



**Belton Joyner**

# What is the death from which we are being saved by the emptying tomb of Jesus Christ?

Perhaps it is a bit myopic to look at The United Methodist Church to determine “The State of the Church.” The Church of Jesus Christ is defined more by the Holy Spirit than it is by denominational membership rolls. Nevertheless, in these reflections, I walk as a United Methodist descendant of Wesley, Otterbein, Boehm, and Albright; it is the church I know best.

*Is The United Methodist Church* ten youth who use their summer vacation on a mission work project? **Yes.**

*Is The United Methodist Church* a district superintendent pleading with a congregation to pay its apportionments? **Yes.**

*Is The United Methodist Church* a Sunday school class that freezes out the member who is too liberal (too conservative) for class comfort? **Yes.**

*Is The United Methodist Church* a part-time local pastor who goes back to school after thirty years so her congregation will have licensed and prepared clergy leadership? **Yes.**

*Is The United Methodist Church* an urban building where the word on the street is “you can get help there”? **Yes.**

*Is The United Methodist Church* a place where the sign out front is still in English although ninety-percent of passers-by speak Spanish? **Yes.**

*Is The United Methodist Church* a community that helped Bill and Ron explore what it means to be a Christian same-sex couple? **Yes.**

*Is The United Methodist Church* a people who can always find *The Book of Discipline* but have to search unused classrooms to find a Bible? **Yes.**

*Is The United Methodist Church* a mysterious gift of grace through which multiple-thousands of people have been found by Jesus Christ? **Yes.**

All of the above and more. No single brush can paint a picture of United Methodism. In some ways, that is our strength; in some ways, that is our limitation. But there is a question that might bring The United Methodist Church into focus: What is the death from which we are being saved by the emptying tomb of Jesus Christ?

*Death from sin:* United Methodists are people who acknowledge that in Jesus Christ God has worked grace to save them from brokenness from God.

*Death from oppression:* United Methodists seek to deny and

destroy those forms of human relationships that keep others from fully becoming the persons God has intended them to be.

*Death from untruth:* United Methodist institutions have no fear of truth. Our colleges and universities proffer no boundary to discovery other than the mystery of God’s very self.

*Death from individualism:* United Methodist organization and discipline are designed to connect persons and communities and cultures and experiences. In an environment in which each of us becomes his or her own standard of discernment, we are tempted away from connection.

The other day I counted the choices of cereal available at a nearby grocery store. There were 177 different cereals from which to choose. This amazing circumstance became for me a symbol of the threat to the heritage of the Wesleys, of Otterbein, of Boehm, and of Albright. Rather than deciding together what God is saying to us, we are becoming comfortable with decision-making and action that is more about what God is saying to *me*. It is about me! The God who shapes a people in community — not in isolation — calls us to be a people of conference: conferring, connecting, challenging, covenanting.

Such an approach to life is countercultural. Do we dare risk living as a connected people in a time that commends and celebrates individuals (individual congregations and individual persons)? How do a people of community relate to a world of individuals? What structures will direct us toward the means of grace?

We are more likely to serve well the God who lives in the community of Holy Trinity if we too live our life as a community. How does that happen? The family Eucharistic meal is at the center of such a life. The Table is a table of invitation, anticipation, memory, fellowship, and outreach. The Table reminds us who we are.

And how do we live out who we are? What kind of clergy is needed? What is the baptismal injunction for laity? How do we study the Scriptures together? How do we model to the world how people of grace disagree? How do we know when the living God has a new word for us? How do local churches best test their viability? What pet projects need to be set aside for God’s promised tomorrow? How can we enjoy the victories given by God?

*Where is Jesus Christ in all of this?*

**F. Belton Joyner, Jr. is a retired elder in the North Carolina Annual Conference and author of *Life in a Fish Bowl*; *United Methodist Questions, United Methodist Answers*; and editor of *The Unofficial United Methodist Handbook*.**