

We're here again with the disciples in the locked room, where they have come together to process what has happened and comfort and console each other on the loss of their friend—and to figure out how to go forward now that the worst has happened and their leader has been lost. Jesus comes to them, appearing in their midst regardless of the locked doors. He greets them with the Peace and shows them his hands and side. He tells them that all prophecies about the Messiah have been fulfilled—that the Messiah had to suffer, die and rise again. Then he commissions them to be witnesses, to preach and teach repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations.

For the disciples, as we saw last week and as we see today, the key to all of this is whether or not they believe he's alive. Seeing a ghost or spirit appearing from beyond the grave was a real fear; so it's no wonder that the disciples weren't immediately comforted by the appearance of Jesus, and it's no wonder that they needed some proof before they could believe he was alive; and it was no wonder that Jesus went to such lengths to help them believe. If you remember, he let them touch his wounds in his hands and side, and even came back a second time for Thomas; and this week he even eats a piece of fish—which, as was well known at that time, the dead couldn't do. He went out of his way to prove he was alive and not a ghost or a dream or a hallucination. Jesus was alive, and in these moments and these appearances disaster and hopelessness were replaced by joy, and tragedy turned to triumph.

And why was it so important that the disciples believe, and we believe, that Jesus was and is alive? In Luke Timothy Johnson's book, *Living Jesus*, he puts it like this:

If Jesus is simply dead, there are a number of ways in which we can relate ourselves to his life and his accomplishments. And we might even, if some obscure bit of data should turn up, hope to learn more about him. But we cannot reasonably expect to learn more from him.

If he's alive, however, everything changes. It is no longer a matter of our questioning a historical record, but a matter of our being put in question by one who has broken every rule of human existence. If Jesus lives, then it must be as a life-giver. Jesus is not simply a figure of the past, in that case, but a person in the present; not merely a memory that we can analyze and manipulate, but an agent who can confront and instruct us. What we learn *about* him must therefore include what we continue to learn *from* him.

So, obviously, there's a big difference between thinking someone is alive and thinking they're dead or simply a vision. A dead person cannot continue to teach, or guide, or influence us in the same way that a living person can. So it's important for the disciples to understand that the risen Christ isn't a ghost; neither is he just a vision, just a hallucination brought on by deep grief and longing for their master's return; the risen Christ is there among them, body and soul, greeting them with peace, eating with them, letting them touch his wounds. As he is with them in this way, they come to believe in the reality of the resurrection. And by believing in the risen Christ, his resurrected body becomes the thing at the center of the church's faith, the thing that drives our proclamation of new life in Christ. The disciples came to believe, and through them we believe, that Christ's resurrection was not purely a spiritual thing, but that he was alive and well and in his human body—and that through Christ God was doing something new for all humanity. As he was transformed, moving from life through death and into a new reality, the disciples were transformed, and we too become something new, through our belief in his transformation.

The really cool thing is, to me anyway, as we are changed, we too can change the world into something new, as we follow his commission to preach and teach about his way. As followers of the Way we have an assignment: to show people how the power of God is still present even in the midst of tragedy, despair and death. Through the power of the Holy Spirit we bring the power of God into the darkest corners of our existence, where violence reigns, where relationships are toxic, where injustice seems destined to prevail. We become as Christ was to the world—loving, healing, compassionate.

While most of the country was affected by the tragedy of September 11, 2001, the families who lost loved ones were, of course, the most affected. And yet, for two widows of 9/11, their tragedy and the outpouring of help they received after that day led them to give something in return.

Susan Retik and Patty Quigly both lost their husbands in the attacks. But when the United States decided to invade and bomb Afghanistan in response, their hearts went out to the women of Afghanistan who would lose their spouses as well. Underlying their desire to help was the knowledge that, in Afghanistan, widows lose status in society and often find it very difficult to earn enough money to support themselves. So Susan and Patty started "Beyond the 11th", a foundation for helping Afghan widows. And not only have they raised money for this cause, they have also visited Afghanistan and met with some of these widows—women with whom they share the grief that comes from losing those that they love. They have found a healing light for their own lives and the lives of these women by making these connections. Instead of hiding themselves behind locked doors, they opened their

hearts to the world, and discovered the kind of kinship that releases human beings from the captivity of hatred and violence.

Now, I don't know for a fact that these women are Christian, or even religious. However, this is still a good example of how we can be Christ to others, by being loving and compassionate towards them. By empathizing with others in similar situations. By stepping in where violence and oppression bring darkness to people's lives. Jesus calls us to show the world that the power and presence of God is there, even in the midst of tragedy, despair and death. We do this by reaching out into those places where there is tragedy, where there is despair, and where there is death, and doing what we can to ease someone's pain.

In order to help the disciples come to a place in which they had left fear behind and were ready to become Christ's witnesses in the world, Jesus had to prepare them through these appearances. By showing himself he assured them that he was alive; to help assuage their fears and help them understand that what had happened was in the context of God's larger plan; to open their minds to a deeper understanding of scripture; and then—and only then—could he commission them as witnesses to God's work in the world; only then were they ready to carry on with the ministry in Jesus' name. As with the disciples, we too must prepare ourselves to be ready to be witnesses; we must shake off any fear we have about sharing the good news with others; we must understand where we fit into the larger scheme of God's work in the world; we must deepen our understanding of who Jesus was and what he did—we must deepen as well our relationship to the living Jesus Christ so

I talked before, I think, about the difference between building fences and digging wells, and I am reminded of that metaphor when I read the stories of the disciples being behind locked doors. Whatever it is that we hide behind are fences and are functionally like the locked doors of the disciples; and we need to understand that generally it is fear that causes us to put up those barriers. And we in the church seem to be afraid of a lot of things these days: we fear that our traditions will be forgotten and cast aside; we fear that things will never be good again; we fear that, if someone wants to do something new, that means that we were wrong—and we hate being wrong almost more than anything; we fear being hurt; we fear being abandoned and alone; most of all we fear death, either our own or the death someone (or something) we love. But fear is a tool of the evil one, who uses it to divide us and set us against each other. Fear can be insidious, too, creeping in and taking over our lives before we even know what has happened.

On the other hand, digging wells can help provide us and others with the deep, cool waters of life that Jesus can provide. We dig wells when we open ourselves to others, seeking to know their deepest joys and sorrows, and yes, fears. We dig wells when we think about the community around us and ask, “where do we need to shine the light of the risen Christ? And how can we be witnesses to God’s presence in the world in a real, tangible way—a way that builds people up and brings them into relationship with God?”

Jesus doesn’t want us to hide behind locked doors—he calls us to step out in faith, faith that he’s alive! And bring that faith and the hope that comes along with it, to all of the world. Let go of your fears—God, through Christ and the Spirit—are with us and will never leave us alone. Amen.