

The Healthy, Vibrant, Thriving Church: Is Alive Because Jesus is Alive in Them

Message for Sunday, September 30, 2018
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: John 20:1-18

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the service, just after the choir had entered, I jumped out through the door at the front of the sanctuary, wearing a martial arts uniform. I shouted “Aiiee!” and did a flying front kick near the front pew. I continued with punches, blocks, knife hands and more kicks.

After a minute, I turned to the people and said, “Alright, you see how it’s done. Now you try it!” I coached them in how to turn the shoulders when doing a punch, and how to do a sidekick while wearing a dress (very difficult!). Many people were game, but many more were beginning to wonder what on earth was going on here.

I stopped and asked “What did you think when you saw me come out like that? How did you feel when I asked you to do it?” I listened for responses.

I then said that the purpose of the exercise was to *make* people feel uncomfortable. I want you to know how it feels for newcomers entering church. Everything is strange. New rituals, new symbols, new language: What is “sin”? What is the “Upper Room”? The number one emotion non-Christians experience when they visit a church is fear. They’re worried about everything: What will people think? What are they going to do? Will I have to do something? What if do something wrong? They don’t know what will happen, and they’re scared.

Church members must go out of their way to welcome new people, to help them relax and feel at ease.

Children’s Message:

I placed balloons on top of a table, and placed another table upside down on top of that. The only thing supporting the second table is the balloons. Then, using a step ladder, I invited the children to climb up and stand on top of the table. It held all their weight!

Although we can’t see air, it has incredible strength. It’s the air in the tires which makes it possible for cars to drive around. Even great big trucks! It’s the air which holds airplanes up in the sky, even huge jets which are bigger than this room!

Air is very, very strong. God is the one who made the air, and God is stronger than that. God is even stronger than death.

Romans 1:4, New Living Translation:

Jesus Christ our Lord was shown to be the Son of God when God powerfully raised him from the dead by means of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus was killed; his dead body was placed in a tomb. But God’s power is greater than death, and God raised Jesus back to life.

But there’s more! God promises to give us power when we need it. Such as when we’re really angry at someone—God will give us the power—not to fight that person, but to stay calm, to forgive, to make friends with that person. We can pray, and ask for God’s power whenever we feel weak. God is with us.

Thanks to Deanne Hutton for this idea, from *Christian Parables from Science*.

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Thanks to Tom Bandy for the core of this message.

In a lot of Ontario towns, the cemetery is right next door to the church. Perhaps that helps explain the story of a traveller who arrived in a small town by train some years ago. Stepping onto the platform, he beckoned to a boy lounging about the station. “Where is the church in this city?” he asked. “Oh, that’s easy,” the boy replied. “Just go up the hill. You can’t miss it. The church is where all the dead people are.”

The church has often been compared to a tomb... maybe with good reason. It is always locked, except for special occasions. It smells musty. Inside, people are prone to whisper a lot. In many church buildings, there are lots of brass plaques with the names of dead people on them. And the best attendance usually occurs when someone dies.

The worry is that maybe the boy at the train station was referring to more than just the location of the

building. Perhaps he was commenting on the spiritual state of the people. More than one teenager has responded to the encouragement of her parents to go to church with the words, “Oh Mom, it’s really dead there.”

In lots of churches, if you talk with the leaders, you’ll hear them beginning to hint at the same thing as the teenagers. Burdened by committee meetings that seem to lead nowhere, saddened by diminishing membership, and weighed down by increasing maintenance costs, many of the leaders in those churches feel like they’re just waiting for the end.

What if it were different? Wouldn’t that be great? What if the church were no longer associated with cemeteries, but with birthday parties? What if the church was no longer musty, but filled with fresh air? What if the whispers gave way to shouts? What if the doors were always open? What if there were more name tags on moving bodies, than brass plaques on stone walls? What if the church was no longer connected with dying, but rather with being born again?

What if the people didn’t walk to church anymore — but *ran* to church instead? What if the people stopped expecting to see the me when they got there, and started expecting to meet Jesus Christ? What if the people no longer tried to hold on to what they had, and began giving away what they had?

What if it were different? What if the tomb of the church was cracked open, and the stone rolled away, and the people of God came to life again?

In order for the church to be alive and thriving, we need first to experience Jesus Christ alive. *Read John 20:1-18.*

1) The resurrection results in people running—but not on a treadmill!

John’s gospel tells us that when Mary Magdalene discovered the tomb empty on Easter morning, she ran to tell the disciples. When Peter and John heard that the tomb had been opened and the body of Jesus was gone, they jumped to their feet and ran. They raced to the tomb.



Eugene Burnand captured this moment in a painting entitled “Peter and John Running to the Tomb.” The younger disciple is ahead of Peter, but both of them are running all out. Their hair is streaming behind them; they are leaning forward in excitement; their eyes gaze into the distance for the first glimpse of the miraculous.

They ran as if their life depended upon it. Indeed, it did. As Paul put it:

1 Corinthians 15:14, New Century Version:
If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is worth nothing, and your faith is worth nothing.

If Christ has not been raised, death and evil reign supreme. No wonder they ran to find out about it!

If the tomb of the church can be cracked open, then people will run to it as if their lives depended upon it. We see all around us signs of death and evil: there is murder and mugging, disease, greed, corruption. People experience rejection and judgement every day. People fear death so much they watch it constantly on TV in a vain attempt to get used to it. Show to those people how you can have peace and hope and joy right in the very midst of trouble, and people will come running. Show them Jesus.

2) The resurrection results in surprises and discoveries

John’s gospel reports that Mary was given the shock of a lifetime when she discovered that the man she thought was the gardener, turned out to be Jesus, risen from the dead. Later the disciples would be taken by surprise behind locked doors. Doubting Thomas would be startled by a Saviour who could read his mind. And immature, selfish disciples

would be astonished by their calling to bring the message of salvation to the whole world.

A number of year ago a touching reunion took place in a church in the former Soviet Union. With the collapse of the Cold War, an elderly mother had returned to her homeland in what must have seemed to everyone else a hopeless search for her son, who had been taken from her 30 years earlier. Not knowing where else to go, she started by visiting the churches which were now being recognized in the country.

At the same time, a 30 year old orphan, with no religious interest, but with a hunger in his heart, just happened to drop in to a church for the first time in his life. After he heard this woman make her appeal for help during the service, long forgotten memories from decades ago started popping into his mind. Suddenly, in the middle of the Lord's Prayer, he leaped to his feet shouting, "That's my mother!"

If the tomb of the church can be cracked open, people will be in store for some surprises and some discoveries. People will look around them, wondering who needs help, who needs a friend, and never knowing if they might be reaching out to Jesus himself. The people who, when asked to do something, quickly protest that they have no talent, will be astonished when they are told to bring the gospel to the whole world, beginning with their next door neighbour. And worship! Worship will be filled with expectation, for at any minute someone might leap up, shouting "That's my God!"

3) The resurrection results in an irresistible force

Jesus warned an ecstatic Mary Magdalene, "Do not hold on to me!" When Lazarus was raised from the dead, Jesus commanded the sisters Martha and Mary to "unbind him and let him go free!" In short, resurrected people are too hot to hold; too big to be contained; too urgent to be held back; too excited to be at ease. They want to dance, and leap, and run, and celebrate.

More than this, they want to tell people about it, and roll the stone away from other tombs to let others go free as well. Trying to hold onto the risen Jesus Christ is like trying to bottle a hurricane. Now that he is loose in the world, nothing will stop him.

4) God does it

Over the last few weeks, I have focussed on this theme of The Healthy, Vibrant, Thriving Church. One final thing needs to be said: **God does it.**

God broke open the tomb, to raise Jesus from the dead. God breaks open the tomb of the church, to give new birth to the people of God. Yes, our participation is vital. Yes, we need to reach out to others, to give away life, to make strangers feel welcome, to love. Yet in the end, it is God who works in people's lives by the Holy Spirit. We plant the seed, and water it, and care for it. But God alone gives the miracle of growing new life.

It is God who works this miracle of new life in me, in you, in anyone who desires it. We can't do it by ourselves. Praise be to God!

Next Steps:

- Spend time with Jesus. Thank him for his great love.
- Share the good news with someone. Be joyful!