

On Easter Sunday, we read the resurrection account from Mark's Gospel. Last Sunday, we read a post resurrection account from John's Gospel. This Sunday we will read a post resurrection account from Luke's Gospel, yet before I read the account which comes from Luke's final chapter, let me share with you how Luke began his Gospel:

Dear Theophilus, writes Luke, "I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you were instructed." Luke then unfolds the investigated story of Jesus beginning with a priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth who was barren. And today we pick up the story Luke investigated in the final chapter of his Gospel, knowing that Christ lived, Christ died, and Christ lives again, for the tomb stands empty. Now just before we enter the text today, the resurrected Christ has been made known to two travelers on the road to Emmaus in the breaking of bread and has appeared to Simon.

Listen now for God's word to us today, beginning at verse 36, chapter 24:

^{24:36} Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."

³⁷ They were startled and terrified and thought that they were seeing a ghost.

³⁸ Jesus said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?" ³⁹ Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." ⁴⁰ And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. ⁴¹ While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" ⁴² They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³ and he took it and ate in their presence.

⁴⁴ Then Jesus said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶ and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things.

I have mentioned to some of you that I am in the midst of an online course through the Center for Action and Contemplation, founded by Franciscan Richard Rohr. As part of the course, the participants interact online with each other by responding to questions from readings and presentations and then by engaging with one another given our responses. I have thoroughly enjoyed the course and the richness of hearing so many voices reflect on thought provoking questions. There is one reoccurring theme though that has been shared by multiple participants that should be troubling to those of us in the church. Their words indicate that for now, they have given up on the church. Their past experiences in churches has either been filled with too much pain or not enough life.

I have shared with you in the past about the cultural rise of the "Nones," those who claim no religious affiliation and are often between the ages of 18 and 35. But the

voices that I am hearing through this online course represent the “Dones.” “Dones” are often adults that at one time or another were heavily involved in a local church, but at some point, the faith community in which they worshipped either became a place of too much pain or a place with not enough life. The church became a place that wasn’t able to hold their questions and their quest for a deeper relationship with the divine.

If you have been in a church for any length of time, simply because the church is a gathering of people, you may have experienced it as a place of pain or a place with not enough life. I remember the first time the pain of a church community was acute for me. I was sixteen years old and attending a church in South Africa under state sanctioned apartheid. Even though Genesis clearly says, “So God created humankind in God’s image... and blessed them,” it was not believed to be so for all people in this church. The pain of knowing that only those of European decent would be welcomed in this particular sanctuary was painful for me. I knew that if Bertha or Samuel, two servants in my South African exchange home, were to walk into worship all hell would break loose, for they would not be welcomed. I remember thinking, “Didn’t Jesus say in the Gospel of John, ‘For God so loved the world?’”

I remember a few years later, when I visited my grandmother during an extended business trip. I was able to attend worship with her and my aunt and uncle. I was stunned when I learned that I had to meet with their pastor prior to worship, otherwise I would not be welcomed at the communion table. I needed permission. I needed approval by their pastor, to receive the gifts of bread and cup that Jesus freely offers to all, for doesn’t the table belong to God?

As I read some of the posts of my fellow participants my heart ached, because their shared experiences of faith communities were either too painful to remain or they were without enough life. As you can imagine, I was engaged by numerous participants given that I had previously shared that I was a pastor of a local church. As I interacted with participants, I shared what a sacred trust it is to be pastor and that my prayer was always that by God’s grace I would do more good, than harm and would hope that the church I serve would do more good, than harm, too, and that it would be a life-giving community.

These conversations made me wonder though. Is being in community with each other here at FPC Redlands life-giving for you? Are we doing more good together than harm? Are we awakening each other’s hunger for a deeper relationship with this mystery we call God? Or are we a community where there is not enough life or maybe even too much pain?

“Why, oh why,” writes Richard Rohr, “did we make the Gospel into a competition?” Why did we decide that some people are in and others are out? Why did we create barriers to the table of grace? Why did we turn this body of Christ called the church into a place that is often times filled with pain or devoid of life?

I believe this has happened, throughout the ages, under the guise of control and a need for security. Those within the structures of power can keep things the way they like it. With each variation of Christianity layering on additional requirements, over and above the basics of love God and love neighbor, life was drained out of the church. Churches filled with those who have gotten good at being good, like the first century Pharisees, they were churches that cause more harm than good.

So, is it any wonder that the disciples were startled and frightened when Jesus just materialized in the midst of their gathering? I don't think so, because the reoccurring theme since Easter Sunday has been this, "Oh no!"

The two on the Road to Emmaus had experienced the Risen Christ and so did Simon. Yet, the disciples were together again because they were still trying to sort through what this really meant for their lives. If Jesus is not dead, but really alive, then the story that they thought was over is not over. Oh no, for even though the disciples had either experienced or heard about the risen Christ, they were still not ready for the reality of the Risen Christ in their midst, a reality that disrupted their desire for control and security.

Imagine being in your living room with some friends and the front door is locked and then all of a sudden Jesus materializes out of nowhere and is in your living room! I think being startled and terrified are appropriate responses, for a dead Jesus is a lot easier to keep track of and control, than a living Jesus.

Just like us though, the disciples cannot escape their fears. Psychology teaches us that minds trapped by fears cannot be easily opened either. When fear grips us, nothing really changes, for fear is unable to receive a new word. Fear creates stasis or reinforces the status quo. Fear bars the possibilities of something more.

Can you recall any fears that you have experienced that blocked the possibility of something more? Reach back in your childhood... do you remember fears associated with learning how to swim or ride a bike? Can't you just see the child clinging to her parent in a pool, too fearful to let go? Can't you just hear the tear-filled terror of a child yelling at his dad as he holds the bike, "Don't let go, daddy!" Or maybe something more recent, like the fear that overwhelmed me last October when I decided to rock climb for the first time. Even though I knew I was safely belayed, fear overwhelmed me. I was ready to give up less than half way up the climb, but then the instructor addressed my fears. He gave me clear instructions that allowed me to eventually trust the safety equipment that was protecting me from a fall.

Jesus, like my climbing instructor, addressed the disciples' fears. He asks what seem to be rhetorical questions, for Jesus doesn't berate or condemn the disciples for their fears. Jesus simply addresses their fears and says, "Look and touch, I am the real deal. I am not a ghost. I am really alive. And by the way, do you have anything to eat, because I am hungry?" I love the normalcy Jesus engenders. It is as if Jesus simply said to his disciples, "It's just me."

Jesus addresses their fears, because then and only then will he be able to open the disciples' minds to understand the scriptures and the something more that is ahead of them. As Barbara Essex writes, "Jesus taught and commissioned the disciples saying, 'My whole life, death, and rising is about what God is doing in the world - reconciling the world to God's self. From the law of Moses to the prophets, to the Psalms, it has always been about God and God's purposes and agenda for creation - repentance leads to forgiveness and the wholeness of creation.'"

I appreciate Barbara Essex's reminder, "It has always been about God." The Bible is God's story, for God is the one always extending, always giving, always initiating a relationship with humanity. We are part of God's story when we accept God's invitation. We are part of God's purposes and agenda for all of creation when we bring

peace, unity, harmony, love, compassion, grace, justice, and mercy to a world that is in deep need of God's reconciling love.

So, the questions we have to ask ourselves this day are these, "Where is the presence of the risen Christ needed among us? Where is the presence of Christ needed in our community? How are we being called as church to be life-giving witnesses in this community? How is God calling you to participate?"

The world as it is – the tragic accident claiming fifteen lives of a Canadian hockey team, the shooter at YouTube who injured others before committing suicide, the reality of chemical weapons used against citizens, the world-wide stream of refugees fleeing and displaced with no place to call home, air strikes to end violence, human trafficking here in the Inland Empire and around the globe, ethnic cleansing, hunger, despair – is not ultimate, God is. God is at work reconciling us and all of creation. The risen Christ goes before us and calls us to bear witness that love conquers all and that life, not death has the final word.

The psalmist cried out, "Be gracious to me and hear my prayer, O God." I cry out to God, too, for my heart aches for the church with a capital "C," as well as for this particular church.

As a gathered community, as sent disciples into the world, will others find enough life among us? Will others experience more good, than harm among us? Will others be drawn to explore a deeper relationship with the mystery we all call God? Be gracious to us God and hear our prayer. Help us all to be life-giving witnesses to your power and presence among us, for Christ lives – Oh yes! Use even us, our words and our deeds, to make known your love for all of humanity and creation. Amen.