

“What Makes a Church a Church?”

Most likely the disciples continued to meet in the upper room where the Last Supper had been held. Despite Mary of Magdala’s good news, “I have seen the Lord!” the disciples were meeting behind locked doors ... listening fearfully for every step on the stairs and for every knock at the door. Since they were associates of the crucified Jesus of Nazareth, they were afraid they, too, would be found culpable ... guilt by association. As they gathered, Jesus suddenly appeared among them. He addressed them with the normal greeting of his time: “Peace be to you.” Such a greeting means more than: “May you be saved from trouble.” “Peace be to you” means “May God give you every good thing.”

Following his greeting, Jesus gave the disciples the commission that the Church must never forget. Jesus said that as God had sent him into the world because God so loved the world, so now he sends them, his disciples into the world to carry on the work of God’s love. Such an emphatic commission means three things: (1) It means that Jesus Christ needs the Church which is exactly what Paul meant when he called the Church “the body of Christ.” (Ephesians 1:23) Jesus came with a message for all people, and now that he was returning to the Father, his message was entrusted to the Church. The Church must be the mouth to speak for Jesus; the Church must be the feet to run his errands; the Church must be the hands to do his work. Jesus is dependent on his Church.

(2) It means the Church needs Jesus. As Believers, we need someone to send us; we need a message to take; we need a power and an authority to back our message; we need someone to whom we may turn when we are in doubt and in trouble. Without Jesus, the Church has no message; without Jesus, the Church has no power; without Jesus, the Church has no one to turn to in times of trouble; without Jesus, the Church has nothing to inspire the mind, strengthen the arm, and encourage the heart. The Church is dependent on Jesus.

And third (3), the commission, the sending out of the Church by Jesus is parallel to the sending out of Jesus by God. Jesus was God’s messenger only because he rendered to God perfect obedience and love. Therefore, the Church is fit to be the messenger ... fit to be the instrument of Christ only when the people love and obey Jesus’ ways and his teachings. The Church must never broadcast its own message; the Church must only spread the message of Christ. The Church must never follow human-made policies; the Church must follow the will of God. The Church fails whenever it tries to solve some problem in its own wisdom and strength, and ignores the guidance of Jesus Christ.

As believers, as a church, everyone is commissioned. Jesus needs you and you need Jesus ... and together, we need to go out and address the world ... a world in turmoil because of it has forsaken God’s love; it has scandalized the Peace of Christ and it has grieved the Holy Spirit. But before we charge out the doors, let us address the issue: “What makes a church?” Soon after I raised this question, a tune started playing in my head: *The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is not a resting place, the church is the people ...*

We love this children’s song. The words and music appeal to us. But, what does it mean when we say, “... the church is the people”? At first when we think of a church, we have an image in our mind of a building. When people ask us, “Where do you go to church?” we give them a name and a location and a brief description. Then what makes a church “the people?”

This is a valid question for us to explore following Easter Sunday. Jesus Christ is risen; his disciples bear witness to the event. Now what? One problem is that far too often in the church’s experience, Easter is a day and not a whole season. Yet today’s scriptures remind us that Easter begins the great 50 days of joy. Each Sunday, from now to Pentecost Sunday (May 27) is Easter! Sad that just one week away from Easter Sunday, we may feel Easter’s hopes grow a bit dim. Easter joy can be difficult to sustain, which is why, historically, the church has called this “Low Sunday.”

John’s gospel lesson gives us the opportunity to be honest about the post-Easter let down, while at the same time, John reminds us that our faith, our hope, are not of our creation. We have joy and confidence because the risen Christ comes and stands among us. John tells us that the risen Christ first appears to his disciples, except Thomas, and gives them his peace. He then commissions them to do the same work that he himself has been doing, giving them the Holy Spirit, thus empowering them with the same power which has characterized his ministry in the world.

This is rather amazing considering that these are the same disciples who proved to be unhelpful at the cross, and that all they have to show for themselves now is their hiding behind locked doors in fear. And yet, to these faithless, fearful, ordinary people ... Jesus gives his commission ... gives his Spirit ... his power. We need this post-Easter good news, because the events and the messages that follow Easter are what lay the foundation for what makes a church exemplify the word and work of Jesus Christ.

In truth, what makes us a church is not our earnest efforts, our great faithfulness, our acts of justice and love. What makes us a church is the presence of the risen Christ. Easter boldly says *to today's church, caught in its failure to be faithful, that Christ comes, breathes on us, blesses us, and gives himself to us that we might be his people in the world. ... the church is the people!*

Today's gospel lesson affirms that statement, because it gives us a picture of a church that had no organ or piano, no Bible, and no pastor. In fact, it's a picture of the church at its least ... its minimal ... the first assembly of weak people ever to take upon itself the name "church." It's the fearful disciples of Jesus gathered after his resurrection. Look at them! It's unbelievable! Because for long, painstaking chapters in John's Gospel, Jesus has been preparing his disciples for his departure.

He has gone over and over his commandments to love one another, to be bold, to trust him, to be ready to follow him at all costs. Somebody was not paying attention. I mean, there they are ... cowering behind closed, bolted doors. They are suppose to be the ones walking confidently out into the world full of the Holy Spirit ... announcing the Easter triumph of God. But no ... they are hunkered down ... cowering ... hoping nobody in town will know that they are there. If the "church is the people," then this is the church at its worst: "scarred, disheartened, and defensive."

One author writes regarding this scene: "What kind of advertisement might this first century church put in the Saturday paper to attract members? 'The friendly church where all are welcomed'? Hardly! Locked doors are not a sign of hospitality. 'The church with a warm heart and a bold mission'?" Forget it! This is the church of sweaty palms and shaky knees." Could these disciples in that locked room even be called a church? Not only is there no sanctuary, no pulpit, no parking lot, more significantly, it has no plan, no mission, no conviction, no nothing.

Here is a church with absolutely nothing going for it except... except that, when it gathered, the risen Christ pushed through the locked door, threw back the bolt and stood among them. Maybe that's every church. Despite all the institutionalizing of Christ's church, the efforts that come with developing facilities, the planning and organizing of worship, programs, and fellowships (*all symbolic of bolted doors*), the Risen Christ penetrates these facades ... is present among us ... and makes himself known ... and we know it

To be the church is a gift from God, because, by the grace of a living God, the Holy Spirit slips through our "closed doors", our plodding through the bulletins, and there is worship, worship not of our own creation but worship as a gift. And we sit in awed wonder, for we have then *become* the church. Such is the experience of many Good Friday services! Christmas Eve Services! Funerals! Weddings! And even some ordinary Sundays.

If you want to see the true church, look then in this 20th chapter of John: stripped of sacred trappings, pretense peeled away, a pitiful huddle of timid souls hanging on to one another behind locked doors. The fact is, it is the Presence of Christ that makes our human gatherings the church and who we are. The good news is that it was to this church, which was hardly church, that the living, risen Christ came saying "*Peace be with you*". Into this busy, buzzing void there was a voice, a Presence. He says, "Peace be with you," showing them his pierced hands and feet. He tells them that he is sending them out into the world. Then he breathes on them, giving them the Holy Spirit ... bestowing upon them the awesome power to forgive sins. You put these gifts together, and they are the church. To the church, which had nothing, the risen Christ gives everything. Spirit. Mission. Forgiveness.

When we peel away all the trappings of the church as an institution; when we de-institutionalize the church, we discover we are the church not because of the buildings we've built and cared for, not because of the furnishings, or the various activities; not even the preacher and preaching! We are the church because to us, even to us, the risen Christ has come and given us his gifts of the Spirit, mission, and forgiveness ... commissioning us to give his gifts to the whole world in his name. That's why we're called the church.

Church isn't my hard work, your earnest effort, or heavy-duty giving. Church is a gift, a visitation, an intrusion of the living Christ standing among us. Sometimes this fact scares me, because when I say such a thing, I'm reminded that all of this, all of what Boyds Presbyterian Church encompasses and means to you and me, is so much bigger than we realize. What makes us a church is Easter. What makes us a church is the presence of the risen Christ. Christ comes, breathes on us, blesses us, and gives himself to us that we might be his people in the world.

Like the first disciples, this frightens me because I'm not sure what all this means, except it's a wonderful feeling knowing that what makes a church doesn't depend solely on your or my efforts. And that despite our lack of discipline, our faithlessness and failures, God acts through us and makes known His presence in this church community ... especially today as we confirm and commission young disciples. The very existence of this congregation, despite all that is set against it, is what makes this church a visible embodiment of the power of God in Christ after Easter. Yes, it's scary, very scary; but also very, very reassuring and hopeful!