

“Not Seeing and Believing”

A Sermon by Scott Herr

The First Presbyterian Church of New Canaan – April 11, 2021

Please Read:

Acts 4:32-35

John 20:19-31

Abraham Lincoln once said, “If all the people who fell asleep in church on Sunday morning were laid out end to end, they would be a great deal more comfortable.” Hard chairs, unsingable hymns, forced silence and excruciating boredom are just a few stereotypes of the church, seen by many as a dying institution. People considering the ministry are often looked at with suspicion. An advertisement in a church press read: “Are you forty-five and getting nowhere? Why not consider the Christian ministry?” Clergy are sometimes perceived as: “Six days invisible, one day incomprehensible!”¹

Having recently been in conversation with churches seeking a new pastor, it was interesting to see how congregations presented themselves. Apparently, search committees want to make their church look more desirable. Churches boast about their Facebook likes, livestreaming capability, great music, friendliness, powerful preaching, singles ministry, childcare, parking lots, counselling centers... One was very proud of the fact that they had a 3-million-dollar budget and only 85 people in attendance. The same church boasted their highest attended worship was the blessing of the animal’s service. Attendance burst from their average 85 to 350, but that’s including dogs and cats!

Some churches, on the other hand, appear to have absolutely nothing. Take, for example, the church depicted in our text today. What we’re looking at today is not your ideal fellowship, at least at first glance... Jesus had prepared his disciples to be a devoted and confident fellowship of faith. They were to be a community of profound love with the gates wide open and the welcome mats out, but here we find them barricaded in a house with the doors bolted shut. They were to be the kind of people who stride boldly into the world to bear fruit in Jesus’ name, a people full of the Holy Spirit performing greater miracles than Jesus himself, but here we find them cowering in fear, hoping nobody will find out where they are before they get their alibis straight. In short, we see the first church as a community of disbelief.

They had seen all too clearly how their movement fell apart, beginning with Judas’ betrayal and Jesus’ arrest. They saw how their leader was marched away, tortured, beaten, and killed. They had seen the tomb where he lay. Only one of them, Mary, claimed the impossible, that she had seen the Lord. As darkness closed about them again that evening of the first day of the week, they were afraid. They have no plan, no promise, no program, no perky youth ministry, no powerful preaching, no parking lot, no nothing. In fact, when all is said and done, this terrified little band huddled in the corner of a room with a chair braced against the door had only one thing going for it...

Jesus came and stood among them. He showed them his scars and said, “Peace be with you...”

¹ Nicky Gumble - *Questions of Life*, p. 219.

Perhaps that is the main point of this story. This is John's account of how the Risen Christ pushes through the barricades which the first church had put up against the world, how the Risen Christ breaks through fear and doubt and fills the church with his own life. And what we are asked to recognize, of course, is that every church is finally this way. Despite all of our boldest attempts to do mission studies and church growth plans, if left to our own pursuits we will have... absolutely nothing. No liturgical mascara, no programmatic cosmetic, can conceal the fact that, apart from the presence of the Risen Christ, the church is a very dead place.

It's interesting to me that the first disciples seemed to get at least one thing right. Thomas expressed his doubts, and they didn't condemn him. Thomas is accepted as one of the disciples with all of his loud scepticism - I'll believe it when I see it attitude. Have you ever come across someone with that approach to faith issues? Maybe Thomas reminds you a little of yourself? Prove it to me! Show me now!

Apparently the first church did not yet have the strong sense that they knew it all. They knew they did not have all the answers. On the contrary, it was the Lord alone who could put their doubts and fears to rest. Jesus does not judge any of the disciples for their cowardly betrayals. In fact, to Thomas, the most outspoken of the sceptics, Jesus simply approaches him and says Peace be with you. He shows them his hand and his side and says again Peace be with you. He says he is sending them out into the world, and that they should receive the Holy Spirit. He doesn't tell them that they are utter failures, that he'll find someone else who's up to the job. He comes to meet them exactly where they are. It's interesting to note that Thomas was the disciple who went the furthest to share the good news of the Gospel. He is the missionary who most likely founded the *Mar Thoma* church in India.

So, what changed Thomas from this questioning atheist to confident evangelist? What changed the whole group of cloistered cowards into faithful disciples with missionary zeal? There are a number of factors, to be sure, but it seems there is meant to be some connection between Jesus showing the disciples his wounds and their belief that he is the Risen Christ. Early on in the church's history, there was a heresy named Docetism. Docetism said that Christ, the Son of God, did not really suffer on the cross, did not really live as we live on this earth. For the Docetists, Christ only appeared to suffer (the Greek for "appear" is *doceo*). He only *appeared* to be human... No! the church said. Fully God. Fully Human. As Isaiah prophesied, "By his wounds we are healed."

In fact, just after Thomas touches the Lord's physical wounds, Thomas cries out, "My Lord and my God." Indeed, the Christian faith does not deny the pain, the reality of the suffering of our world, the deadly pandemic, the gun violence, the homelessness and displacement which our violence causes. There are very real scars in our world. There are very real scars in our lives. So, we need a very real God who can identify with real wounds in order to save us. Our faith helps us to go on, in the name of Christ, but there are still scars. I saw one article recently on the resurrection which made the distinction between rescue and resurrection. We are not rescued from suffering and pain in this world, but we will be finally resurrected, as was Christ.

It seems to me that woundedness is essential to being human; it allows us to learn acceptance and compassion for others. Unless we have experienced weakness and woundedness, we can have no way to identify with those who are hurting and crying out for healing. As Henri Nouwen titled one of his books, maybe the only true healers are “wounded healers.” It’s really hard to be helped by someone who hasn’t been there, some Docetist Deity who has no scars.

Christ came to those harassed and huddling disciples, showed them his scars, spoke a word of peace to them, a word of healing and wholeness. And he told them he would be sending them forth. In this passage we see an outline of the church’s whole life: Peace be with you comes straight out of the worship liturgy. Being shown Jesus’ hands and side alludes to the Lord’s supper, and the breathing of the Holy Spirit comes from the early church’s practice of baptism. Being sent out is, of course, our mission as God’s people, and forgiving sins is the texture of the church’s life. As Philip Yancey put it, the world can do just about everything better than the church, except one thing; and that is grace. If we are called to do anything, it is to be dispensers of grace for the world. A friend who served in Scotland took this a little far. His church growth campaign was simple: *Come to church and be disappointed*. But come and learn with us about God’s amazing grace! I’m guessing this won’t play in New Canaan, but it is bold!

So, where there was nothing but a bunch of weak and wimpy disciples, Christ enters in and brings the church to life. To the church with nothing Christ gives everything, provides it with what it needs to be the church: live spiritually, love inclusively, learning continually, and leave a legacy... Without the Risen Christ, there is fear and angst. In his presence there is faith and mission.

Theologian Karl Barth once remarked that to say the old line from the creed, “I believe in the Holy Catholic Church” does not mean that we believe in the church at all. Rather, it means that we believe that God is alive and at work in the church. We do not believe in the church, but we believe that the church comes alive as the Holy Spirit, the presence of the Risen Christ fills and takes charge of the lives of us who are the church.

Each Sunday is Easter, a day to worship the Crucified-Risen Christ. As Frederick Buechner once wrote, “Easter means we can never nail Christ down, not even if the nails we use are real and the thing we nail him to is a cross.” Killing Jesus, says Walter Wink, is like trying to destroy a dandelion seed-head by blowing on it.

Despite our attempts in the church to keep nailing Jesus down, or throwing our worst doubts and fears over his Easter revelation, Christ continues to enter our lives, to invite us to touch his wounds and receive his Spirit, to go out and be wounded healers giving witness to God’s grace.

Did you know that the root of the word vulnerable comes from the Latin, *vulnus*, for “wound”? Perhaps our job as Easter people is not to be all amped up with joy and

happiness, but to be honest that we are wounded, deeply flawed, and to confess that our only real hope is the Living God who loves us and will never abandon us....

Brothers and sisters, siblings in Christ, you may not see the Risen Lord face to face like Thomas. You may at times feel that this is boring. You may wonder if we have anything left to go on... that we are so filled with fear and doubt that there's no hope left. You may have scars that run so deep you feel that there is no hope for you. But there is one hope. There is one reason to believe. You can't keep out, hold down, or nail up the crucified-risen Christ... Right now, with pierced hands and side, God offers peace to you. Christ's Spirit has been poured out for you, and you are promised new life, freedom, and hope. Ironically, maybe not seeing a very glorious church is one way to start believing and seeing our glorious Saviour. And believing in him, you will have life in his name...

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. AMEN.