

The Second Sunday of Easter

April 12, 2015

"GET OUT OF THE HOUSE!"

By Pastor Mary Anne Biggs

Acts 5:27-32 ~ John 20:19-31

Several years ago I saw an interview on television with a fellow who was over 90 years old. He played center field for a senior adult softball team in Florida. They called their 80 year old rookies "the kids." The interviewer asked the man how he had lived so long and stayed in such good shape. I'll never forget his response. He smiled into the camera and said, "My mother makes me get out of bed every morning ... and makes me get out of the house!"

Well, you don't have to be over 90 to know that's good advice. I'm a few years shy of that milestone and some days it's hard for me to get out of the house. There are mornings when I am sorely tempted to unplug the telephone, lock the doors, pull the covers over my head, and hide. Do any of you ever feel that way? Sometimes, the world is just too much for us. That's one reason we need our homes, and God help you if your home is not a safe place ... a haven away from the storms raging outside. On the other hand, if you are going to accomplish anything, whether it's making the world safe for democracy or winning a softball game in the super seniors' league, you've got to get out of the house to do it. That's good advice for the church to remember too.

What a picture of the church John gives us in our gospel reading today. It's Easter, the first day of the week. The news has broken, but where are the disciples? Are they out searching every street corner for the risen Christ? No. Are they in the face of the high priest and the members of the Sanhedrin or telling Pontius Pilate, "You can't handle the truth!" No. Are they shouting the news from all the roof tops that "this Jesus, whom you crucified, God has raised from the dead?" No! The doors are locked, the shutters are closed, and they quiver like potluck Jell-O salad with every knock at the door or noise from the street.

They're hiding out of fear. They're not fools. They saw what happened to Jesus. Nails in his hands, a spear in his side, his corpse thrown in a cave, and then, who knows, stolen maybe? They are so afraid ... that instead of doing the sensible thing ... dispersing and running in separate directions to find protection ... they stick together. Yet they are too paralyzed to move. And it's pretty clear ... they can't do a blessed thing unless Jesus is with them!

Suddenly ... in a breath, in a heartbeat, in the blink of an eye ... Jesus is with them! And what does he say? "Shalom! Peace be with you." Have you ever noticed how in every gospel the first word at Easter is not "Rejoice!" but "Fear not!" "Calm down." "Be at peace." "Shalom." And we can understand why. How would you react if a person you knew to be dead walked up to you

when the sun had set and doors were locked, tapped you on the shoulder and said, "Hi!" But this is Jesus ... the miracle worker ... the one who healed the sick and raised the dead. They had seen that, too. So why are they so surprised? It seems like no matter how many miracles God may work among us, we are still surprised when it happens again. We're just slow learners when it comes to trusting God.

Or perhaps there is a deeper fear at work when it comes to the risen Christ ... deeper even than our fear of death. I mean our fear of life ... that if Jesus has conquered death and is alive and among us ... all bets are off and we are at his mercy. As I said last Sunday, who knows what demands he might make of us? Who knows what crosses he might expect us to bear? Who knows what changes he might want to make in our plans and priorities, and how can we say no?

The late Fred Craddock wrote about a minister who was so frustrated with the lethargy in his congregation that one Sunday night in the worship service he said, "Why don't we all form a circle, hold hands and attempt to communicate with the living?" For some, fear of death is a protection, a comfort somehow. It gives them an excuse to hide out and do less. Because they might fail, they don't even try. Because they might lose, they don't even engage. Because they might suffer, they don't even sacrifice to attempt something great for God. It's easier to huddle in the upper room and worry over how to arrange the furniture.

Our biggest limitation is our seriously stunted vision of God. But if Christ is risen, and God is greater than the ruling Sanhedrin, mightier than the Roman army, bigger even than death, then all our excuses are swept away. It means that any dream God gives us ... God has the power to do. Kind of scary, isn't it? Maybe we should lock the doors.

Of course it won't do us any good. Jesus will be here anyway, dispelling our fears, renewing our faith, showing us the greatness of God. But life is frightening and we forget, so we need this place and we need each other. Believe me, if you try to go it alone, you won't get very far. Jesus comes first to the community, where two or three have gathered in his name. When we come here on the first day of the week, wounded by the struggles and failures and griefs of the week, weighed down by our weariness with well-doing, paralyzed by our own fear and self-doubt and distance from God, the risen Christ comes to us to offer peace. That's why every Sunday in Christian worship, we don't just celebrate Easter ... we experience it! The risen Christ is with us! Thank God he is with us because we can't do a blessed thing without him.

The worst mistake we can make is to ignore our need for worship with one another. I have seen it so many times. A person faces a crisis. A family goes through some trauma. And what do they do? They withdraw from the church. Maybe they're embarrassed, or maybe they're angry, or maybe they don't know how to reach out for the help they need. But instead of staying connected to their community of faith, and drawing from the rich resources of spiritual celebration and Christian compassion, they withdraw in pain. Christ calls us together and comes among us for good reason ... we need it ... we need him.

Worship is a transforming experience, an encounter with the risen Christ. But it is not the sole goal of spiritual life. Too many churches forget that. Too many Christians forget that. Too

many pastors forget that. They act as if coming to church were the main thing ... as if this were where God's main work gets done.

Imagine you have a garden. In that garden you are going to grow juicy tomatoes, crisp cucumbers, sweet zucchini, spicy peppers ... with a row of bright sunflowers just for decoration. You gather some workers. You meet at your garden shed. You show them the tools ... tiller, hoe, rake, shovel. You hold classes on how to use them. You have your workers study the seeds so they will know which ones to use where and how to plant them. You talk about weeds and have serious discussions which ones are weeds and which ones actually help the soil. Every once in a while you have a guest gardener come to enthuse them even more about tilling the soil and planting the seeds.

All through the growing season you gather once a week in the shed to go over these things. And you enjoy your meetings so much that you put in a kitchen and start sharing meals there. You even put up a big sign by the shed, "The Gardeners Guild ... New Members Welcome." But when you go outside, you just can't understand why there are no juicy tomatoes, no crisp cucumbers, no sweet zucchini, not a single hot pepper, not one bright sunflower to decorate your day. Why? Because folks, you can't grow a garden sitting in the shed.

Jesus comes to the disciples where they are sitting in the shed and says "Shalom!" Almost immediately he goes on to say, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." In other words, "get out of the house!" You aren't going to accomplish anything for God hiding behind locked doors or sitting in a church pew. The mission of the church is out beyond our doors ... it's in the streets, in our homes, in the classroom, in the places where we work, in the halls of government and the corporate board rooms, in the hospitals and prisons and in all the places where people are hurting and waiting for help, waiting for a crust of bread or a cool drink of water, waiting for justice and mercy and peace and a word of good news.

This gospel story is a metaphor for the double movement of the church. We come together to meet Christ and be renewed. But then we move out as agents of the good news into the highways and byways where Christ sends us to finish the work he started. It's like inhaling and exhaling. If you don't do both, you aren't breathing ... you are going to die. Internal and external, inward and outward, reflection and action, spiritual and physical ... these are the essential mutual directions of our faith. But it's the devil to get the two balanced, isn't it? The inward movements of prayer, meditation, study, and worship with the outward movements of service, mission, witness, and advocacy for justice ... it's a dance! God has given us a vision to change the world into what God wants it to be. It is not up to us to finish the work by ourselves ... neither can we fail to do our part. But if we go out there to change the world without being grounded first in prayer and worship and care for one another, we will not have the right vision, we will not have the right strategies, we will not have enough stamina, we will not be freed from fear. On the other hand, if all we do is pray and worship and take care of ourselves, we will accomplish nothing ... we will be good for nothing.

We need each other. We need these moments with Christ in our upper room. But the world needs us. People out there need the Christ in us by their side. How do we accomplish both ... by the presence of Christ, of course. The biggest mistake we could make is to think that we can

garden without the Gardener that Mary met outside the open tomb, without the tools, the seed, the information and energy we need to hoe the tough row. Because without him, we just can't do a blessed thing.

Just see what happens when Jesus enters a room. Thomas missed their first meeting. Everybody's talking about an experience he hasn't had. He's mad. He feels left out. At least he's honest, and doesn't pretend. He attacks them, questions their experience, doubts their sincerity, maybe even their sanity. They meet again ... and guess what happens? It's Easter again! Jesus is there! Jesus speaks peace. And this time Thomas sees him, puts his hand in the nail-scarred hand and believes.

And the story continues in our reading from Acts ... it's only about two months later. And where are Peter and the apostles? Are they still hiding out in the upper room quaking each time there's a knock at the door? No. Have they given up and run away, gone home to their fishing boats and tax tables and farms? No. Are they sitting in the house, lounging by the pool, waiting for God to make everything right? No. They are standing before the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of their land.

These are the very people who tried Jesus not long before and brought him to Pilate to be crucified. These are the very people who had scared the disciples into hiding in the first place. But now they're not so easily frightened. This is the second time they've been hauled before the court. The first time they were instructed - no, commanded! - "Do not speak of this Jesus ever again or we'll have your hide!" But they have violated their probation, you see. They've been all over the city sharing the good news anyway, opening blind eyes, giving strength to the lame, feeding the hungry, and healing in Jesus' name.

This time the mighty Sanhedrin hauls them in and scowls at them with their meanest scowl, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us" (Acts 5:28). And what do they say? "We must obey God rather than any human authority" (Acts 5:29). Respectful, but unbending ... facing death, they proclaim life!

Where do they find that kind of world-changing courage to face the cross and preach the gospel? Where do they get the backbone to walk into the halls of government which, in this case, also happens to be their denominational headquarters, and stand their ground for the grace of God? Here's the secret ... they have met the risen Christ in the upper room and he has sent them out. They have the courage of the one who faced this council before, was crucified, but raised from death by God because he is with them. As surely as he has been with them in the upper room when they gather on the first day of the week, Christ is with them as they face the powers so that not even death can deter them.

And, beloved, Christ is with us. We have met him here this morning. We have sensed the healing peace of his Spirit. But now it's time to take him back into the world where the important work is waiting, where people may resist you, where the very people you are trying to help may despise and reject you, where the councils of power may tell you to hush up, where people are locked in, alone, and afraid, needing most of all the peace of Christ that you bring.

Jesus sends us out there to complete the work that God sent him to do. Let's do it then, shall we? Beloved, it's time to get out of the house! May we pray?

Dear Jesus, thank you for meeting us here when we gather in your name. Thank you for the fellowship we share and the way you lead us to care for one another. Help us to remain spiritually grounded, centered upon you. But help us also to follow you out of this place into the places of power and the places of powerlessness with the good news of God's reign. O Lord, if you turned the world upside down with only a handful of timid disciples, what might you do with us? O, Lord, do it, for God's sake. Amen.