

Believing is Seeing

A sermon preached by
James F. McIntire

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Texts:
John 20:19-31

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Pascha 2



Hope United Methodist Church
Eagle & Steel Roads, Havertown, PA
Phone: 610-446-3351
Web: www.HavHopeUMC.org
Office: HopeUMCHavertown@verizon.net
Pastor: HopeUMCPastor@verizon.net

John 20:19-31

19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." 24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." 28 Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" 29 Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." 30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31 But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.



The week after our celebration of Jesus' resurrection we read of the church at its worst, says Tom Long, one of today's most respected storytelling preachers — a group of people "scarred, disheartened, and defensive."

"Look at them," says Tom Long, "For long chapters in John's Gospel, Jesus has been preparing his disciples for his departure. He has gone over and over with them his commandments to love one another, to be bold, to trust him, to be the branches to his vine, to feed on the Bread of Life, to be ready to follow him at all costs.

Somebody wasn't paying attention. Look at the followers of Jesus the night after his resurrection appearances, hiding like frightened little children behind bolted shut doors! Some disciples, some church, huh?"

They were supposed to be the ones walking confidently out into the world, full of the Holy Spirit, announcing the triumph of God over the powers of this world. But here they are, hiding, cowering, hoping that nobody in town will know that they're there. The church at its worst — "scarred, disheartened, and defensive."

Tom Long asks, "What kind of advertisement might this church put in the Saturday paper to attract members? 'The friendly church where all are welcome'? Hardly. Locked doors are not a sign of hospitality. 'The church with a warm heart and a bold mission'? Forget it. This is the church of sweaty palms and shaky knees and a firmly bolted front door."

Could this even be called a church? Not only does it have no beautiful sanctuary with stained glass, no pulpit, no choir, it has no church growth plan, no mission, no conviction, no nothing. Awhile back, a preacher asked Robert Schuller what was one of the most important requisites for a growing congregation. Schuller is said to have responded, "A good parking lot." Is that all it takes?

In a questionnaire, United Methodists were asked what they most looked for in a church, people replied, "Friendliness." Number two was, "Bold, interesting preaching." Nowhere on the list was "Locked doors" or "Frightened members" or "Fear."

Here in John's Gospel is a church with absolutely nothing going for it ... except.... except ...

Except that, when it gathered, the Risen Christ pushed through the locked door, threw back the bolt, and stood among them.

And maybe that's as close as any church ever gets to being church. Even today's megachurches with bowling alleys and indoor pools, or a church with a huge choir and gorgeous windows can't match that dynamic. Left to ourselves, we're nothing more than a huddle of confused, timid students who failed the course called, "Following Jesus 101."

Despite all the trappings we might wrap around a worship experience – despite all the planning and liturgy and design we might create – sometimes, by the grace of the living God, the Holy Spirit slips through our closed doors, our properly printed worship bulletin, our respectable reverence and there is worship, worship not of our own creation but worship as a gift.

A number of years ago, Will Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas in their book *Resident Aliens*, wrote that there was a good deal of "atheism" in much of our church life. Too many churches are atheistic. That is, they keep cranking along, offering ceramics classes for older adults, yoga classes for busy homemakers, trips to Disney World for the youth so that God really doesn't matter. They are successful at being uplifting moral improvement societies for young people or a place for older folks to hang out during the week, but they fail at being church.

If you want to see us, stripped of our sacred trappings, our pretenses peeled away, then look here in John's Gospel — "a pitiful huddle of timid souls hanging on to one another behind locked doors," says Willimon, "without the Presence, the presence which makes our human gatherings the church of God, this is about all we are."

Yet the good news is that it was to this church, which was hardly church at all, that the living, Risen Christ came saying "Peace be with you" (John 20:19). Into this busy, vacant void, there was a voice, a presence, a peace not of human making.

Christ doesn't come in with blasting trumpet fanfare and a red carpet flanked by beautiful angels in luminescent robes. My brother called me after church last week, Resurrection Sunday. He told me a story in which a Sunday School teacher asked if anyone in the class knew what Jesus said after the stone was rolled away and he appeared to those at the tomb. A little boy's hand shot up, "Oow, oow, I know, I know!" "Okay, Jimmy, what did Jesus say at the resurrection."

"He said, TA-DAA !!"

"So," said my brother to me, "Happy TA-DAA day!"

Christ slips into our midst and he says, not "TA-DAA", but "Peace be with you," and he shows his pierced hands and feet. He says it again (in case we failed to get the point), "Peace be with you." And he tells us, his disciples, that he is sending us out into the world. Then he breathes on us, gives us the Holy Spirit, and bestows upon us the awesome power to forgive sins.

Here is the church as much "church-ey" as it ever gets, says Tom Long. John Calvin said that the true church is "wherever the word is rightly preached and the sacraments duly administered." Well, yes and no. Because even our right preaching and our due administration can't make church. Church is a gift of a God who refuses to leave us be. God comes to us. God's presence makes church church. To the church which had nothing, Christ gave everything. Spirit. Mission. Forgiveness.

We are church, not because of the buildings we've built and cared for, not because of choirs we pull together, not because of our Power Point presentations and decorations and flowers, or the preaching, or even the activities and programs we plan. As we at

Hope move forward in our life together we need to hear that very clearly. We are the church, not because we see Jesus and then believe but because we first believe without seeing.

We who gather to worship and serve God are church because to us, even to us, Christ comes and gives us the gifts of Spirit, mission, and forgiveness, commissioning us to give them to the whole world in God's name.

That's why we're called church.

Will Willimon tells of his first church located in rural Georgia – a circuit of several churches actually. He was fresh out of seminary, eager to be a good pastor. He was in graduate school at the time, commuting out from Atlanta to the boondocks and a place called Suwanee, Georgia – “a thirty minute drive that took me back 30 centuries.”

On his first visit to one of the churches, he found a large chain and padlock on the front door, put there, he was told, by the local Sheriff.

“The Sheriff, why?” I asked.

“Well, things got out of hand at the board meeting last month; folks started ripping up carpet, dragging out the pews they had given in memory of their mothers. It got bad. The Sheriff come out here and put that there lock on the door until our new preacher could come and settle things down.”

“That typified my time at that church,” he says, “I would drive out there each Sunday, just praying for a miraculous snowstorm in October which would save me from another Sunday at that so-called church. I spent a year there that lasted a lifetime. I tried everything. I worked, I planned, I taught, I pled but the response was always disappointing. The arguments, the pettiness, the fights in the parking lot after the board meeting were more than I could take. It was tough and I was glad to be leaving them behind. ‘You call yourself a church!’ I muttered as my tires kicked gravel up in

the parking lot on my last Sunday among them.”

A couple of years later, while visiting at Emory University, Willimon ran into a young man who told him that he was now serving that church. His heart went out to him – “Such a dear young man, and only twenty-three!”

“They still remember you out there,” he said.

“Yea,” I said glumly, “I remember them too.”

“Remarkable bunch of people,” he said.

“Remarkable,” I said.

“Their ministry to the community has been a wonder,” he continued. “That little church is now supporting, in one way or another, more than a dozen of the troubled families around the church. The free day care center is going great. Not too many interracial congregations like them in North Georgia.”

”I could hardly believe what he was telling me. What happened? I asked.”

“I don't know. One Sunday, things just sort of came together. It wasn't anything in particular. It's just that, when the service was done, and we were on our way out, we knew that Jesus loved us and had plans for us. Things fairly much took off after that.”

Willimon concludes that what happened was that that church got intruded upon. Someone greater than any preacher knocked the lock off the door, kicked it open and offered them peace, the Holy Spirit, mission and forgiveness. And now, they are called “church.”

Church isn't about our hard work, or our efforts, or our long range vision planning or our increased financial giving. Church is a gift, a visitation, an intrusion of the Living Christ standing among

us – just like the intrusion into that locked room the week after Jesus' Resurrection.

Church is about we disciples being intruded upon by the Christ who stands in our midst and says, not just “Ta-da!,” but rather, “Peace be with you” and we leave from that encounter lifted and commissioned to be who God calls us to be. Forgivers, healers, lovers, reconcilers – compassionate children of a compassionate God.

That same Christ stands in our midst even this morning and says to us, “Peace be with you.” Do you have to see to believe? Or do you believe and through that belief see what it is we are to be and become? Believing is seeing.

Believing is seeing.

Amen.

[Portions of this sermon are borrowed from Bishop William Willimon, You Call This A Church?, preached at Duke Divinity School while Dr. Willimon was Dean of the Chapel]