

Proper 16 Year A
Christ Church Sparta

Preached by The Rev. George Greer 2026-08-23

The Tibetan Buddhists believe in the theology of the transmigration of souls. That is, when someone dies, they believe that the soul of that person goes immediately into a different body, the body of a child born at that exact moment in time.

This belief becomes very important when their spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, dies. When that happens, a world wide search is made for a boy born at the very moment this great leader dies. Once found, that boy is taken away and brought up as the community's new leader. Everyone, including the child himself knows from the start that he is the new Dalai Lama.

For us modern Christians, this sounds a little strange. We prize the right of every person to choose their future. Even monarchs, a person born in a long line of monarchs, can abdicate their throne. But not the Dalai Lama, he has no choice. His identity is given to him.

And that raises a question for us, “What makes a Christian a Christian?” Having grown up in the church, I can assure you it has nothing to do with us preachers. The one thing that makes us who we are is who Jesus is. Jesus Christ is Christianity.

The supreme virtue of Love is not unique to the Christian church. The hope that good will eventually overcome evil isn't unique to Christianity either. What is unique is, Jesus. If God had only given us a book, then we would have the Bible, but we wouldn't be Christians. We'd just be another noble philosophy of life, no different than any other faith tradition.

What God did, we believe, is come to us in the flesh. We believe that God came to us as a Jew from Nazareth named Jesus or in the Hebrew, Joshua, meaning God saves. As Christians, we believe that the way God saves, the way God gets to us, is through Jesus Christ. It is our claim that when we look at this Jewish carpenter's son, who was born, lived briefly, died violently, rose unexpectedly from the grave; it is our claim that we see as much of God as we can ever hope to see.

Now, we can sympathize with those who look at Jesus and see only a teacher, or great prophet. After all, from the beginning, who Jesus was, what he was about, was far from self-evident. Granted, there were a few who stood face to face with Jesus and declared him to be the “Son of God”. But it appears many more looked into Jesus’ eyes and considered him insane.

So, from the very beginning, that God came to us as Jesus meant that a lot of people didn’t get it. Jesus frustrated people’s expectations about how a Messiah ought to act. Jesus never said point blank who he was. He didn’t walk around Palestine wearing a sandwich board that said, “Got Jesus?” or “I Am the Son of the Living God”. Everyone knew that a Messiah would have great power; he would be a person who could step in and take charge, a great man who would set things right, fix all the worlds’ problems.

Jesus never guilts or forced anyone into following him. He refused to take up the sword. Looking at his life’s work, many people would say that Jesus was one of history’s most noble failures.

Occasionally people will ask, "How many people attend services on a given Sunday?" At times I'm tempted to ask, summer or winter, but truth be told, we probably have more people here on a Sunday than Jesus ever had attending one of his sermons, excluding of course, the feeding of the 5000, although I'm not exactly sure how many that day actually heard him speak.

So it wasn't so much that God came to us, it was that God came to us as Jesus. Jesus never presented himself in a way that we thought the Living God would. Sometime around 30 AD, Jesus was executed for doing the things he did and saying the things he said. He wasn't killed for walking around town bragging that he was the Son of God.

Jesus was killed for saying things like, "In God's eyes, the poor and the oppressed are precious; the rich may be in trouble; regardless of what you may think about yourself Caesar, you are not God; not everyone who cries, Lord, Lord will enter into the kingdom of Heaven. In fact, whores and tax collectors will get in before you."

You can't say things like that to the crowds and expect to live a long and prosperous life. And Christianity, being a Christian, is all about following Jesus. It is about doing the things that Jesus did; speaking as Jesus spoke. Granted we don't always succeed at that. But then, Jesus did try to warn us by telling us that his way was "narrow".

Time and again, Jesus says and does things that we Christians wished he hadn't. Lord only knows what he was thinking when he said, "Hate your mother", "Love your enemies" or last weeks, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Not exactly statements that endear you to another.

Though we have an idea what he meant when he said some of those things, most of us would have preferred he not have said them at all. For most of us, it's not that we listened to Jesus and found him difficult to understand, it's that when we listened to him, we didn't always like what he had to say.

Someone might come up to me after the service today and say, “George, I know you would never intentionally want to hurt anyone with one of your homilies, but this morning I was deeply offended by one of your comments.”

And I might think, “Hum, What makes you think I wasn’t trying to be offensive.” Remember, we’re talking Jesus here. On occasion it can get a little prickly.

It’s not easy being a Christian; for being a Christian is about entering into a lifelong struggle to be with others who are also trying to follow Jesus and to allow Jesus to become our friend.

It’s about a relationship, I believe it was Richard Niebuhr who said that conversion happens when the God whom you thought was your enemy to be feared, is actually your friend who is to be loved.

We love God because God first loved us in Jesus. Christianity is about a way of life, a way of walking with Jesus; it's about a relationship with our Lord.

We believe, not only that Jesus spoke to us, that he came to us, but that he continues to speak to us, come to us. If Easter didn't happen, no one today would think of Jesus. Most of his teaching was far from original, and according to Scripture, he was less than effective in getting his message across to the people.

But when he rose from the dead, when he came back to us from the other side of the grave, we say that Jesus, who he was, what he taught, what he did, has been vindicated by God.

That's what the early Christians meant when they exploded out into the world shouting, "God has raised Jesus from the dead!" Easter is like God saying to us, "In case you were wondering whether or not Jesus was truly revealing my will for the world, with all his talk of forgiveness, loving the unlovable, finding the lost, know that this is exactly the way

I, the Lord your God, see it. When Jesus speaks, I Am speaking.
When you look at Jesus, you are looking at me. You are looking at the very One who hung the stars.

So, what sets Christianity apart from any other world religion or philosophy; what makes us so different from everyone else, in a word, Jesus. We're here this morning, not because we were busy searching for meaning in our lives. Rather, most of us were minding our own business when from out of the blue, Jesus found us. Maybe we were just biding a little time, working hard to make it through another homily or boring service when Jesus grabs hold of us. Maybe after singing an old familiar hymn, we find ourselves sitting down and saying to ourselves, I believe!

Who is Jesus? Who do you say that he is? He is the Messiah, the very Son of God. Amen.