

“You show us the path of life.
In your presence there is fullness and joy.” AMEN!

So, I drove into our parking lot
bright and early on Easter morning, last week
and suddenly thought.

Oh my!

Here it is Easter Sunday, and we
do not have a church sign!

Now, I’m a little slow, admittedly.

People had asked if we
had a banner to put up.

I looked for one, to not avail and
then thought, oh well! :-)

People have GPS’s or they know how to find us!

But, then driving into the lot early Easter morning,
I wondered if I’d made a terrible mistake.

What if people wanted to come to St. Stephen
but since we had no sign and
they just passed right by?

Obviously by then, it was too
late to do anything.

Easter was going to be celebrated,
even if it was just the home folk
locked up in here all alone.

Of course, it wasn't the way I'd feared at all!

Plenty of new faces were here.

And plenty of faces we hadn't seen in a while too.

And God's Spirit danced in the reunions and
in the meetings with new friends.

How did it all happen without any
newspaper advertisements or radio spots?

I saw and heard some pretty slick ones.

One big church even had youth from all around
Florida come to Tallahassee and hand out
flyers to come to the local congregation, here.

Some churches, it seems, have it all.

Corporate contacts, huge youth programs,

multi dimensional ways to proclaim
the gospel while other churches
don't really have much at all.

Some have absolutely nothing. (Pause)

Take for example the church mentioned
in this morning's gospel.

Here we have a group of
people huddled together, afraid and
with door securely bolted not really
being a good examples of hospitality
and welcome.

The prayers, the teachings,
the walking on water, the washing of feet,
and miraculous healings has them now
hiding in fear, hoping to not
be identified as one of His followers.

Scholar and theologian Tom Long wrote
that "we see here the church at its worst -
scared, disheartened, and defensive."

If they'd done a newspaper ad what
would they have written?

“Come one and all! You belong here!” Or
“Small church with warm hearts and open doors!”

Yeah, probably not!

More like, “Sorry, closed!” Or
“We are the church that hides.”

This first church gathering, up in the hidden room,
had no plan, no program, no hope,
no youth group, no multi-faceted
audio/visual technology, and...

You guessed it... no sign.

They were a group of people scared to death
and locked in a room.

It was pretty low point...
but they did have one thing.

Just one thing... but it was the
most important....they had the risen Christ.

“Alleluia! Christ is risen!
(Christ is risen, indeed. Alleluia!)

That’s the main point of the story, don’t you think?!

Despite our plans or lack thereof,
abilities or disabilities,
if you have the risen Christ then you
have all you need.

Now, don't get me wrong!

We need to plan and
be strategic about mission and
work on open communication and
community care and be bold in outreach...

but we could have all of that and
not have the Risen Christ, too. (Pause)

I remember having this important teaching
slap me in the face in seminary.

I had just finished an internship experience at
a large Lutheran Church in an affluent suburb
of Harrisburg, PA.

Trinity Lutheran has it all.

Multi-pastoral leadership and
an organized office staff,
including an office manager!

They have a talented praise band,

three services on Sunday,
one on Saturday night, and
a prayer service on Friday's.

Large youth group and huge Tuesday morning
Bible Study with food and fellowship.

No doubt that God is active there!

So, I'm back on campus after the internship there
and talking to a professor about the "tragedies"
of these small Lutheran congregations,

that are struggling and sometimes they're
like a block away from each other.

"Why don't they merge?" I judged.

They could join together and be stronger,
I had all their problems figured out! :-)

And this professor gently, but firmly,
raised his voice to me and said,

"Who are you to say God isn't in
the small congregations that you feel
are so broken!" :-0

I think that was all I could do! :-0

Even in fear, even in small,
even in simple rooms... the Risen Christ
can be present. (Pause)

And do miraculous things.

This gospel on the second Sunday of Easter
is often focused on Thomas, but really
it shouldn't be, should it?

At least not the judgmental way
Thomas is often portrayed.

It's a resurrection text and it's focus is on
what the Risen Christ can accomplish.

Even through scared people locked in seclusion.
even through people that are absent, and
even when we ask for proof of Jesus...

Because we want/need to have an experience
with the Risen Christ, too.

I know there are times when I pray for proof!

We also want to be productive and
there's something very affirming to be connected
to a church that does a lot of stuff.

We Christians love to think of ourselves
as useful, social institutions.

No one says it out loud, but there's an attitude or
an air of assurance that communicates that
God is worshipped here, but if God were
to depart...

the place would still go on because
it's doing so much "good" in the community.

But, then we are no longer a place
where the Risen Christ dwells.

This scared group of disciples...
even after Mary's announcement of seeing
the Risen Lord and the race to

the empty tomb by Peter and the disciple
whom Jesus loved... even after that...
we see what the church can be when
it is deprived of Holy Presence.

It's scared and peeking out the windows;
behind locked doors and there's a hollow feeling.

But it is also in the hollowness of busy congregations
that frantically do so much, in the attempt

to fill their Risen Christ void.

Who's to say the Risen Christ cannot show up
in the most unlikely of places and
the most unexpected situations?

If Easter was a lesson about the way
fear and joy walk together then today is
a recognition that fear and peace
go hand in hand, too.

(Introduce Karen Duncan from IRC)

As the Risen Christ came into their presence
and brought peace and assured them of
God's presence... everything changed!

Without peace and presence there is
cowering fear.

With Christ there is praise, witness,
peace sharing, bold mission and
a healing community.

Jesus offers this to us as he did to Thomas.

Touch my hands, put your hand in my side...
and believe.

AMEN!