

Palm Sunday
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Trinity Episcopal Church
April 9, 2017

Coming Alive

Ezekiel 37: 1-14; John 11: 1-45

Comedian Groucho Marx once said, *“We’re all gonna’ die... The only question is whether we’re alive when we do.”* When Jesus began his ministry, his church might be described as dying – obsessed with hundreds of rules that covered every detail of worship and personal piety, but blind to the big picture – the injustice of Roman rule, the exclusion of so many groups seen as different and inferior, the chasm between the tiny numbers of the rich, and the countless masses who were barely surviving.

And Jesus’ response? *“I came that you might have new life,”* he said, *“and have it abundantly.”* *“I came that all of you might have new life, and have it abundantly.”*

But he couldn’t do it alone. So he sought out a small group of friends. First and foremost, he wanted ordinary people, simply, willing to listen; people hungering for new life, willing to try to discover the presence of God within themselves; people with the seeds of faith, no matter how fragile. People like you and me.

Once he found them, he asked them to consider living in an entirely new way; to dream beyond their tired worship rituals, beyond spending time with people just like themselves. Instead of thinking mainly about themselves, he asked them to be servants for one another, creating a world of *shalom*, of justice, and loving kindness, one person at a time. As our Presiding Bishop put it in the sermon we watched, he taught that, *“If it’s not about love, it’s not about God.”*

Jesus invited his friends to ignore human categories like rich and poor; male and female; Jew or Gentile; slave or free – and try to find God in every human heart. Because to Jesus, we’re all beloved, no matter where we grew up, what religion we practice, whether we’re gay or straight, whether we were sold into slavery, or born with a silver spoon in our mouth.

And he also gave them the bad news – the price tag for this extraordinary freedom and joy. They’d have to give up the comfort and security of their old ways. Over and over, they’d have to confront their fears that they weren’t good enough, smart enough, or faithful enough to put their trust in God.

They'd have to keep a laser focus – well maybe he didn't use the word 'laser' – let's say a sustained focus on what really matters – loving God and loving their neighbor. And they'd have to become part of a community that supports each other in this way of life – and stick with that community when the going got tough.

And because Jesus never asked his friends to do anything he wouldn't do, on what we call Palm Sunday, he turned his face toward Jerusalem, to the way of the cross. He knew the path to Easter, for each one of us, always passes through Good Friday.

Jesus was all about "mission," about God's mission of restoring all people to physical and spiritual life, and reconciling all people to healthy relationships with God and each other. Love God, love your neighbor, restore everyone to health, reconcile everyone with God and each other. It was as simple and as impossible as that. Which is why, to accomplish this, Jesus believed everyone had to become a missionary, responsible for creating this new world he called "shalom."

It turns out this is *very good* news for modern Christians. It's why virtually every denomination is finding they've lost their way, and that the key to new life, to reversing the death spiral so many churches face, is not to keep looking *inward*, to the people and practices we've long cherished, but to look *outward*, to the people who are not yet here, those who are hungering spiritually, but have become disillusioned with organized religion; all those who need us out there, whose lives are being drained by hunger or homelessness, the lack of a decent education, or any of the ills that threaten so many of God's children.

Churches that are flourishing, that are vital, are focused not on their church's needs, but on God's mission. They're focused on spiritually forming and equipping their members to become modern – day missionaries to the outside world, not Bible thumping evangelists, but simple construction workers of the kingdom, saving one life at a time.

Trinity is at such an exciting and grace – filled crossroads. We can stay as we are, and inevitably decline. But through the transition process, it's become clear that, if we're to be faithful to God's mission, this is simply not an option.

Instead, God seems to be inviting us to a new commitment to the three essential pillars of the Christian life – deepening our faith, strengthening our community, and working shoulder to shoulder with each other, and with others in the community, to help God create a more supportive and loving world. This means re-defining what we do *inside* the church, so we can create a real presence *outside* these walls, partnering with others to meet the needs of the communities we serve.

The good news is that we already have everything we need for God's mission. Trinity's an incredibly welcoming, kind, generous, open-minded and open-hearted community. We're well organized and financially stable. We have great staff, and strong, committed lay leadership. We're a people of prayer, whose faith *matters* in our lives.

The great prophet, Frederick Buechner once said, "The key to happiness is discovering where your great passions and the world's great needs meet." So welcome to Trinity – where every single one of you gets to explore what you really care about, what gives you meaning and satisfaction, and how God can use you to add so much to the lives of others.

Are you ready to enjoy the fruits of a deeper relationship with God? Are you ready to commit to growing even closer to this wonderful Trinity family, not just visiting together, but learning together, and ministering together? Are you someone who God wants to study your faith, deepen your relationships at Trinity, tutor an elementary school child, mentor a first time mom, or cook a delicious meal for some of our neighbors? Are you ready to create a Trinity which anyone with a spiritual hunger would love to be a part of?

My sisters and brothers, the long wait may be over. It just might be that if we are to become the church God wants Trinity to be, we are the people we've been waiting for.