

“Church At Its Worst”

The Second Sunday of Easter, (April 7) 2024

John 20:19-31

*“Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.’”*

Years ago, I was helping cook hamburgers with several other local pastors at a SFA Baptist Student Ministry function designed to welcome freshman students to SFA and to introduce them to the local Baptist churches. While cooking, we were all making small talk when a former SFA student who had just spent a year in seminary came by to visit with us. We all talked about ministry in general, and student ministry in particular. The young man said with the authority that only a first-year seminary student can have, “The essential to having a church with a thriving ministry is to have a family-life center. If a church does not have a gym and a recreation ministry, then they are not going to be able to minister to people like they should.” He went on like this for quite some time even though 80% of the pastors present were not serving in churches which had a family-life center. On and on he went, “a gym is the key to ministry by a church.” Finally, an old pastor of a country church blurted, “It is a wonder that the church in the New Testament was able to do anything!”

What does it take to have church? What does it take to do ministry? What’s the mark of a church alive and thriving?

Look at the church pictured here in chapter twenty of John. John gives us a

picture of a church that had no family life center, no pipe organ, no band, no orchestra, not even an old upright piano. They did not have the latest technological innovations, videos, live streams, or special effects. They had no parking, no advertising, no social media presence, and not even a website. They couldn't make their budget. Their treasurer had betrayed them all and then committed suicide and they did not even have a pastor. The Easter lilies were wilted and the enthusiasm of a week ago was spent. Here is a church at its worst.

It's the disciples of Jesus, gathered after his resurrection.

And look at them! For long, painstaking chapters in John's gospel, Jesus has been preparing his disciples for his departure. He has gone over, then over again, 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.

Like Thomas, they must have missed that Sunday or else somebody wasn't paying attention. So, here they are cowering like frightened rabbits behind closed, bolted, shut doors! Some disciples, some First Church Jerusalem!

They were supposed to be the ones walking confidently out into the world, full of the Holy Spirit, announcing the Easter triumph of God. Look at them hunkered down, cowering, hoping that nobody in town will know that they're there. Here, says Tom Long, is the church at its worst -- "scarred, disheartened, and defensive."

Long asks, "What kind of advertisement might this church put in the Saturday paper to attract members or put on their website? '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.

From my perspective, this church in the second half of John 20, reminds me of the church post-Covid. At the end of our ropes, with little energy to do anything we tend to sit in our own little groups behind closed doors, occasionally peering through the curtains to see if there might be someone or something else threatening out there.

Could this even be called a church? Not only has it no sanctuary, no pulpit, no choir. It has no plan, no mission, no conviction, no nothing. Years ago, a preacher asked megachurch pastor Robert Schuller what was one of the most important requisites for a growing congregation. Schuller is said to have responded, “A good parking lot.”

Not long ago, a poll came to me by email saying what people most looked for in a church. They said, “Friendliness.” Number two was, “Bold, interesting preaching.” Nobody replied, “Locked doors.” “Frightened members.” “Fear.”

Here is a church with absolutely nothing going for it except ...

Except that, when it gathered, the Risen Jesus 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 the one in Houston with a bowling alley and a pool, or this one with a plain and small, multi-purpose building – left to our own devices, we are nothing. We are nothing more than a huddle of confused, timid, cowering failures who got “F’s” in the course called, “Following Jesus.” Left to our own resources, we cannot make it as

a church.

And left on our own, we both run out of energy and get lost and confused about what we need to be doing. Writer Debie Thomas says, on our own without the Resurrected Jesus, “we will also lose the ferocity of our hope, the holy restlessness that leads us to action, the commitment to justice that fuels our prophetic lament, solidarity, resilience, and courage. After all, how will we pray for God’s kingdom to come, and how will we credibly usher in that kingdom in whatever small ways we can here and now, if we don’t believe in its ultimate fulfillment?” (see Debie Thomas, *A Faith of Many Rooms: Inhabiting a More Spacious Christianity*, pp. 100-102).

Sometimes churches like us think we are useful social institutions in and of ourselves. If the Living Christ did not show up, we think that we would still be an organization that makes a difference in Nacogdoches. After all, we get out the vote for elections, we’re inclusive, we feed people, we’re a community in which relationships are important, and on and on.

But John’s gospel cuts through our illusions. If we want to see what happens to a church when the Living God is no longer present, then look here in John 20. Afraid of its own shadow, bedraggled, the church sputters and spurts trying to figure out what is its mission, and stumbles getting going.

The good news is that into the midst of this church at its worst, the risen Christ comes. No scolding, no saying, “You guys are a bunch of incompetent losers. Get your act together!” He does not bail them out or let them slide from being the church. He walks in and says, “Peace be with you.” He shows them his wounds and says, “I’m sending you out into the world.” Then he breathes upon

them and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit,” and tells them part of who they are and what they are to do is practice the giving and receiving of forgiveness (John 20:19-23).

Perhaps this sounds odd to us but to the early readers of the Gospel of John they knew exactly what was going on. They recognized “Peace be with you,” right out of the liturgy. Seeing Jesus’s wounds is a reminder of the Lord’s Supper, while baptism is remembered in the breathing of the Holy Spirit. Being sent out is, of course, about the church’s mission, while forgiveness is central to life within the church as a community of reconciliation and healing (see Tom Long, *Whispering the Lyrics*, p. 92).

In other words, the Living Christ is calling and re-calling them to be the church. He walks into the church at its worst and beckons them to be the church at its best. From fear and despair, Christ calls them to become a bold, healing, community on mission.

Of course, part of this story is that Thomas misses all this. Whenever you miss gathering with the church the way Thomas missed gathering with the church, you miss the Living Jesus.

If I have had one person tell me this, I’ve had dozens tell me, “I love Austin Heights, but I have trouble believing in Jesus.” To be honest, I have days like that, too. Like Thomas, we feel as if we are left out of the experiences with Jesus that others seem to have had. At least Thomas has the courage to show up and say so. He is honest that he has doubts and that he has not experienced the risen Jesus like the others have. Folks, if we can’t be honest about these kinds of questions here, where can we be honest?

Look at what the rest of the disciples do. They believe for Thomas until Thomas can believe for himself. They keep gathering and Thomas shows up, too. Let me relieve some of you of a burden you are carrying around. You don't have to believe in Jesus everyday. We assuredly are not people who live by certitude. We live by faith which means sometimes there is doubt. Sometimes a lot of doubt. But believing and following Jesus is not just about how good or how strong your own personal, individual faith is on any given day. The church believes even when you don't. The church believes for you even when you don't.

William Faulkner was once asked how he would counsel those who read *The Sound and the Fury* once or twice but still didn't get it. "Read it three times," he said.

Sometimes we have to keep at it in order to get it. We keep practicing it. We keep talking, keep showing up in worship and passing the peace, keep reading Scripture, keep praying, keep singing hymns, keep forgiving one another, keep caring for the least of these, and going out in mission, whether we feel like it or not. Faith is practiced repeatedly. Love must be practiced, or it becomes stale and empty. Forgiveness must be something we do, or we forget how. Giving and tithing must be actually done, or it becomes something we put off, feel guilty about but never do, all the while we lose something vital in knowing the Living Christ. Praying and worshiping and believing in God is something we must be trained to do and then practice it over and over or else it becomes empty and brittle. The testimony of the church in John and across the centuries is that if you practice it then the Living Christ will show up.

Theologian Karl Barth said that to say the old line from the Apostles' Creed,

“I believe in the Holy Catholic Church” does not mean we believe in the church. Barth said it means that we believe God is present and at work in and through the church. He wrote, it means that “in this assembly, the work of the Holy Spirit takes place. ... We do not believe in the Church: but we do believe that in this congregation the work of the Holy Spirit becomes an event” (*Dogmatics In Outline*, pp. 142-143).

I don't know about you but that's the kind of event I need. An event in which the Holy Spirit, the Living Christ shows up, perhaps when we least expect it but when we need it the most.

Last year when I had surgery to have my left kidney removed because it had a tumor inside of it, I was in the UT Tyler hospital waiting on the pathology report on exactly what kind of cancer it was, whether they had gotten it all, and if the margins were clear and clean. And though I was glad that I came through the surgery successfully, my anxiety was high as I waited for the test results.

My primary nurse was one of the three who had transferred me into my hospital bed after surgery while I was still recovering and did not know what I was saying. Later, when Jane came into the room, this nurse said with much laughter, “It's good to meet the Silver Fox I've been hearing so much about!”

Over the next couple of days, in talking with me, this nurse would quote Scripture to me, and I'd quote some back to her. Of course, she soon learned I was a pastor and then we would really get going, quoting Bible verses, telling Bible stories, and singing snippets of hymns. And then it hit me, Matthew 18:20 says, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” In other words, there in the hospital room, while I was hooked up to IV's, monitors,

and all the rest, we were having church. The Living Christ was walking into that hospital room just like he had walked into that locked upper room in John 20. It was an event of joy and healing.

Last week on Good Friday, we had our annual Service of Shadows with the reading of the arrest, torture, and crucifixion of Jesus, as candles are extinguished until we end in near darkness. In the meantime, I felt terrible. Holy Week is trying and exhausting anyway and both Jane and I were reaching the end of our ropes in trying to find the accoutrements of Good Friday – the candles and candle holders, scripts, reading light, and so on. None was difficult except nothing seemed to be where it was last year. What made it worse, is both of us had allergies hitting us full force during the most critical week in the life of the church. I did not feel well.

Afterwards, we were driving up the driveway, exhausted, and just having heard once more the story of the church at its worst, and we looked over in the playground and there was Rachel and Valentina with Eric on his way, and Christina with Sage and Rosemary, all gathered around Abel and Ceiba, speaking Spanish and being the church to this grieving father and little girl. Jane and I immediately knew that the church at its worst was transformed into the church at its best because the Living Christ was in that playground turning it into an event of compassion, comfort, and healing.

And finally, yesterday morning here in a near empty sanctuary stood Stan Bobo and Cindy Bertin. Stan has been a member since 1978 and Cindy since 1998. Stan was ordained as a deacon in 1999 and Cindy in 2013. After several years of dating, they had decided it was time to be married. They wanted it quiet – very quiet – hence, you did not know about it ahead of time. So, with only Jane present



as a witness, we gathered right here in front of the Communion Table, and I led them in the Service of Holy Matrimony.

Four of us stood here. But in walked another. The Living Christ joined us turning this into an event of joy and celebration. With Christ present we were the church at its best.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.