



New Day Church

Need a fresh start?

JESUS OUT OF CONTEXT

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At my day job this week, everybody kept asking me how I was feeling about the big service coming up. One guy told me I should think of Easter as the Superbowl of preaching. So I feel badly that I need to start with an apology. I just want to say I'm sorry to any of you who may have thought you were showing up for a rock concert this morning. If you saw one of our invitations this year, you might have seen the version that mentioned Rolling Stones, The Spice Girls, Journey, Phish and U2. (All five groups politely declined our offer to perform this morning.) To be honest with you, our invitations used the old "bait and switch" technique in advertising – we lure you in with one thing and then surprise! When you get here what you end up with is me. Absolutely shameless.

The point of mentioning those bands on our flyer was actually BECAUSE they'd never be here on an Easter Sunday. We couldn't afford them for one thing, but also it would just be completely out of place and wouldn't fit our idea of an Easter worship service.

You kind of know what to expect on Easter Sunday, don't you? There's really only one story that we're celebrating today. It's like Christmas: The plot and the characters stay the same year after year. It's definitely a story that deserves repeating. Jesus rising from the dead is the centerpiece of what Christianity is all about. If he had stayed dead, there wouldn't be much point in being here this morning or any Sunday for that matter. That's what gives us our hope. That's what shows us that he was bigger than sin and death.

But since the events of Jesus' dying and coming back to life are now so familiar to us, it makes it easy for us to check out and think we've already heard it all before. We don't expect any surprises, because we know how it turns out.

That's not the way it was for the original disciples, though. It was anything but expected. Jesus' resurrection was as unimaginable to them as the Easter concert line up we put together would have been for us. They just couldn't make ideas fit together with what they knew about life and death. It was a radical day for them.

So that's the challenge for us. How do we reconnect with the more radical side of the message? How do we get back to a similar spot as those first disciples? How do we

recapture something that's fresh and challenging about Easter when we know the facts so well?

Now maybe you're thinking, "Hey -- that's okay. I'm just fine with the annual ritual and routine, please." Maybe the familiar is what you like about Easter. There's something safe in things being predictable. Why mess with a good thing?

One of my favorite newspaper cartoons had a young girl named Gina who goes up to her Grandma and says, "What are you doing, Grandma?" The grandmother has a watering can in her hand and she says, "I'm watering my plants, Gina."

Gina observes her for a minute, then says, "But Grandma -- there's no water in the can." To which her grandmother replies, "That's okay dear. They're artificial plants anyway."

Listen, I don't want to be that Grandma. If all we do on Easter is go through the motions and pretend we're doing something meaningful, there is no point. We're watering artificial plants. Life is too full and too short to spend time doing something pointless just because it's what we do one day every year. Christ revolutionized the world and his followers on that first Easter. If it's going to have any impact on us at all, we have to try to connect with the power that made such a difference that first Easter.

So how do we do that? I'd like to enlist the help of the bands we mentioned at the beginning. Since they weren't able to be here in person, I took a little trip (with my camera, of course) to see each of them and ask what words they might have shared if they could have been here.

My first stop was to see the Rolling Stones. It had been a while since most of them had hung out with a pastor. I'll be honest -- I'm not a Stones fan, but there is a rolling stone that plays a pretty prominent role in the Easter story. Earlier, Lisa read for us about the first visitors to the tomb. Here's what they discovered:

Luke 24:1-4

They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.

When I shared that with the Rolling Stones, Mick and the boys thought immediately of their song I AM WAITING.

*Oh we're waiting, oh we're waiting
Waiting for someone to come out of somewhere.*

When Jesus was lying in that tomb, all his disciples went into a waiting mode. And they weren't sure for what or who. They were in a state of limbo. We tend to imagine that they were waiting for Jesus to walk out of the grave, but they really weren't. They didn't honestly think that Jesus would come back to life. Even though he had talked about it beforehand, they had just seen him be brutally and shockingly executed. It looked so

final. Their world had been ripped away and they were sad and bewildered. They were not hopeful.

When Jesus did rise and showed himself to the group, there was nobody in the room who stood up and said, “I knew it! I KNEW he could do it! I told you guys!” They had all thought he was gone for good.

I say this because I think there’s an important observation here. It was not the faith of the disciples that brought Jesus back from the dead. It was the power of God. Had it depended on their belief in him, Jesus would still be in the grave. But it didn’t. This was about God doing the impossible – not the disciples.

Oftentimes, we have this concept in our heads that if we don’t have enough faith, God won’t be able to work in our lives. That’s just not true. God’s hands are not tied by us. If you’re not sure you have enough faith to have a relationship with God, I’ve got news for you: God is at work long before you have faith. He can meet you where you’re at. If you’re not sure you believe enough for God to help you, I’ve got news for you: God already sees your situation and has a plan. His purposes don’t hinge on my strength or yours.

This morning, like those lyrics, you might be just waiting for something or someone to come out of somewhere. Jesus is that someone, and he will gladly come your way, whether or not you feel like you have much faith.

What is fascinating about all the people Jesus met after he rose from the dead is that nearly every single one of them had difficulty recognizing him at first. Some people see that as a reason for doubting it was really him, but I think the fact that the Bible records it all so honestly shows us just the opposite. This wasn’t a hoax at all. Something very strange was happening. He somehow looked different to the people who had been with him for a long time.

Part of what threw them off was that they were seeing him out of context. Have you ever had that happen to you? Every Sunday morning when I arrive here, there’s a guy who gets here at the same time to go play basketball in the gym. Since the school is open then, he meets some friends to shoot hoops while we are setting up.

I only see him for about 30 seconds once a week. Except for a couple weeks ago. I was at the mall when I saw this man with his wife and kid, and I could not for the life of me place where I recognized him from. It was because he was completely out of context. I didn’t know he had a life outside the Meeker gym.

Everyone who saw Jesus saw him out of context, because they were only thinking of him as belonging in a grave. It didn’t fit their understanding of what was possible. They weren’t expecting to see him, so they couldn’t recognize him.

This is where the big story meshes with our own little stories. Because we often miss seeing Jesus, because he seems out of context. We expect to see him in church or in a Bible verse, but not necessarily in our own lives. He's out of context when I find him where I hang out rather than only on Sunday mornings. That's where the shock is, that's where the power is. Because he's not just somebody who lived and died somewhere back in history – he's someone who lived and died and still lives. He's here today. He's here in Northeast Tacoma.

How do we recognize him? How do we find him? What are some contexts where Jesus meets us unexpectedly?

That's what the Spice Girls have to tell us. Not the band – the original spice girls, the women in the Bible who went to finalize Jesus' burial. Here's their story again.

Luke 24:1-3

On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.

While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!"

Those women learned that they had to find Jesus somewhere else. They were looking for him in the wrong place. The angel told them that flat out: You're not going to find him here. But the women didn't understand for sure what he meant. It was particularly hard for Mary Magdalene. After everyone else had left, she hung around the tomb a while longer, still not sure what it all meant.

John 20:11-16

But Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

"Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher).

Here is our first example of someone seeing Jesus where she didn't expect to find him, so she didn't realize it was him. I believe Mary learned to see Jesus in the context of her **emotional need**.

In my travels, I met up with the Spice Girls band, and I was a little skeptical they would have anything applicable to say to Mary, but when I told them her story, they felt the words to their song Oxygen would be appropriate:

Open your heart,

Take a deep breath.

Stop searching and start believing.

Make sure you're there to answer when love comes around.

Don't be surprised when true love knocks at your door.

That was right on target, because Mary WAS surprised. Her grief was so overwhelming that she couldn't quite take in what the angels said to her. Her perception of reality was distorted – all she saw was that Jesus was missing and she assumed someone had moved him. She DID need to stop searching and start believing, because the answer was right in front of her. True love was knocking at her door.

All it took from Jesus was the mention of her name. When Mary heard it, she knew it was him. She had heard that voice so many times before. All her anxiety and sadness melted into relief and joy when she turned around and faced him.

Jesus shows up in our emotional distress as well. The last place we think to look for him is in the middle of our own hurt and grief. One of my favorite verses is Psalm 34:18.

Psalm 34:18

*The LORD is close to the brokenhearted
and saves those who are crushed in spirit.*

Sometimes he's right near us, but like Mary, we've got our back to him. Maybe you've been so wounded by life that you associate the pain with a God who wasn't there for you, and you really don't want to face him. Jesus stands asking those same two questions he asked Mary: Why are you crying? What are you looking for?

The deeper the pain, the harder it is to turn around. As we bring our grief and distress to Jesus and lay our complaints before him, he calls our name and says, "I'm here. I haven't left you. I won't leave you. I am right here in the middle of your grief and hurt."

It goes against all our instincts to look for God in the middle of our suffering. We'd rather get away from it. But if we can believe that God is close to the brokenhearted, then those times of hardship become rare opportunities to see more of him.

Anne Lamott wrote in *Traveling Mercies*, "I'm cracked, cracked, cracked, but the thing about cracks is they let the light in."

Jesus comes to us in the context of our emotional need.

Mary was the first, but she wasn't the only person to see Jesus that day. Some of the disciples encountered him that afternoon. All the buzz the women had started had raced through the community.

Luke 24:13-16, 28-35

Now that same day, two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him...

There you see the same thing happening again – They couldn't recognize him.

...As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them.

Two friends on a seven mile journey. Did I just say Journey? Ah...my travels took me further...back in time as well. Journey had a song that fit this situation very well.

*There's a place to be,
won't you stay with me,
you can help us see,
Here we are.*

You can help us see. Jesus had explained so many things to the two men as they walked along the road, and they knew they were on the verge of getting to some deep truth, so they begged him like that song "won't you stay with me". They knew he could help them see. And he did.

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, "It is true! The Lord has risen and has

appeared to Simon." Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.

The second context where Jesus shows up is in **everyday conversation**. These two men weren't looking for Jesus as they walked on that trip. In fact, they were headed away from all the commotion. They were headed out for a two hour power walk. We aren't told why they were going to Emmaus, and it doesn't really matter. What's significant is that Jesus shows up uninvited and joins the dialogue.

Unlike Mary, though, these two don't recognize him by his voice – they recognize him when they both see him do something he did before, which was break a simple loaf of bread. Something in that action spoke to them. They each recognized it in their own hearts and confirmed it in each other.

Again – this isn't where we normally look for Jesus, but he shows up anyway. Sometimes we'd rather he didn't. I remember sitting with a friend in a restaurant one time, talking about where I was at in life. I was really stuck, but I couldn't see it. And my friend said to me, "What are you doing? You need to make a change." And as I listened, I realized that it wasn't just my friend talking to me – it was God speaking through him.

Jesus enters our conversations uninvited, and if we're listening, we can hear him there. The two disciples recognized him in the simple, ordinary action he took while he was with them. There are so many things that happen in our lives that are his small and ordinary miracles. Sometimes it takes a friend journeying with us to help us see all the ways he's active in our lives.

Again, this feels out of context for us. Like those disciples, we're not looking for him in our relationships with other people. But he said himself that when even two of us get together in his name, he's there in the middle of it. Do we believe that and look for him? Ordinary friendships can become life-changing when we start to discover Christ in our everyday conversations.

There's one last encounter with Jesus for us to look at this morning.

John 21:1-8

Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Tiberias. It happened this way: Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. "I'm going out to fish," Simon Peter told them, and they said, "We'll go with you." So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.

Same response – Jesus shows up but isn't immediately recognizable. With all the fishing here, you have to have figured out by now that this would be the story for the band Phish. Interestingly enough, the story fits right in with words from their song, Jesus Just Left Chicago:

*You might not see him in person
But he'll see you just the same.*

The disciples were out working hard in the boat and not even paying attention to the man on shore. Peter and the others didn't see Jesus. But he saw them just the same.

He called out to them, "Friends, haven't you any fish?"

"No," they answered.

He said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.

Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, "It is the Lord," he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water.

These disciples were through with crying. They had seen Jesus and knew he was alive, but it wasn't the same as before. They didn't see him very often. He came and went. They weren't really sure what to do next.

So the disciples turned back to the only thing they knew how to do, which was fish. That was a source of identity, something tangible they could do instead of just sitting around. It turned out to not be all that productive, though. They spent a whole night working for nothing. They wore themselves out and had nothing to show for it. And it was in the context of this **work** they were doing that they found Jesus.

They definitely weren't expecting to see Jesus there, much less get advice from him. But he came along and with a simple word infused their work with new power that netted entirely different results.

I like this picture of Jesus talking fishing, because it tells me that he doesn't just wait for holy moments on Sundays to speak to us. He can meet us in the middle of our crazy lives, whatever it is we spend our time doing all day. Whether you're a teacher or a contractor or stay at home mom or an executive, Jesus can transform your work, and he can use your work to transform you. His goal is to change us and help us do what were intended to do. To be what we were intended to be.

The disciples were struggling and floundering in their work, not reaching their goals at all. Do you ever feel that way? Jesus says "You're wearing yourself going after a few fish. I've got bigger plans for you, plans to fill your net more than you ever dreamed

possible. You don't need to wear yourself out any more. But it means being willing to throw your net in a different direction."

That's hard. Our identities are so wrapped up in what we do, and Jesus asks us to rethink how we're used to operating, to see our work differently than we normally do. But when we can take a step of faith and respond to Christ with obedience, we have a chance to see his power in a whole new way.

Peter didn't just throw his net in that new direction – he threw himself in as well. As soon as he recognized the Lord, he swam straight toward him, because the boat wasn't fast enough.

I don't know why, but that image of Peter reacting so quickly to Jesus gets me every time. It's so heartfelt and so reckless. Peter knew that the moments of seeing Jesus clearly were precious and there was no time to waste.

When we see Christ in what we do, when we hear his voice calling to us, we can't wait around. Those are precious opportunities. We need to jump right in and swim toward him.

That really brings us to our final band, which is U2. Because this message isn't just about disciples – it's about you, too. And me. All these pictures have been goofy this morning, but they represent what we're talking about – placing ourselves in the picture where we didn't think we belonged. How are we doing at seeing Jesus in our own lives?

U2 had several lyrics to offer, because they sing about God a lot, but probably the most fitting line for today was from their song called Grace that simply says, "Grace makes beauty out of ugly things."

That's the heartbeat of the Easter story. God took the ugliest kind of death – a brutal death on a cross -- and turned it inside out and made the most beautiful ending – new life. And if Jesus was powerful enough to rise from the dead, then he can do anything. He can take the ugliness and brokenness in my life and make it beautiful by his grace.

Bono talked about that song a bit in a book called Bono in Conversation. He told the author, "At the center of all religions is the idea of Karma. You know – what you put out comes back to you – every action is met by an equal or opposite one. And yet, along comes this idea called Grace to upend all that...Love interrupts, if you like, the consequences of your actions, which in my case is very good news indeed, because I've done a lot of stupid stuff. It doesn't excuse my mistakes, but I'm holding out for grace. I'm holding out that Jesus took my sins onto the cross, because I know who I am, and I hope I don't have to depend on my own religiosity."

What it comes down to is you and me seeing Jesus out of the context of an old familiar Sunday School lesson and in the context of our own lives. If we want to truly experience the meaning of Easter, it has to become personal. We have to acknowledge that ugliness

in our own hearts that needs to be made beautiful. We all have sin and darkness that chokes off our connection with God. And we have to acknowledge that we're never going to be able to fix it on our own.

Once we reach that point where we invite him into our lives, he's there to stay. It's a permanent relationship that rests on his power – not our faith. We don't have to worry – we can be secure in knowing that God loves us and forgives us.

So as we wrap up, here are some Easter morning questions to take with you. As you look to find Jesus in your own life, ask yourself:

1. What am I looking for? Jesus asked that of Mary, and he asks you as well. Do you know what you're hoping to find? Peace? Forgiveness? Direction? Hope? Can you articulate your emotional and spiritual need right now?
2. Do I need to turn around? Is there a specific moment in my life when I said "Yes" to Jesus? You can make this Easter morning that moment. You don't have to pray some big special prayer. Just say, "Jesus, I know I need you. I believe you died for me. Please come into my life and forgive me and give me new life." It's a small step, but that's the entry point for connecting with Jesus in your own life. Have you made it personal and turned around?
3. Am I engaged in conversation with him? Whether we are aware of it or not, he's in the middle of our relationships with other people. Can I see him and hear him in that context?
4. Am I ready to throw my net in a different spot? Maybe the goals I have in life have been pretty small fish. Maybe I've been spending my energy and coming up empty. Jesus invites us to find our identity in him instead of what we do, and in the process discover who we were really meant to be.

Jesus should always be out of context, because there's no context big enough for him. He's bigger than Easter. He's bigger than church. He's bigger than your past. Are you ready to let him have it all to experience that original power of Easter for yourself?