

Resurrection in the Plural
Text: John 20:19-31
The Reverend Christopher A. Henry
Morningside Presbyterian Church
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*When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."
John 20:22*

It was the first day of the week, the same day that the women had awoken early to visit the tomb where Jesus' body was laid. The same day that the earthquake had rolled the stone away from the tomb. The same day that an angel had delivered the good news: he is not here, he has risen. It was the first day of the week, 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, John tells us, and where are the disciples? Huddled behind locked doors, most likely in the same room where they had celebrated the Passover meal only three nights before. They are gathered in the room where Jesus had stooped down to wash their feet and had predicted that they would all desert him. By evening on the first day of the week, they had. The same disciples who had promised to follow Jesus to the end, no matter what that meant, were now spending Easter evening behind locked doors, a safe distance from the hill on which their leader was executed.

The reason for their clandestine gathering was fear. John tells us that the disciples were afraid, afraid that their turn might be next. So they locked themselves in a room. Here they are, on the first day of the week, meeting in terror, listening fearfully for every step on the staircase and for every knock at the door.

Just last week, we celebrated the resurrection with the stunned women who came early to the tomb, who became the first witnesses to the resurrection, the first preachers of the gospel. Last week, we saw the church at its best. Not just because this sanctuary was full and the music was glorious enough to raise the dead, but also because we heard the words that are the heart of our faith. Do not be afraid, the angel told the women...he is not here, for he has been raised

This week, in the upper room, we encounter a group of disciples who have not yet heard those words of life. If last week was a picture of the church at its best, on fire with good news and set to proclaim resurrection to the world, this week seems to be a picture of the church at its worst. No large crowd. No spirited choir. No silver-tongued preacher. While the women run off to Galilee to tell the world that Jesus has risen from the dead, these disciples sit hunkered down in

the upper room. They are stuck in Friday afternoon gloom. But it is the *first* day of the week.

This is the only clue that the gospel writer gives us readers. It is the first day of the week, the day of resurrection.

Only one event could transform these knock-kneed, frightened disciples into the pillars on which the church would be built. Only one: an appearance of the Risen Christ. This, of course, is precisely what happens. But to come to them, he must break through the locked doors and fearful hearts of the disciples.

They too must be resurrected. Notice again what happens in the upper room. Jesus appears and first greets the disciples, "Peace be with you. Then he does something that seems quite odd. Jesus breathes on the disciples. Breath. The source of life and strength. Also a symbol for the Holy Spirit. In the ancient Early Church, before someone was baptized the Priest would breathe on the person, as a sign of the new life that they had received.ⁱ When Jesus breathes on the disciples who had been locked in the upper room out of fear of the unknown, he gives them new life. He transforms them. He....resurrects them.

Last week we celebrated the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, that is, resurrection in the singular. This week, the Gospel of John will not let us forget that the church itself has been raised from death. This week, we celebrate resurrection in the plural. This week, we celebrate the rebirth of a group of disciples and the birth of the church on the first day of the week.

What makes a church successful? It is a question that I am hearing and reading more and more these days. Seminaries devote entire degree programs to the study of church growth models and successful evangelism techniques. Churches hire consultants who work on congregational image makeovers. Hundreds of books have appeared that champion one strategy or another for creating a healthier, happier, church community.

What makes a church successful?

Certainly the disciples did not have it right-- locked doors make it very difficult to invite others in or to reach out to the community through acts of love and justice. Fear won't inspire faith, nor will the kind of self-pity and shame that characterize this upper room gathering. This is no way to have church!

Robert Schuller, the founding pastor of the Crystal Cathedral in Southern California was once asked what made for a growing church. His answer: good parking. While some of you who parked a mile away last Sunday might be inclined to agree, there has to be more to it than that.

This week, we see embodied the answer. What makes a church successful?

An intrusion of the living Christ. That is what it took for fearful locked-up disciples to become the church on fire. That is what it takes for us as well. The presence of the living Christ is the only assurance of success for the church.

Over the past couple of weeks, we have been inundated with news and opinions about Barack Obama's pastor, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright. One of the most common questions among many in the media has been, "if Obama did not agree with his pastor's positions and statements, why didn't he leave the church?" The problem with this question is that it assumes an understanding of the church as a kind of social club for likeminded individuals. Nothing could be further from the truth! What brings us together is not a common political party or position on any one issue, what unites us is not the perspective that comes from the person in the pulpit on Sunday. As one of you put it this week, "if I had to agree with everything you preachers say in order to go to church, I'd never come!" No, what unites us in spite of our many differences is the common call to live as a resurrected community. To speak the truth in love. To proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ in word and deed. You are here, in the deepest sense, because God has called you here.ⁱⁱ

When you invite your friends and neighbors to come and join you at Morningside, and I know you do, I am sure that you mention the beautiful sanctuary, the outstanding choir, the moving worship service, the opportunities to serve the community. I am sure that you talk about the wonderful congregation and its compassion, friendliness, and deep commitment to inclusion. But, as you share our story, I hope above all that you tell others that Jesus Christ is alive at Morningside Presbyterian, that this is a church whose doors are blown wide open by the power of the Holy Spirit. That at Morningside, we proclaim resurrection, in the plural.

Not too long ago, I found myself in a small Methodist Church not too far away from here. As I walked through the building, I thought to myself, "this place is pitiful." The paint on the walls was cracked and peeling, the carpet looked old and worn. I ran into the pastor. He explained that the size of the congregation has dwindled over the past couple of decades, now only a few people remain. There is no choir, and the organist only comes twice a month to play during the services. "What keeps a church like this going?" I asked. He pointed to a card tacked to the he bulletin board in front of us:

"I cannot begin to thank the members of this congregation for all of the love and support over the past months. When Charles got sick, you all were there with food and cards and flowers and laughter that I needed so badly. As things turned worse, you never wavered. 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 Christ."

Something had happened in that church. Something that cannot be measured or quantified. The Holy Spirit slipped in through the crack. The Risen Christ walked through a locked door. And that church was alive with the power of resurrection.

The good news of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is this: it did not stop outside the tomb on Easter morning—Christ is alive, and because of this the church can be as well. Because of the resurrection, we must no longer live in fear and isolation, huddled behind locked doors. Instead, we must open wide the doors of the church and let the Spirit of God blow through. Jesus, after greeting the disciples and breathing the Spirit upon them, sends the disciples out into the world. Resurrected, brought to new life and vitality, these disciples are not given a moment to catch the breath they have just received. They are sent into a world full of violence and pain and called to be makers of peace. They are sent into a world full of injustice and oppression and called to proclaim the righteousness of God. They are sent into a world that is overwhelmed by lies, and they are to share gospel truth. They are sent into a world held captive by the power of sin and they are called to proclaim the freedom of the children of God. These disciples, like you and I, are sent into the world, full of resurrection power.

I close with one of my favorite resurrection storiesⁱⁱⁱ—of a small Lutheran Church in the South Bronx, one of the most impoverished neighborhoods in the nation, and its new pastor, Reverend Heidi Neumark. The first Sunday she was at this church she said, “I knew what I had gotten into when I looked into the altar and down beneath the altar side by side was a box of communion wafers and a box of rat poison.” The leaders of the congregation, the officers, are former prostitutes, drug addicts, undocumented immigrants, homeless people, and the unemployed. As Paul said about the Corinthians, “not many wise, not many noble among them”.

Several years ago, this congregation decided in Holy Week that they were going to act out in their neighborhood the whole Easter story from Palm Sunday to the Resurrection. They scraped some money together and they rented a donkey, they persuaded a young man in the congregation to play the part of Jesus and they marched around their city block, the burnt out tenements and deserted storefronts, following Jesus and the donkey and shouting “Hosanna, Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!!” When the parade got back around to the front of the church, it encountered a street protest already taking place, and the Palm Sunday parade and the street cries blended together and the whole group poured into the church. In the church they followed the script; Jesus was arrested unfairly, tried, convicted and executed unjustly. A familiar story in the South Bronx. And then the women, following the script, came back from the tomb, with cries of joy and amazement. It was empty. An angel had said, “He is risen!”. And the disciples followed the script, “No, no it is an idle tale.” But then the script called for three members of the congregation to stand up and say, “I know he is alive, he’s alive in me!”

The first was Angie, abused by her father, she had drifted into alcoholism, HIV positive, down on the street she found her way into a Bible study in the church, felt the embrace of the congregation, began to grow in faith, and find some hope. Now she's a student at the Lutheran Seminary in Philadelphia and she stood and said, "I know he is alive, he's alive in me." Another stood, and then the third, "I know he is alive, he's alive in me" and then that part of the script was over and they were moving on. But they couldn't stop it. People began stepping forward and saying spontaneously, "I know he is alive too, he's alive in me."

It was resurrection, in the plural. It was joy without barriers or borders. It was the love of Jesus Christ let loose on the world. It was Easter, again and again and again.

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

ⁱⁱ Thanks to my good friend Adam Copeland, who helped me think through these reflections on his blog, adamjcopeland.com.

ⁱⁱⁱ I first heard this story from Thomas Long, at Duke University Chapel.