Get Jesus out of the tomb

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Each year when I sit down to write my Easter sermon, I remember Doris Olson.

Doris was a pillar of the church, and when I arrived as the new pastor, she came to my office and told me a story. In 1952, Doris came to First Congregational on Easter Sunday with her three young children. The minister was, in her words, "too smart for his own good. He preached about spring and new life and baby rabbits, but never said a word about the resurrection! The minute he pronounced the benediction, I marched my children out the door and across the street to services at First Lutheran where I knew they would at least get Jesus out of the tomb!"

That is a word to the wise for all preachers on Easter Sunday. Whatever you do, make sure you get Jesus out of the tomb.

In the United Church of Christ, diversity of faith is a gift and a challenge. My congregation includes people from all across the faith spectrum, each with their own "take" on Jesus. There are Seventh Day Adventists who have a preference for the resurrected Christ, the one who will come in glory one day to judge the living and the dead. On the other end of the spectrum, there are the social justice folks who focus on Jesus of Nazareth, champion of the oppressed and poor. Left to our own devices, we might easily split into different factions or even different faiths.

Then Easter comes. Together, we follow the women to the empty tomb and hear the witness of the angels: "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not hear, but has risen." There is no evidence of what has taken place, only a powerful absence that defies all our expectations. The proclamation is clear: the one who lived and died--and was buried--is not here. He is risen and will one day return. The empty tomb holds in tension all our versions of Jesus Christ and reminds us that there is one body, one spirit.

It is an unsettling place. Yet the empty tomb is the center of the Christian faith. For in this sacred space we meet the mystery and power of Jesus, Son of Man and Son of God. There is no proof, no evidence or rational explanation. Just an invitation to a deeper faith and a richer encounter with the living Christ who is not dead, but risen.