

Sermon on John 20:19-23
CCRC, 7 April 2024
Beyond Disorientation

Dear Friends of God,

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That cowering band of disciples gives us a picture of who we are as a church.

Look at those disciples in the upper room. There is nothing great about them. There is no pipe organ, no piano, no worship band. There's not even a pastor. They have no vision statement, they aren't purpose driven, they don't have a logo or a catch phrase that tells them who they are.

In fact, they are perhaps the most miserable, pathetic conglomeration to ever call itself "the church."

These disciples had failed. When Jesus was arrested, every single one of them fled. Each of them had made that split-second decision to run away from Jesus. Peter went so far as to deny he even knew Jesus—how could he even dare be among the disciples anymore? At least some of them had dared to follow at a safe distance and to be present when Jesus was crucified. But they all carried shame and were now all gathered together cowering and whimpering in some hidden room as far away from people as possible. Welcome to First Church, Jerusalem. Church of the bolted door. Church of the uncommitted.

American preacher, Tom Long wonders what kind of advertisement these disciples would put in the local paper inviting people to come join. "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 shame that would drape on you if you sat with them.

Could you even call this a church?

What does it take to be a church? Do you need a beautiful building? Do you need a bold mission? American preacher William Willimon gives us a clue

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If you want to see us, stripped of our sacred trappings, our pretenses peeled away, then look here in this twentieth chapter of John — a pitiful huddle of timid souls hanging on to one another behind our locked doors. Without the presence, the presence which makes our human gatherings the church of God, this is about all we are. ("You Call This A Church?" William Willimon)

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I once talked to a thirteen-year-old boy whose family was looking for a new church. In the previous eight months they had been to about twelve different churches. I asked him what they were looking for. He said, "One that has a preacher I can understand and one that makes

us feel welcome.” That sounded reasonable. Nothing about Christ’s presence being among them, though.

What if that family had stumbled into that early Jerusalem church? What’s this: a bolted door? Cowering disciples? No pastor with tattooed arms? No worship band playing the latest songs? Maybe they would have appreciated the authenticity of the members. But I doubt it. Could you blame them if they kept looking? Could you blame them if they got in their car and said to each other, “Now there’s a church with nothing going for it”? And they would be right.

This church had nothing going for it...except...

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Except that something wonderful happened: the risen Christ slipped through the bolted door and stood among them.

Picture that in your mind. Jesus standing there in muted resurrected glory, fresh from victory, powerful in his presence, full of promise and hope. Stilling their fears, offering something profoundly new, yet ancient, he stood there among them.

What a gift that was. What a turn-around moment.

Jesus showed up with peace. Twice in the five verses in our passage and once again a few verses later we hear Jesus say,

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Peace be with you!

Notice there is an exclamation mark behind it each time. It’s emphatic. It’s a strong statement, designed to go deep into their hearts.

And at that deeply disoriented time they needed to hear this. It’s in this place where Jesus is apt to show up. It’s in those moments when we feel powerless and clueless that Jesus mysteriously comes to us.

Jesus enters the locked room and he speaks his emphatic message: Peace be with you! Shalom! We are not told much else than this, nor are we given any reactions to this word. But we can hear in this a message that it’s alright. Jesus is not out to get them. He bears no grudge and has no vendetta against them. It’s okay. Peter, it’s alright. Thomas take a look. John, you and I are good. I’m not back to haunt you. I’m back to create a whole new situation.

Peace be with you. When Jesus shows up there is peace. Peace with God. All those things we try to lock away, those things we try to hide behind lock and key, the sin, the shame, the guilt. Jesus says, “Peace.” It is forgiven. You and I are good. Because of my resurrection, the power of these things is gone. When you leave this gathering today and go wherever it is you go in your week, and you reflect on those things you have locked up inside, remember, Jesus comes there with peace. You are free from the power of these things because of the resurrection.

Imagine what it looks like to be that free. Imagine a place where there is that much relief and that much acceptance. The church is the place where Jesus has shown up to give his peace.

Jesus also shows up with purpose. He doesn't let these disciples stay idle and scared for too long. He says to them:

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As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.

New Testament scholar Robert Kysar puts it well when he comments,

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Christ's peace is not a passive contentment. He gives the disciples a second gift, a mission. Believers now become apostles (apostoloi) because Christ sends (apostello) them into the world. God's sending Christ is the pattern for Christ's sending the disciples. They are sent out of God's love for the world and for the world's redemption.

Robert Kysar, Preaching John

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When Jesus shows up, we don't just get peace and say, "cool" and leave it at that. We get sent. Just as Jesus was sent out of love for the world with a message of peace for the world, so we are sent. Sent to be God's peace in the world. When Christ comes among us, he gives us a purpose that identical to his purpose. We are sent out with the same love as his, the same generosity of spirit, the same other-centred service. He calls us to live out the forgiveness we've received.

It had to be this way. Jesus wants to spread a message of forgiveness around the world. And to spread this message of forgiveness, he doesn't do so through those who appear blameless or somehow most worthy. He doesn't spread his message through the beautiful and the brave, the ones who have it all together with a personal mission statement, achievable goals, a ministry plan and a winning smile. He spreads it through those who truly know that they themselves have been forgiven. The kind who have experienced what Jesus can give. The kind who know what it is to be a loser, a failure, a lousy example and who yet know the forgiveness of Jesus. Those huddled, scared, shame-filled disciples. The ones who deeply know his peace.

Jesus sends them out just as he was sent out. They are weak, they are humble, they are compassionate because they know the pitfalls of life. They are still very capable—they know things, they've seen things, they've heard Jesus say things and explain things. And yet they know their own weakness and the grace of God in their life.

I love this statement from a theologian from New Zealand:

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When we know that we are safe in Christ, we are free to go wherever we want and mix with whoever we find, and do it without fear. Our orientation will be one of mission: concerned not with isolating and protecting our inner purity, but with finding ways to make the Christ who is within us accessible to others. (Michael Riddell, *Threshold of the Future: Reforming the Church in the Post-Christian West*)

When Jesus shows up we have a sense that we are sent like this. We have a sense that we have a purpose that is his purpose.

Young and old, we have this mission. Last night we heard about four of our students who are going to Nicaragua this summer to work in summer camps for children. This morning we are sending four adult members to Eastern Europe to get a clearer understanding of what God is doing among our mission partners there. We will hear from them all in our Mission Sunday when we celebrate the sending presence of Christ among us.

The church is the place where Jesus has shown up to give his purpose.

And because we know we can't do this on our own, Jesus shows up with power.

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And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

This scene of Jesus breathing on his disciples reminds us of the creation story when God breathed into Adam's nostrils the breath of life and he became a living soul." The same verb is used in Ezekiel 37:9 where life is breathed into the bones in the Valley of the Dry Bones. The church is a new creation whose life is breathed into it by Christ. Jesus breathes into us a new heart, a new spirit within us. He gives us a new mind, new attitudes, new confidence, new strength. He gives us his Holy Spirit. It's Pentecost before Pentecost.

This Spirit gives strength to the church to proclaim the peace of Jesus. This is the power that gives joy and truth and patience as God's people do his work here on earth.

The Spirit reminds them of who they are: sheep of my flock, branches on my vine, servants of my kingdom. He reminds them what they had to do: love one another, love your neighbour, love your enemy, serve, wage peace, stand for truth, trust me, keep your commitments. He moves them to remember the story of Jesus dying and rising again, establishing a new kingdom of joy and peace.

The Spirit gives us direction as we go out into the world with Christ's peace. Wherever it seems as if death has demolished life, Jesus shows up and fresh hope abounds. His Spirit gives hope for a future. I hope our students and our Mission Discovery Team hears stories that bear this out and come back to tell us about it.

The church is the place where Jesus has shown up to give his power.

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What would you tell a thirteen year-old church shopper about our church. That we have a great preacher and a music team that is really good, livestreaming and great programs? Or would you be able to say we found Jesus here with all his peace, purpose and power, moving among us and changing us? That is more the story we need to tell.

As William Willimon says,

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Church isn't my hard work, your earnest effort, our long-range planning or heavy duty giving. Church is a gift, a visitation, an intrusion of the Living Christ standing among us. ("You Call This A Church?" William Willimon)

That is what makes a church strong and vibrant: Christ among us.

AMEN

Risen Christ, our eternal Savior,
Like the disciples,
we are gathered together the week after Easter:
wondering whether it is true,
marveling at the possibility,
and daring to hope.

Like the disciples,
we are sometimes afraid,
sometimes full of doubt
sometimes so disoriented.

But in your extravagant generosity, your boundless love,
you appear to us in our fear and love us in our doubts
and grant us the oceans of your peace.
Thank you for loving us as we are
And reorienting us to your kingdom of peace.

Send us in the power of your Holy Spirit
To love as you love
To forgive as you forgive
To bring peace as you have brought it to us
Help us be your agents of reconciliation
in a broken and troubled world

Amen

Students in Grade 5-6 are now dismissed for a sermon discussion in classroom 10/11. If you haven't already done so, please pick up a clipboard and discussion sheet from the Children's Worship table.