

“So That We Might Believe” 4-3-16 CHC

Huddled together, anxious and fearful, feeling threatened. That is a picture of Jesus’ followers after his death. The hopes and dreams energizing and empowering them for the past three years have turned to disappointment. The vision drawing them to give up their fishing nets, tax collecting offices, and other life vocations is gone.

Have you ever been left holding the bag of a broken dream? Loss and disappointment diminish energy and motivation. My first ordained call to the First Presbyterian Church in Helena, Montana left me in such a state. Excited to begin ministry, lured by a church and an established pastor to join him in ministry, ready to learn and be mentored, within months I found myself disillusioned. Six months later the pastor was released due to moral indiscretions.

The Presbytery Executive sat me down and asked me to leave that call and take on a church in a remote, isolated part of Montana. He did not believe that my inexperience could handle a 700 membership church. I looked him in the eye and said no. God called me here. Major adjustments were under construction. I felt like Joseph in the pit, the Israelites in the wilderness, Mary weeping at Jesus’ tomb, and the disciples behind locked doors in that upper room. My first call and I was already in transition. What would God do next? Where might God lead?

Richard Rohr calls this being in “liminal space”. This is a particular place in life where we dislike being, but where God is always working and leading. It is that position in life where we are moving from one place or state of being to another. Liminal space induces some form of inner crisis. We have arrived at what appears as a tried and true place, but all of a sudden it is no longer there. What will replace it is still out there somewhere. Is something wonderful and fresh forthcoming? Who knows? As one person observes, “It is a time for intimate emotions and dangerous questions” (Ruth Barton, eReflections, The Transforming Center).

The disciples are in liminal space. Garrison Keillor says that “Easter is that time of year when Christians ask themselves two questions. Do I really believe all this stuff? And if so, why do I live this way?” (‘Christian Century’ March 16th, 2016, p.23).

Sometimes we get stuck in this space and can’t find a way forward with God. Things get in the way; church culture, institutional wounds, things people say or do inconsistent with a profession of faith, a life crisis blamed on God, or simply being passed over, unrecognized.

While the disciples are pondering if they believe all that is happening, questioning their future, Jesus drops in. He comes and stands among them and says, “Peace be with you”. He shows them his hands and side and says a second time, “Peace be with you”. Then Jesus gives them a command.” As the Father has sent me, so I send you”. Then he breathes on them and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained”.

Have you ever had Jesus' drop in' while you were experiencing a questioning, confusing, and uncertain time in your life? Out of confusion clarity and direction arises. You know what you are supposed to do. You can move forward with a new and strong sense of purpose.

James Martin recently wrote a featured article in the Wall Street Journal March 26th, 2016. It was entitled 'The Challenge of Easter'. He asks why Easter has stubbornly resisted the commercialization and commodification that swallows up the celebration of Christmas. He writes that it is because of Easter's subversive message: Christ is risen. If Jesus rose from the dead, and you believe that, than what Jesus says demands a response. "The Easter message is radical, subversive, and life-changing. It means that nothing is impossible with God. Love triumphs over hatred. Hope triumphs over despair. And that suffering is not the last word". Then Martin adds, "And if he is Lord, and if you're a Christian, then what he says has a claim on you. His teachings are invitations, to be sure, but they are also commands" (Wall Street Journal, March 26th, 2016).

"As the Father has sent me, so I send you". Jesus may give the command, but he also extends the power to fulfill it.

Jesus needs the church and we need Jesus. In an article focusing on ways to grow church attendance, Carey Nieuwhof says that you grow your church and advance your mission by being active partners together in the missions God leads us to engage. He observes that too many North American Christians have thought that sitting passively in the back row to get fed is what's required, or that the main goal of finding a church is to attend one you 'like'. The goal, rather, is to listen to the voice of Jesus and find a mission where God calls, serve in it and live it out. The healthiest people are not those who simply attend bible study groups, come to worship on and off, take a class, and the like, but who serve in the mission and love the mission.

Our Christ Care groups and all the ministries of the church are designed to do just that. Each group is to be about four things: Worship, Biblical Equipping, Care and Support through prayer, sharing and fellowship, and Mission. We engage Christ's mission in ESL, our Cuba partnership with Luyano in Havana, the Sangla Hill girls' school in Lahore, Pakistan, our partnerships with local agencies, Mission Possible, active involvement with our missionaries, support of our immigrant population, and so on. You can identify many more that you are involved in. All of these we engage as a result of the belief that this is what Christ is sending us to do. The church isn't a cruise ship, but Christ's body doing his work in the world.

When Jesus extends authority to forgive and retain sins, he is not transferring God's authority to the church, but sending us into the world with Christ's Spirit of love and grace. The heart of our relationship with the world is centered in John 3:16-17; "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him".

And so the ministry God sent Jesus into the world to do continues. But now that ministry is extended to us, the church, the body of Christ. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you". We are his heart, spirit, and work of justice and love among the people of this world. Divine love is always other directed,

focused on the other person rather than self. Jesus sends us on a mission of love, not condemnation and judgment.

Of course, then as now, not everyone buys in to this call. Thomas is somewhere else when Jesus appears to the group, and now, hearing testimony of his resurrected appearance, says, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe".

Fair enough. A week later, Thomas reunited with the disciples, the doors once again shut, Jesus appears. "Peace be with you". Knowing full well Thomas' heart, as well as yours and mine this morning, Jesus says, "Put your finger and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe". Jesus is in control even if we aren't.

Walter Percy, the novelist, writes, "Death in this century is not the death people die, but the death people live". Jesus calls and empowers us to live, not as spectators but as participants in his mission (Homiletics, March-April, 2016, p.50).

What Thomas did right was to stay in the conversation with Jesus. Unquestioning faith is no faith. Outside the Church of All Nations in the Garden of Gethsemane, a sign reads, "Please, no explanations in the church". My mother, who was always a curious and questioning woman, began asking our Lutheran pastor when she was in her 30's, questions about things in the bible and faith. She related to me his response which simply stated was, "Don't ask questions. I'm trained to tell you what is in the bible. Just come to church on Sunday". Essentially he said, "The church is no place for questions, young lady" ('Christian Century', Shawnthea Monroe, p.23).

Jesus doesn't buy this attitude. He invites us to engage. Years ago theologian Paul Tillich wrote a book that influenced me, "Dynamics of Faith". He made the point that we all have a faith in something, and that doubt is an inescapable and essential part of faith. Faith, he writes, is what happens when a finite being, like you and me, is "grasped by and turned to the infinite" (CC, p.23). An unquestioning faith is no faith at all, because it shows a lack of engagement with God. We find our way to God through the questions and as we honestly wrestle with the mystery of God's revelation.

Thomas connects enough to be able to move forward. Jesus tells him that those who have not seen, but believe, are especially blessed. This isn't a narrative about surviving death. Jesus' resurrection represents a whole new way of understanding, thinking, and living. We are invited into a totally new mode of being.

Martin is right when he writes about Easter's subversive claim. The resurrected Lord demands a response, inviting me into his love, life, and mission. As we submit to him he breathes his Spirit into us and his ministry becomes ours, empowered by his life of love and service. The good news is that there is a greater power at work in the universe than we could ever imagine, and it is good.

And if, indeed, Christ is risen, how am I being challenged to believe and live my life differently?

