

May Have Life
A Sermon by the Rev. R. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – April 24, 2022

PLEASE READ:
Acts 5:27-32
John 20:19-31

The Book of Acts is formally known as the “Acts of the Apostles,” and chronicles the history of the early church. However, it just as easily could be called the “Acts of the Holy Spirit,” as nothing would have happened without the gifts and empowerment of the Holy Spirit. In Luke's Pentecost, the church is born jubilant, triumphant - in a spectacular display of confidence and power, more like last week's joyful Easter celebration of God's new life for you and me, and how we can respond in faith to live as Easter people for our church, community and the world.

But today is known in the church calendar as "Low Sunday," that day which seems almost like a hangover after the outburst of Easter joy last week. Today, you'll notice, there aren't as many people here as last Sunday. God even adjusted the weather appropriately. And in the Gospel lesson for today, we find a mirroring of the mood. John's version of Pentecost is a more accurate description of most churches today - a rather anxious, dispirited group huddled behind locked doors.

O sure, the women had said, "We have seen the Lord," but the disciples did not believe them. They said that's post-mortem hysteria and grief gone wild. That's what death and defeat does to some people. They hallucinate and mythologize...

John's depiction of those first disciples may also hint at our situation today. Despair and anxiety seem to engulf our society. Are we really being threatened with nuclear war? Is climate change something that we can really do anything about or is it too late? The politics of the day make us all groan, whatever side of the aisle we may be on. The elections in France today are a sign of the times. Is it even possible that Marie Le Pen is in the running for president of France? And we have loved ones who are struggling with loss, or illness. The pandemic is so confounding...

What we dare proclaim here this morning is that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is not merely an antidote to the despair, the pain, the sadness, and confusion of our lives. The Living Lord opens up a whole new reality because he puts us in touch with our true identity, puts us in touch with the God who loves us and makes all things new.

We are not born merely of human parents. We are born of God and participate in the larger story of God's redemptive love for us. What is initiated in this love story is a new humanity which has certain characteristics. They are highlighted for us in these strange resurrection appearances. Jesus, encountering his disciples after the crucifixion, begins with words of hope and reassurance. "Peace be with you." He says that twice. "Peace be with you." And he reveals to the disciples the cost of that peace, by showing them his hands and his feet. And he sends the disciples out on a mission: "As the Father sent me, so I send you."

The love of God defines what is real and what gives shape and direction to human life. To be human is to have a mission. To be human is to be enlivened by the Spirit of God. To be human is to know the wounds of Christ, to be a participant in the resurrection drama of God's reconciling love toward a better life and fairer world for all.

Not all of us, of course. Our patron saint is "Doubting Thomas." We dare, "Unless I see the wounds of Christ, I won't believe in any living God." I've always wondered why Thomas wanted to touch Jesus' wounds and put his hands in his side. Those are weird details of this post-resurrection appearance. But recently I learned why the attention to the wounded side is so important. The open side is the symbol of a new image of humanity, of a new Adam. Just as in the first creation of humanity God took a rib from the side of Adam, so here Thomas puts his hand in the side of Christ and is transformed. This is the wounded Christ who is there for others, *and from whom comes a new creation*.¹

If you want to see and touch the wounds of Christ, just look around you! The wounds are there in Christ's lively images, in the world that God loves and the world for which God aches. But, can you see also the work of resurrection? Or, like those first disciples, are you yet behind locked doors? I think most of us are not locked up, but we are rather distracted and out and about doing just about anything than paying attention to the wounds of our world.

The resurrection becomes an embarrassment to us of the church because it challenges the habits of hardened hearts and opens us up again to the woundedness of the world. The Easter proclamation forces upon us the connection between Good Friday and Easter, between reality and sacrificial love.

In Leslie Newbigin's book, *A Proper Confidence*, he talks about one of the great Soviet mathematicians who was at the cutting edge of epistemology (the theory of how we "know"). He says that you cannot know anything at all without committing yourself in some way. He echoes what Werner Heisenberg said back in 1927, "Method and object can no longer be separated. The scientific world-view has ceased to be a scientific view in the true sense of the word." Heisenberg himself said, "There is a higher power, not influenced by our wishes, which finally decides and judges..." And Max Plank put it this way: "For religion, God is at the beginning; for science, God is at the end."

So, what's your "higher power"? What is the story to which you've committed yourself? What is your "theory" of life? The word "theory" has the word *theos*, God, as its root... What is ultimate for you? Sooner or later, you have to stand somewhere and sometimes have to make a stand. "Here I stand, I can do no other!" All our seeing and knowing is theory-laden. Scientists need theories, continually tested by observation, from which to work. But we too need theories, stories that can be questioned and refined in much the same way.

The Easter story asks us important questions: "Where is your mission? To what are you saying Yes and No? What are you *for* in life? Where is your heart?"

The Biblical answer - the script of God's story line - the theoretical, theological framework of Holy Week and Easter is this: the only proper way to know and face the world is to love it - even if it costs you everything. You won't understand yourself or life unless you love, because, in the end, loving is the supreme form of knowing.

When we come to know the world in this way, we are able to say, even without seeing completely, "I believe! Yes, Lord. I will follow you. I will love you with all my heart soul and mind,

¹ Joseph Ratzinger and William Congdon, *The Sabbath of History* (Washington, DC: The William Congdon Foundation, 1998), 30.

and I will love my neighbor as myself." That is what we struggle with. The result is pure theory in the best sense - knowing and giving of ourselves to the glory of God. God's gift is the resurrection of a dead heart. The love story of Easter opens our hearts to the mission of God and calls into question our own limited version of reality. That is why Easter is so wonderfully disturbing, and disorienting. As John Updike wrote in his poem, *Seven Stanzas at Easter*, "Let us not mock God with metaphor..." This is ultimate reality we're talking about here!

One of the main challenges for us is to remain open to God's story line for us. Has the breath of God touched us in such a way that we are willing to go out from behind locked doors in the peace of Christ to listen to and share in the experiences of others? Are we willing to go out to hear what the feminists, the gays, the Democrats, the Republicans, the traditionalists, liberals, Atheists, Asians, Black Lives Matters, LatinX, or whatever other group of people that seem different from you have to say? Are you willing to simply go out there and listen with some compassion?

I wish it were easy. But sometimes it's hard to love *those* people. We do not, if we are Easter People, have the luxury of falling back on either conservative absolutism or liberal relativism. Either extreme causes fear in somebody! The Easter story calls us to a tertium quid, a third way, a relationship with the living Lord and God's mission of reconciliation. Given what is happening in the world, the call for us to be agents of reconciliation is quite an adventure.

The Easter story is about God's ultimate yes to us and the brokenness of our lives and world, about God's ultimate power to forgive, to heal, to transform the deadness of our cold and hateful hearts. Easter contradicts our tribalism and violence by calling us into a fellowship of love, into a story about healing and transformation. The Lord himself wants to break through our locked doors and distractions and say to us, "Peace be with you. You have nothing to fear in me. I have a mission for you, to go and give of yourselves to show my costly love in the world, a love which risks it all, gives it all, for the glory of God."

In Acts 2, Luke says the Holy Spirit nearly knocked the doors off the hinges. In John 20, the Holy Spirit was no more than a breath, but it was enough to blow open a securely locked door. Pentecost is an Easter evening draft through a locked door. On Pentecost, John 20 version, our lock-in becomes a break-in. Jesus seeks to breathe on us still, and in breathing that holy breath, wants to knock open our doors. Jesus says to you with your anxieties and fears, "Peace be with you." "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." "Receive the Holy Spirit." "Do not doubt, but believe."

This peace is God's way of reminding us that "In the end, it's all going to be OK. And if it's not all OK, then it's not the end yet!" That's the good news on this Low Sunday of Eastertide. God will give us new life! We are to receive the Spirit, to know the wounds of Christ, and to live into the power of the resurrection, the new creation, the new heaven and earth. We are sent beyond those doors and whatever may hold us, to be Easter people. And we can do this because we know the one who is at the heart of Easter reality. By God's grace, may we as a church community move beyond our locked doors and distractions, and go out into the world as bold and confident agents of the resurrection. It's all so that we and the world may have life!

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