

I heard a speaker once say, at a Christian conference for Pastors, that nobody, upon coming to an average church service on an average Sunday...nobody really expects to meet Jesus. Now we do have certain expectations of what we'll find at church and these are nearly Gospel to us. We expect to be in the company of some other Christians, some of them even our friends, hopefully. We can expect that we'll all sit and face the same direction, plus there will be some standing up and sitting down, couple times during the hour. We kind of trust it'll only be an hour – so we can get nervous when it sometimes goes over. We'll expect a little music and that probably they're going to want us to sing along too, and respond through a dialogue or creed or group prayer. Oh and there'll be announcements, most likely a bulletin. Some Scripture will be read. In this particular church, you trust and know that there will be weekly communion. Ushers will be on task, as will Greeters. Somebody will be back at the controls for the microphones frantically trying to make sure everything goes right. AND THERE WILL BE COFFEE. Those are the things we have come to expect, upon coming to an average service on an average Sunday.

Yes, certainly, there are things we can count on and trust to experience in church week by week. We count on well-thought out – well-themed out worship services that have a predictable, dependable flow. And that helps us express our sense of spirituality. But if we all think about it a moment – every one of us also is on some level hoping for surprise, for something unexpected. Though we all like our comfortable patterns, rituals and routines – deep down most of us hope the Spirit moves within our worship to jolt us, enlighten us, sometimes comfort us, yes, BUT also sometimes *alarm us*. Be a prophetic word to us. Shake up our priorities. Bump us out of comfort zones. Don't we desire to encounter Jesus through the Word and Sacrament – through the readings, maybe even through the Sermon a little bit? Through the fellowship and care that others offer us. But even through the unexpected and wind-blown ways of the Spirit. Through those ways where we cannot foresee everything, we hope Jesus will catch us off our guard. Take us by surprise. Jolt us from complacency.

We're still only in chapter 1 of Mark – the Gospel that we'll primarily be hearing from in this year ahead. Only in chapter 1, the 21st verse, but already we've heard from John the Baptist, we've seen Jesus baptized, and we've heard him call his first disciples – to take up their nets and fish for people. In today's text, Jesus goes to church and all...HECK breaks loose. Obviously, it's still early

in his ministry, yet it seems his fame is preceding him. You know it just isn't *anybody* who gets an invite to teach during the weekly Synagogue service – so we know that Jesus is already being viewed as a kind of roving teacher, a portable rabbi. He's given the honor of bringing a teaching to the Synagogue, and he does so with an uncanny authority – such that Mark tells us the people were amazed.

They were probably much more used to preachers/teachers who would go on and on in citing ancient texts and recitations to shore up the point they were making. You've sat through sermons like this and so have I. The Scribes were known to be long-winded as was the style of that day. Put forth an argument, then quote scripture, then repeat the argument, quoting philosophy, then more scripture over and over and over. Some babies would cry – teenagers would slump in their pews – fathers would be checking their...sundials – mothers looking interested but their eyes glazed over. "As saith Hezeboam-Mekiah the 4<sup>th</sup> to the people of the Moabite valley whose king was Jehu-nephra-holim." Long winded, loving the sound of their own voices, droning on forever, kinds of teachings. (*That's what the Scribes were like – thank goodness we modern preachers are never like that!*)

Until the day Jesus came to synagogue – the day Jesus came to church and taught as one who had authority. "The time has come – the Kingdom of God is near, repent and believe the good news!" Adults sat up. Smart phones put away. Children swung their heads around to see what was going on, teenagers unexpectedly and suddenly paid attention! This was new, this was different, this was a surprise. This was amazing, as Mark puts it.

But that's not all, it got even crazier and out-of-the-ordinary. A man suffering from an evil spirit shouted out – **"WHAT DO YOU WANT WITH US, JESUS OF NAZARETH!"**

Yeah, ok – you didn't see that coming now did you? That's just the thing – no matter how much we plan things out – and no matter how normal and ordinary the worship may seem to you – you just never know. And there are some people in whom the Spirit is working within their heart, getting them ready to hear what needs to be heard. To re-evaluate what needs looking into.

And it comes as a surprise – it jumps out at you – interrupts the flow. "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth!" said the unclean spirit that had gripped the poor man. The next thing was that Jesus, not with sword, not with violence, not with an earthquake nor a lightning bolt – but in the tradition of how God gets things done – used the power of his Word. "Be quiet and leave him!" The body shook wildly, and there was a shriek and the man was freed from the grip of evil. What a remarkable day at church, right!? Mark tells us plainly that

everybody was amazed, astounded, and the news of the roving teacher, the portable rabbi, began to spread throughout the region.

Now let's think about how church is for us this very day. Did you expect to meet Jesus when you came here this morning? Did it cross your mind? Did you expect and hope for and are ready to look for the astounding presence of God in your midst. I don't think we always have the eyes to see it, or the ears to hear it. But every once in awhile we do ---- and every once in awhile the Spirit has so softened our heart, that we are ready to be taken off of center – knocked out of comfort – and able to meet the Lord as he comes to us in his wild unpredictability. Again, you don't always see it – but God be praised sometimes you do.

There was a middle-aged man named Daryl\* who was a reluctant youth group volunteer – kind of got roped into it because the church had been so desperate for volunteers, and with him, he figured, they had certainly scraped the bottom of the barrel. One of the youth activities each month was to go to the Holcomb Manor nursing home and lead a devotion for the residents there. They brought a guitar, some songs, prayed some prayers and the adult helpers took turns leading a 5-minute devotion. But even that seemed waaaay beyond his comfort level. So he always found a good reason to not be available on those once-a-month Sunday afternoons. He'd help out with pizza parties and game night at the church, but maybe not so much the old folks home.

As it so happened, a flu epidemic knocked all the adult leaders out one month, including the pastor, and the youth director. So it fell to Daryl to be the only adult that could accompany the youth group to Holcomb Manor. Oh he felt awkward and out of place during the service – but, really, the youth were doing everything – even the 5 minute devotion. Daryl just leaned against the back wall between two elderly residents in wheel chairs, eyeing the exit door so that as soon as the last Amen was said, he could go out and warm up the church van. Just truly saw himself as the driver and chaperone -- no way was he a leader.

But at one point during the Lord's Prayer, one of those elderly residents in the wheel chair reached out and held his hand. And after the prayer, that frail old man with his mouth hanging open, kind of expression-less – that old man kept holding his hand. The Youth Group packed it up, coats back on, headed out the door, but that old guy just kept holding his hand. Daryl finally had to say to him, "I'm sorry, I really have to leave now." The guy didn't let go. "Uh, but I'll come back next time." Still held on. "I promise." And then the guy let him go.

True to his word then, he returned the next month, and again after that! Not just leaning against a wall anymore, but kind of singing along, praying along, participating. And always during the Lord's Prayer, working his way over to Mr.

Leak – he had learned that was the name. Working his way over to Mr. Leak and holding his hand. The old guy even managed to smile at him sometimes, and always squeezed his hand tightly upon parting. It got so that Daryl would start really looking forward to these visits and would change his schedule around to make sure he was available on those particular Sundays.

On the sixth visit – now, you probably saw this coming – this kind of sermon illustration; this kind of story. I trust that you knew where this was sadly going to end up. Mr Leak did not show up for the service on that sixth visit that Daryl made to Holcomb Manor. Halfway through the devotions, kind of concerned, Daryl went to the nurse’s station and was directed to Room 27 where he indeed found Mr. Leak in his final moments, near death, lying in his bed. Though he was forty-two years old, Daryl had never really been this close to someone who was at death’s door. He went over to hold onto Mr. Leak’s hand, but this time, the elderly gentleman could not squeeze back, and did not open his eyes, but just laid there breathing with great difficulty. And of course tears filled Daryl’s eyes.

But here’s the thing – there is a small twist to this story. Something unexpected. Mr. Leak’s granddaughter was in the room sitting in a chair and had watched Daryl come in and go over to her Grandpa. “Oh, I’m sorry,” he said, “I didn’t see you there.”

“I think I know who you might be, and I was hoping to run into you,” she told him. “Grandpa Oliver said something about you. They say he can’t speak very much, but he’s been talking to me up until last night. That was when he sat up in bed, and he said, ‘Please say goodbye to Jesus for me.’”

The young lady went on, “And I told him, ‘it’s okay Grandpa, I don’t need to say Goodbye to Jesus.’ You’re going to be with him soon. But he shook his head at me, then smiled a crooked smile and said, ‘Oh I know I know...but listen; Jesus comes to see me every month and he might not know I’ve gone.’ That’s the last thing he said. I told the nurse about it, and she said there actually has been a chubby balding guy that seems to visit during a youth worship service every month.” The granddaughter looked at chubby, balding Daryl and said, “I’m thinking that guy could be you!”

Now if a reluctant follower like Daryl can be mistaken for Jesus, maybe you and I can too. Sure, we’ll get a surprise visit from the Lord right into the midst of our busy lives – you know it’ll happen. But once in awhile...once in awhile the Lord is hoping to make an appearance through your kindness, your generosity, through your love.