

Rev. Lisa Schrott
April 16, 2023
John 20:19-22
Sent

Last Sunday our scripture passage ended with these words, “Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord,” and she told them that he had said these things to her.” But in the Gospel of John, this was not the end of the story ... rather just the beginning. On this second Sunday in Eastertide we continue the story of the risen Christ in John chapter 20, verses 19-22.

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors were locked where the disciples were, for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

One of my favorite poems is *A Christmas Oratorio* by W.H. Auden

Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree,
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes --
Some have got broken -- and carrying them up to the attic.
The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt,
And the children got ready for school. There are enough
Left-overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week --
Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot,
Stayed up so late, attempted -- quite unsuccessfully --
To love all of our relatives, and in general
Grossly overestimated our powers. Once again
As in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed
To do more than entertain it as an agreeable
Possibility, once again we have sent Him away,
Begging though to remain His disobedient servant,
The promising child who cannot keep His word for long.¹

You might be thinking to yourself – why in the world is Lisa reading us a poem entitled *A Christmas Oratorio* today? It’s been 80 degrees this week - Christmas is long gone. Don’t worry – I didn’t hit my head and get amnesia – although that would make for a great movie plot – kind of a *Groundhog Day* redux. Or maybe a Hallmark special - the pastor stuck in a

¹ W.H. Auden. *A Christmas Oratorio*. Originally published in *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*. Random House, 1944. Found online at <https://www.thepoetryhour.com/poems/for-the-time-being-a-christmas-oratorio>

perpetual Christmas loop. No – I like this poem because this week has had that kind of feel to it – that after Christmas feel - the tulips and lilies still blooming, but beginning to show signs that their days are numbered.

But the part that rings the most true to me is this line “...and in general grossly overestimated our powers. Once again As in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed To do more than entertain it as an agreeable Possibility.”

This is how the Sunday after Easter sometimes feels. Even though we call it the Second Sunday of Eastertide, wear our white stoles, enjoy the Easter flowers that remain, and sing resurrection themed music, it can too often feel like we are done. The Lord is Risen. He is risen indeed. Ok what's next.. a couple of weeks to Memorial Day and poof it is summer. So what is one to do on the Sunday after Easter? I think it is instructive to look back at the disciples and also to the early church.

Mary Magdalene is credited by many scholars as being the bible's first Christian preacher. She was also the first evangelist. Mary Magdalene saw and believed and announced to the disciples the Good News that she had seen the Lord – that the Lord was risen. The resurrection was God's gift – God's work, but it was in Mary Magdalene's hands to share the news. And just in case the disciples were not sure that it was now in their hands to share this news (because you know that the disciples don't always get it the first time), Jesus appeared to them later that night and said “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” I am sending you. Jesus' death was not the last word – not for Jesus and not for the disciples. There is still work to be done.

I can imagine them – sitting together – huddled by an evening fire. Confused by the empty tomb Peter saw and by Mary Magdalene's words– after all they saw Jesus die on the cross. They were afraid – probably terrified for their lives -- thinking out loud.. if the authorities come and ask us questions about the empty tomb, what are we going to say? Will they believe us when we say that we did not take his body? I'm guessing there was a lot of anxiety in the room about what was next – debates about how long to stay holed up; whether going back to their homes would put their families in danger; whether they should try being fishermen someplace else where they could be a bit more anonymous than in Jerusalem or Galilee.

I love that the first thing Jesus says recognizes their inner state of turmoil. He doesn't lecture them about their lack of trust or faith – sitting with the doors locked in fear, waiting for something else bad to happen. Jesus says “Peace be with you.” On the surface that sounds a bit casual and lacking the gravity of the moment – after all the last time he spoke to them was from the cross saying: “It is finished,” before he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

But “peace be with you” is more than a just a “hi how’s it going greeting.” One Greek lectionary² defines this peace as a state of freedom from anxiety, inner turmoil and worry. Another defines the term “peace” in this passage as meaning “the tranquil state of a soul assured of its salvation through Christ, and so fearing nothing from God and content with its earthly lot.”³ That’s a lot to pack in one word! I suspect that for the disciples it was going to take quite a bit to move them into a tranquil state of soul.

Jesus follows this greeting of assurance with a statement of intent and a command. As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. There is no question here, no ambiguity. Jesus was sent by God the Father into the world and now Jesus is sending the disciples into the world. And the command that Jesus gives... “Receive the Holy Spirit.” Again, no wiggle room here – no, well maybe the Holy Spirit will pop in and visit now and again; no in case you are not sure what to do, consult the Holy Spirit. Jesus makes it clear to the disciples – the Holy Spirit is here and present and it is their job to receive it. The Holy Spirit will empower them to face the days and weeks ahead. It will empower them to gather new disciples and form the beginnings of what we now know as the church, what we celebrate on Pentecost Sunday.

God prepared us in advance to be sent out to share the good news. To be evangelists like Mary Magdalene and like the first disciples. When we hear the word “evangelist,” our brains – or at least my brain – often goes to the prototypical person on the street corner, yelling to repent, that the Lord is coming. Is that the only way to be an evangelist?

I don’t think I am revealing state secrets when I say that the PC(USA), on the whole, is not known as an evangelistic denomination. And yet we do have a message to share to the world. We have a message of good news – a message of hope – a message of reconciliation and a message that love defeats death. Recently the PC(USA) published an evangelism guide: *8 Habits of Evangelism*. The Preamble, written by the Rev. Ray Jones, Director of Theology, Formation & Evangelism for the PC(USA), opens with these words:

“It is interesting to me that evangelism, the very word that means to declare good news and glad tidings, has become a dirty word. When an essential ministry of the church is distorted by religious zealots and used to judge others to determine who is “in” and who is “out” of the community of faith, the message of glad tidings is turned into judgment and exclusion— a dirty word. The proclamation of good news is no longer perceived as news worth sharing or hearing.”

Jones encourages us to redefine evangelism, saying,

² Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida *Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains, 2nd Edition*; Accessed through Accordance Bible Software 13.3.2., Oaktree Software, October 2021 update.

³ Joseph Henry Thayer, D.D. *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. Accessed through Accordance Bible Software 13.3.2., Oaktree Software, October 2021 update.

“If evangelism is simply a tool to bring more people into our churches, evangelism is not good news. Evangelism is not good news when it is used to focus on one aspect of the faith, like eternal life. Separated from justice, evangelism is bad news. The gospel is meant to bring both hope and restoration to the world. The prophet Isaiah paints a compelling picture with words of those who bring a message of good news: How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’ (Isaiah 52:7, NIV)”⁴

Indeed – this is the promise of the empty tomb and the resurrected Christ. Our God reigns. Those words echoed throughout our sanctuary last Sunday as the Hallelujah chorus was sung ... “And He shall reign forever and ever.” And this our great hope in the season of Easter. We live in a world where we are surrounded with reasons not to have hope – but yet we are called to be a people of hope. God gives us the gift of hope and it is in our hands to share it. Like the disciples, we are “sent” to share this news – especially in the world we live in today. As Rev. Jones shares,

As the church is struggling with loss of influence, declining membership and the reduction of the gospel, we are called to engage again the gospel message of good news in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. At the end of Christendom, we are called to move from an attitude of “what the church can do for me” to a posture of bearing witness to the gospel through a community committed to living the new life of Christ.

Evangelism in the 21st century North American context must be experienced as a journey of going deeper in our faith, relationships around us and God’s mission of rescue and reconciliation. This journey of faith engages formation habits that change our lives and the world around us.

We are called to go deeper in our faith – go deeper in our relationship to God – go deeper in our relationships with each other – go deeper as agents of reconciliation. We are called to do this in word and in action. And I am grateful for the ways we are living into this call here at the Presbyterian Church of Okemos. From the use of our facility by community groups to the grocery cart in Fellowship Hall collecting items for the food pantry and the advocacy work of the gun violence task force, we are evangelists. This morning our handbell choir is at North Westminster Presbyterian Church ringing the good news of Christ’s resurrection with a beloved sister congregation who no longer has an active handbell choir. This is evangelism. This morning our children are learning what it means to be loved for who they are right now.

⁴ Ray L. Jones, III *Preamble to the 8 Habits of Evangelism*. Presbyterian Mission Agency, Louisville, KY
<https://8habits.org/preamble/>

This is evangelism. This afternoon we will dedicate our solar panel array – even if the rain will move us indoors - a witness to our call to be stewards of creation. A witness to our recognition of the beauty of the earth, as we will hear the choir sing this morning.

When we were in the planning process for the solar panels, a key decision was whether we would install an array on our roof or a ground mount unit. There were financial and logistical pros and cons to each option. But one of the things that I think tipped us in the direction of the ground mount unit was an observation that it would be a powerful statement to the community that we here at PCO value the care of creation so much that we have installed solar panels. The panels (and the accompanying sign) are a witness to our belief in the risen Christ. The risen Christ who sends his disciples into the world to make a difference, to bring the kingdom of God just a little bit closer to reality. This is evangelism.

I started my sermon with a piece of a poem about Christmas – about our all too human tendency to fail or to forget to live as Christmas people – as people who celebrate the word made flesh, that Jesus came to dwell among us. Auden says: As in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed to do more than entertain it as an agreeable Possibility.” An agreeable possibility. We can find it hard to live day in and day out as people celebrating that Jesus came among us and invited us to into a relationship with him and into a partnership in ministry. The needs of the world can seem overwhelming on the best of days and our contribution to a brighter future like a fool’s errand on the hardest of days. Yet, I take comfort from words attributed to the Talmud. “Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to ignore it.”

The resurrection is God’s gift. It is now in our hands to live as a resurrection people. The presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives is God’s gift. It is now in our hands to receive the Holy Spirit and to let the Spirit guide our hearts and minds. The PC(USA) Confession of 1967 invites us to affirm this call on our lives. I invite you to join with me as we share together a portion of it.