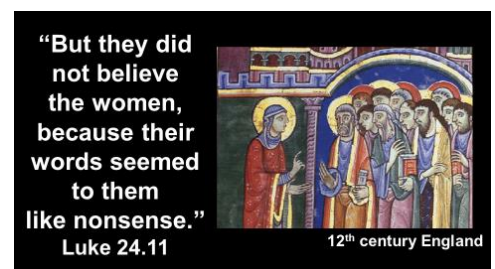
All four New Testament gospels conclude with this story. Take Luke's gospel that was read earlier. The women going to the tomb that first Easter morning are not expecting a resurrection. It does not even occur to them (Luke 24:4). They go to give Jesus' body a proper burial.



They are met by two men in angel-looking attire. “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” they ask. “He is not here; he has risen” (Luke 24:5).

They had to be reminded by these men, “Remember how he told you while he was still with you in Galilee” (24:6). Jesus spoke plainly about what would happen to him earlier in his ministry: “The Son of Man must suffer many things, be rejected by the teachers of the law, be killed and on the third day be raised to life” (Luke 9:22). While he spoke unambiguously about these events, his closest followers could not conceive of it.

The women carry the news to his 11 remaining apostles. Luke tells us, “But they did not believe the women because their words seemed like nonsense” (24:11).



Nobody could have conceived of Jesus' resurrection until it happened. Despite everything that Jesus had said, no one saw it coming.

The Greeks believed in the immortality of the soul. Plato taught that the soul is immortal. The idea that someone would actually rise in bodily form was ludicrous to the Greco-Roman world. Our immortal souls are liberated from our earthly bodies in the afterlife.

The Jewish people believed in a general resurrection at the end of time. God would raise the nation of Israel to prominence again. The Jews could not conceive of a single person rising from the dead ahead of everyone else.

Jews and Greeks could not conceive of Jesus' rising from the dead until it happened. Even his closest followers couldn't see it coming.

In 18<sup>th</sup> century France, several people attempted to invent a new religion to replace Christianity. One such person to come up with his own religion was Louis Marie de La Revelliere-Lepeaux. He called it "Man is God." After reading a long paper to explain his new religion, he was disappointed that only a few embraced it. He asked his audience what he could do so that more people would accept his new faith.

One man rose from his seat and said with a smile, "My dear sir, let me shed some light on the best way to establish a new religion. When Jesus undertook to establish a new way, he was crucified, he lay in the grave three days, he rose again and ascended into heaven. At least you could do this much."

His tongue-in-cheek comment finds its mark. Dying and rising from the dead is hardly anybody's idea of how Jesus would culminate his ministry. Yet here we are, 2000 years later, still talking about him. The greatest music is sung about him. The finest artwork depicts his unforgettable life. Our calendar is demarcated by him. One third of the world's population claims allegiance to him. Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan writes, "Jesus of Nazareth has been the most dominant figure in the history of Western Culture for almost twenty centuries. If it were possible, with some sort of super magnet, to pull up out of history every scrap of metal bearing at least a trace of his name, how much would be left? He is, in short, history's most familiar figure."

Christians still insist Jesus *is* alive. He shows up in the most unexpected places. People still encounter him in surprising ways.



Last month, I attended a board meeting at Gordon Conwell Seminary. I struck up a conversation with a board member named Caleb. He and his wife

Bonny came to faith in a remarkable way. They attended a Rotary Club auction near their home north of Boston as a favor to Jewish friends. One item for auction was the opportunity to audit a New Testament course taught by Dr. Fee at Gordon Conwell Seminary. Caleb and Bonny had young children at the time. Caleb figured his wife would enjoy a break from their children in the evening, so he bid on the course. Since Caleb had the winning bid, Bonny took the class. She was intrigued with seminary students who spoke of Jesus as if he is still alive. After a semester of exploring the New Testament, Bonny was persuaded. She opened her life to Christ, as did her husband. The trajectory of their life was altered by a winning bid at a charity auction. Go figure!

I used to give children's messages in this church. Our two children were preschoolers at the time. I noticed how enthralled they were with Sesame Street puppets. True confession: I enjoyed Bert and Ernie almost as much. So, I bought a puppet for use in children's messages to engage children and hold their interest.



A few years ago, I was talking with one of our mission partners who directs World Vision relief in the Muslim majority world. He told me of a conversation he had with a young woman on the World Vision staff who attributed her coming to faith to a puppet that a minister used at Vienna Presbyterian. You could have knocked me over with a feather! She was a little girl in this church in the early 1980s. Our church adopted her Vietnamese family when boatloads of refugees were fleeing communist Vietnam. I had no idea God would use a puppet to speak to a little girl's heart. Today, she works with World Vision to help resettle refugee families.

One of my highlights in worship through the years has been our "Minutes for Witness." We ask people to share how Christ has become real to them. I heard testimony from a man whose mother had a steady stream of male visitors to her home in the evening. I'm reminded of the woman who told her improbable story of redemption after years of sexual abuse. People have talked about their liberation from addiction and despair. I still recall the testimony of a man who was a confirmed atheist. We heard from one woman who came to faith who had never set foot in a church until middle age.

My all-time most memorable Minute for Witness took place 20 years ago. I met Minh in a class I was teaching here. I was struck by her winsome personality and vibrant

faith. I invited people in our class to share their faith stories. When I heard Minh's story, it rocked my world.

When Minh was a little girl, she witnessed the brutal execution of her father and two siblings. She took a bullet to the head also, yet survived the ordeal. She attempted to escape by boat, but was captured and placed in prison where she was tortured and abused. Eventually, she escaped and migrated to Australia. As you might expect, she suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome. She was suicidal on several occasions. But caring Christian people kept coming into her life at the most opportune moments to show her the way. One such friend invited her to a Bible study that changed her life. Today, Minh is a hospital chaplain in the DC area.



I remember a man who joined our church two years ago with a remarkable story. He's one of the few people who successfully escaped from North Korea and lived to tell about it. He fled to China, where he lived incognito as a shepherd for three years. When it became too dangerous to remain in China, he escaped to Mongolia. There, he met a Christian missionary who helped him plan his escape. After a harrowing experience along the border with Russia, he found his way to South Korea. He subsequently married and his family moved to Northern Virginia. They enrolled in our ESOL program. I had the privilege to receive his profession in Christ and baptize him.

I've told you my story. I was living a rather self-absorbed life when Christ became real to me at age 19. To this day, my dad says I am the least likely person he has ever known to go into the ministry.

What about you? Where are you with this Jesus? What does Easter have to do with your life?

This Easter message is stunning. God raised Jesus from the dead. Life triumphs over death, love conquers hatred and hope trumps despair. Easter means that nothing is impossible with God.



If you are a Christian and profess Jesus as Lord, what Jesus teaches makes a claim upon our lives. That's why we gather each Sunday to listen to what Jesus teaches and do what he says. There is no justification for professing allegiance to him but ignoring what he tells us to do.

If you are not a believer, consider this sermon as an invitation to follow Christ. The following prayer offers a way into this invitation to follow him.

Prayer of Commitment:

Lord Jesus, I invite you into my life. I confess that you died for my sins and extend to me the unconditional gift of forgiveness. I endeavor from this moment forward to live for you and follow you as Lord of my life. I trust that you will transform me into the person you want me to become. Fill me with your Spirit's presence so that I may share this faith and love with other people. I offer this prayer with gratitude in Jesus' name. Amen.