

EASTER... AGAIN!

John 20:19-31

April 24, 2022

It was the first day of the week. In other words, it was the same day that the women had awoken early to see the tomb where Jesus' body was laid. It was the first day of the week, which means it was the same day that an earthquake had rolled the stone away from the tomb. It was the first day of the week, the same day that a shining messenger from God had delivered the news: He is not here; he has risen. It was the first day of the week, which means it was the day of resurrection, the day when God's definitive pronouncement of life had silenced all the powers of sin and death.

It was the first day of the week. And where are the disciples? Huddled behind locked doors, probably the very same room where they had celebrated the Passover meal three nights before. They are gathered in that same room, that same room where Jesus had knelt and washed their feet. That same room, the room where he had broken the bread and poured the cup. That same room where he had predicted that even his disciples would desert him, and by evening the very next day, those disciples had done just that. The same disciples who had promised to follow Jesus to the end, no matter what that end meant. They were now spending Easter evening behind locked doors, at a comfortably safe distance from the hill on which their leader was executed and the tomb where his body was laid to rest.

The gospel writer John tells us the reason for their covert gathering. It is fear. The disciples were filled with fear, no doubt afraid that the same fate that Jesus met might be awaiting them around the next corner. So, they locked themselves in a room, and here they are. It's the first day of the week, and their meeting is not in worship, but in terror, as they listen

nervously for every step on the staircase and every knock at the door.

And what about us? Only seven days ago (to me it seems like longer), we celebrated Easter. We stood with the stunned women who came early to the tomb, who became the very first witnesses to the resurrection, who were overcome with joy, who were the first preachers of the Gospel. And our church was as full as our hearts as we experienced the surprise of Easter—Easter that changes everything.

Or does it?

This week, in the upper room, we encounter a group of disciples who have not yet heard those words of life as a word about them, as a word spoken to them. And so, if last week was a picture of the church at its best, on fire with good news, set to proclaim the resurrection to the world despite all opposition, filled to overflowing with the joy and possibility of it all, this week offers us a different scene altogether. Easter not at the empty tomb, but hunkered down, turned inward, stuck in Friday afternoon gloom.

But it is not Friday afternoon. Remember? It's the *first* day of the week. It is the only clue that the gospel writer gives us readers. It is the first day of the week. He says it at the outset of the story so that we know it is resurrection day. For now these disciples themselves must be raised.

Listen to what happens in the room. Jesus appears, no sound of a footstep on the staircase, no knock at the door. He appears, and he greets the disciples, "Peace be with you." Then he does something that probably seems quite odd, especially in a pandemic age. Jesus breathes on his disciples, intentionally.

Breath—the source of life and strength. Breath—a symbol for the Spirit of God in the Hebrew scriptures and for the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. Breath. In the ancient Early Church, before a new convert was baptized, the priest would breathe on that person as a sign of the new life that they had received, that they were beginning.¹ I've asked some parents of infants whether I can breathe on their child when I baptize them, and I have yet to have anyone agree. It's a powerful symbol. Jesus breathes fresh air on the disciples who had been hidden in fear, and in so doing, he gives them new life. He transforms them, and then he sends them. Just as he himself was sent, he sends them, and it's Easter all over again.

The Gospel of John will not let us forget that the church itself must be raised from death. That's why even the disciple we call "doubting Thomas" has a confession of faith to boldly share this week. "My Lord and my God," he says. This week, we celebrate the rebirth of a group of fearful disciples and the birth of the church on the first day of the week. And today we begin a journey, a journey of Easter that asks us to follow in their footsteps faithfully.

This week, we get to hear what for me is the most hopeful of all Jesus' beatitudes. *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.* That's you. That's me. It's the Church of Jesus Christ, raised up on the first day of the week. Blessed are we who have found faith without sight.

Can the Church survive? It's not a new question, but I do hear it more and more these days as congregations struggle with decline and decay, aging and irrelevance, who seek more sustainable models of ministry. That's a term I hear and that often means more modest hopes, diminished expectations—sustainable models of ministry. Can the Church survive? Seminaries devote entire degree programs to the study of church revitalization and church growth, successful evangelism techniques. Churches hire consultants who work on congregational image makeovers. Can the Church survive? Thousands of

books have been written that champion one strategy or another for creating healthier, happier church communities, all rooted in that fearful question: Can the Church survive?

Can the Church survive? The question first surfaced on day one. It's Easter evening. Jesus is raised and alive, but his followers are fearful and shut down. Can the Church survive? Not like this. Locked doors make it very difficult to invite others in, or perhaps more importantly, to get ourselves out. Fear won't inspire faith, nor will the kind of self-pity and shame that characterize this gathering. Can the Church survive? Not like this. This is no way to have church!

Robert Schuller, the founding pastor of the Crystal Cathedral in southern California was once asked in an interview what made for a growing church, a successful church, a church that looked like his church. His answer was: good parking. While some of you who parked in the far north lot a mile away last Sunday might be inclined to agree with Schuller, I would suggest that there has to be more to it than that, something immeasurable and unquantifiable, something beyond reason, strategy, ratio, or metric. Something beyond sustainable models of ministry.

How about this? The presence of the risen Christ. That is what it took for these fearful, locked-up disciples to become the church on fire. That's what it will take for us as well. I want to be clear. The presence of the living Christ is the only assurance of the Church's survival. But it is *more* than that. Survival is an anemic aspiration for the movement of Christ's community, sent as God sent Jesus. If Jesus is alive, then our aim must be more than continued existence. *Let's try to be around in a couple more decades. I know, the God of the universe has become enfleshed among us and overcome death...So, let's carefully budget to make it a few more years!* Shame on us if we choose that kind of fearful thinking. Shame on us if we lock the doors and keep the news to ourselves. Shame on us if Jesus has to resort to walking through doors to make it into our hearts.

Whenever you invite your friends and neighbors, your colleagues and classmates, to join you and come to Second—and I know you do invite them—I am sure that you mention what a welcoming community of faith this is. And I bet you mention the outstanding programs we offer. Maybe you mention the moving worship service or the opportunities we offer to serve the community. And I am sure that you talk about all the wonderful friends you have made here and the hopeful future that lies ahead of us. But, as you share your story, our story, I hope above all that you tell others that Jesus Christ is alive at Second Presbyterian Church—because without that, no other word of testimony matters—that this is a church whose doors are not locked tight but blown open by the power of the Holy Spirit. I hope you say that at Second Church, we proclaim Easter again and again and again.

Not too long ago, I found myself in a small church. It's not too far away from here. As I walked through that church building, I thought to myself, "This place is pitiful." The paint on the walls was cracked and peeling; the carpet looked ragged, old, and worn. Walking through the hall, I ran into the pastor and struck up a conversation. He explained that the size of the congregation has consistently dwindled over the past couple of decades, and now only a few people remain. There is no choir, but an organist comes twice a month to play during the services. The other two Sundays, they gather in a circle where the pews once were at the front of the sanctuary for a simple prayer service. "What keeps a church like this going?" I asked. The pastor pointed to a greeting card tacked to the bulletin board in front of us. Here's what it said:

"I cannot begin to thank the members of this congregation for all the love and support you have given me over these past months. When Charles got sick, you all were there with food and cards and flowers and laughter and the prayer that I needed so badly. As things turned worse, you never wavered. You never left me. I don't know what I would do without this church. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for showing me the love of Jesus."

Right there in the darkened hallway that smelled like mildew, I saw it. The presence of the risen Christ.

Yes, the Holy Spirit slips in through the cracks. Jesus will walk through a locked door. The church comes to life with the power of resurrection. The good news of the Gospel is this: It did not stop outside the tomb on Easter morning. Because Jesus Christ is alive, the church can be as well, no longer living in fear and isolation, huddled behind locked doors. Instead, we open wide the doors of the church and let the Spirit of God blow through.

I believe with all my heart that it is time for us to get serious about this work as a community of faith. That we are in a unique moment of opportunity and possibility. That by God's grace, we have been called by the Spirit to such a time as this. But I also believe this: This moment will not last forever. That faithfulness demands we respond to God's call, not next week, next season, next year, or with the next strategic plan, but *right now*.

As I approach the fourth anniversary of my time at Second, my mind keeps going back to a conversation I had in my first few weeks with a member of this church who has been a leader in our city and state, and he told me something that has remained in my heart and mind ever since. He said, "Second Presbyterian Church has always thrived when it is externally focused. Our best eras have been those when the Church calls us to take our faith outside the doors of the sanctuary." And Dave was right about Second, but his statement is true for the whole Christian community, all of Jesus' disciples. We thrive, the church thrives, when we are externally focused. I promise, this focus will stretch us, sometimes in uncomfortable ways. This call will ask much of us, pushing us in new ways of being community, new ways of thinking, speaking, living. By God's grace, it will! Because this stretching is the clearest sign of growth I know. Not sustainable models that keep us around. This afternoon, community leaders and people of faith will gather to hear how we can best support those in our city

whose housing is inadequate or at risk. The source of this summit was not an agenda on the issue of tenants' rights but the real suffering of our neighbors. It occurs to me that if we locked ourselves away in huddled fear, we could never hear the cries of those whom God has given us as fellow travelers. It occurs to me that if we had not experienced the presence of the risen Christ, we might not know that they belong to us, and we to them. It occurs to me that if our focus was on internal survival, we might not believe the truth that the Church exists to give itself away in love to a world in need. But we heard those cries, and we know who they are. We believe the Church is God's way of continuing the work of the Gospel. And so, we'll gather, and we'll seek a faithful path forward. And, yes, we will gather on the first day of the week. Just right.

Yesterday afternoon our five-year-old son, Ben, found half a plastic Easter egg in the backyard. Thank God it was a leftover that had survived the first grass cutting of the year. I was standing on the other side of the yard, and Ben picked it up and shouted across the lawn, "Dad, look!"

"What is it, Son?"

"It's still Easter!"

You got it, Ben. Easter comes every time the people of God choose to live into the call of the risen Christ. And we already have all we need, for Christ is risen, and so are we. Amen.

¹ Thanks to Cam Murchison, former Dean of the Faculty at Columbia Seminary and my teacher in a class on Baptism and Evangelical Calling, who shared this fact with me.