

"Church: The Verb"
April 19, 2020
St. Paul's UCC Church
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John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, 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. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "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."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

When I say, "*St. Paul's Church*," what do you think of? *St. Paul's Church*. What image, or images, come to your mind? Is it the brick exterior of our well-kept, well-updated building... the building that probably a lot of us are missing right now? (I know I am!). Is it our sanctuary, the windows, the pews? Is it our Table, our font, our pulpit? *St. Paul's Church*. What is *St. Paul's Church*?

Church. What is church, for that matter? I have been pondering this question for the last several weeks, as we have been "doing church" in this new, strange, online format. What is church? Is *this* church?

It's a good question to wrestle with in this time of social distancing and new ways of meeting together. It's also a good question to look at this time of year, during Eastertide: this season of new life, when Jesus is risen, and his disciples – back then, and today – are trying to figure out what it all means. What is church? Or, maybe better, *where* is church? Where does church... happen?

Things must have been confusing for Jesus' disciples on that first Easter evening. Things must've been hard. Rumors are flying. Nothing is certain. The women say they've seen the Lord, that Jesus is alive, but the other disciples have not seen him themselves, and they are having a heck of a time believing the news.

So they gather together – these disciples, these friends of Jesus – they gather together in an upper room somewhere. They huddle there behind closed doors, shut up tight in those four walls. They lock all the doors. They close all the windows. They draw all the shades. Together, in a claustrophobic room, fearing for their lives, Jesus' disciples don't know *what* to think. Everything is changing so fast. Nothing is making sense. They don't know what to do. So they hole up. They huddle together. They hide from the world. They hardly even breathe.

As some of you have heard me talk about before, my husband Matt's first call right out of seminary was to a church on the outskirts of New York City, on the North Shore of Long Island. It was in a neighborhood that had changed quite a bit over the years. The neighborhood was becoming increasingly ethnic, especially full of Korean folk. And Matt starting to notice that the folks in his church weren't too keen on it. He noticed them muttering things like, "These people are really taking over" or "I just don't understand why it can't be the way it used to be."

Matt heard all this, and he started thinking, "Hmm. Maybe there's real potential here. Maybe, instead of grieving over the way things used to be, maybe there's a real opportunity for us to do ministry *right now*, out there, in the community! Maybe there are gifts we could *receive* from our neighborhood. I wonder..." So he started talking to his parishioners about his ideas. He started telling them about the potential he saw, and the excitement he felt, and... no dice. His parishioners – good, faithful people – didn't go for it. They were tired. They weren't loving all the changes. And Matt got the sense that that would rather stay holed up in their building and feel sad about the way things used to be than to step out there and try to make a difference in the community.

They were hunkered down, afraid of change; they were hiding from the world.

Even as Jesus' disciples are hunkered down – afraid, anxious, angry – even in their not-so-holy huddle, even then, Jesus appears before them. Poof! Suddenly, there's Jesus; in the midst of all their fear and anxiety, doubt and inertia. There he is! He's alive after all, just as the women said! Much rejoicing ensues from the disciples.

...Well, much rejoicing ensues from *most* of them, anyway. It seems that while the disciples were huddled together, there actually *was* one who decided to venture out. Thomas. So when Jesus appears to the disciples, Thomas misses him. He isn't there that day. He's not in that small upper room, huddled there with the rest of them.

Do you remember what the mysterious man in white told the three women – Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome – when they got to the empty

tomb last week, early on Easter morning? He said, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here.... [Now] go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.”¹

You know, Thomas has gotten a bad rap over the years. He’s known as the Doubting One, the fickle one, the one who comes late to the party. But I don’t think he deserves that reputation. Quite to the contrary, I think Thomas is the *most* faithful of the bunch. Why? Thomas gets it. Thomas is going on ahead, just like the man told the women at the tomb last week on Easter Sunday. Unlike the other disciples, Thomas is looking for Jesus out there in Galilee, out in the unexpected places, just like Jesus told him – and all of them – to do. I imagine Thomas looking for Jesus among the hurting and the hungry, the forsaken and forgotten, the strangers and the surprising. Thomas is not stuck in the past, in the way things used to be. Thomas is doing things a little differently.

Doubting Thomas? I don’t think so. How about... *Daring* Thomas?

So, while Matt was serving his little church on Long Island, I had the opportunity to serve a church of my own. It was just for a year, and I was just the seminary intern, but nevertheless, because I had decided to take a year off from my course work, I got to work full-time in a Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, Alabama.

And it was an amazing year, as many of you have heard me talk about before.

See, years before I ever got there, First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham, Alabama had a vision. The people at this church looked around at their changing downtown neighborhood, at all the needs in the community that surrounded them, and said, “There are people hurting out there, right outside our building. They may look different from us. They may seem a little scary. But we think Jesus... just might be among them.” So the people of First Pres left their comfortable way of doing church-as-usual; they raised tens of thousands of dollars, and they built a homeless shelter right next to their church: First Light Shelter of Birmingham, Alabama.

And this ministry completely revitalized them. Instead of mourning the days gone by and the way things used to be, *these* faithful people rejoiced in the gifts they were able to give – and to receive – from the community around them.

They stopped hunkering down. They stopped longing for the way things used to be. They stopped their hiding. They changed. And, they grew. In every way.

So, to go back to my original question: What is church? It’s not a building. It’s not the windows or the Table or the pulpit or the pews. Church isn’t any of these things. In fact, church isn’t a *thing* at all. It’s not a noun. Church is a verb. Church is an action. Church *happens*. Church happens when we sing our songs, and pray our prayers, and

¹ Mark 16:6-7 (NRSV)

are honest, really honest, with each other about how we need Jesus to come among us and wake us and take us out of all our inertia and fear. Church happens in *buildings* when we do that... *and* church happens in other places. Church happens in other places, maybe *especially* in other places, when we see who is hurting, who is hopeless, who is lost, who is forgotten, who needs to show us Jesus.

Church, the verb, *happens*. Church happens when we stop hiding. Church happens when we push through our fear. Church happens when we are not afraid to change.

So, is *this* church? You'd better believe it!

Thanks be to God.