

**The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
East Liberty Presbyterian Church
May 1, 2011 (First Sunday after Easter)
John 20:19-29
“While You Were Out”**

I am glad you are here today. Don't get me wrong: Easter was great! Big crowds, brass and timpani, flowers and fanfare. But where last Sunday's focus was on the empty tomb and the miracle of Christ's resurrection, today we hear “the rest of the story,” how a global community of Christian believers grew from that one, wonderful Easter event. For if Easter was the moment that changed all human history, with today's gospel story we begin to see how this new history unfolded and spread out from a garden tomb in Jerusalem to reach Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and beyond.

Remember: It is still the same location and cast of characters for today as we heard about on Easter last week. And although there were at least twelve people in Jesus' circle of disciples, today's story is dominated by just one – Thomas, who we've come to call “Doubting Thomas.” Thomas wasn't there when Jesus appeared to the group on Easter evening. When Thomas did show up, he didn't believe what the others told him. The image that came to my mind was those old pink memo pads that used to say at the top in capital letters: While You Were Out. Do you remember those? In the days before e-mail, voice mail, and Post-It notes, secretaries used to take phone messages using these pink pads and leave the notes on bosses' desks or pinned to bulletin boards. In effect, Thomas arrived in the Upper Room and was handed a “While You Were Out” note that said, “Jesus is alive and stopped by while you were out. Will try to reach you again next week.” It's a great story, but we end up spending so much time on Thomas' grumpy reaction to getting this memo that we overlook the things Jesus said and did with the rest of the group. So today we'll turn the spotlight off Thomas for awhile, in order to appreciate what actually happened while Thomas was away.

It was the evening of the first Easter Sunday. About twelve hours have elapsed since the women first discovered the empty tomb and encountered the risen Lord in the garden cemetery. Surely those hours were spent getting this news out to the disciples – rousing them from sleep, whispering to them in public marketplaces about what the women had seen, perhaps sharing plans to gather in the Upper Room after work to talk some more about this amazing event. Remember: Jerusalem was still full of Passover pilgrims. The same people who determined Jesus must die were still around and quite anxious to make sure Jesus' disciples didn't cause any trouble. A mob capable of getting one man crucified is capable of additional acts of violence.

So on that first Easter evening, the disciples met behind doors locked out of fear. Then in their midst, Jesus appeared. If death and a tombstone could not contain Jesus, a closed wooden door was not much of an obstacle for him either. In fact, this fits into a larger pattern, in that the risen Christ gives us power to overcome all things that would close us in – the locked doors and fearful hearts that keep us from fully engaging with the world and living a life of resurrection good news.

Jesus appeared in the room and said “Peace be with you” not once but twice. This was not a casual greeting. Someone appearing whom you last saw being laid in a tomb is not an everyday event. So to quiet their fear, Jesus twice offered his blessing of peace. Some things in life need to be repeated. You can’t say “I love you” or “I’m sorry” often enough. Distant family members and lost friends are often worth second efforts and repeat invitations to get reengaged. I don’t know why Jesus said, “Peace be with you” twice, but I am sure that they needed to hear it. And in a troubled and hurting world, a double helping of Jesus’ peace is very welcome indeed.

After this, Jesus spoke to them and then breathed on them, saying “Receive the Holy Spirit.” In the gospels we’re told how Jesus laid hands on people, embraced, hugged, and healed people, but this is the only time Jesus intentionally breathed on people. It is an unusual act, like when Jesus knelt down and washed his disciples’ feet. If we were to make a regular practice in church out of intentionally breathing on one another, I’m sure all of us would be much more diligent about brushing our teeth on Sunday mornings. Nonetheless, it is a powerful image – this idea of receiving the breath, the Holy Spirit of God. I recently read a delightful poem by Billy Collins called “Spring Fever” which contains these words:

“It is time to observe the old ritual / of opening the windows ... Yes, the day has arrived to lift the panes/ that kept the cold out and the warm in / and gave you a place to stand some days / to watch the snow in its silent descent. But now a soft, fresh breeze rushes in, no longer sharpened by the knives of winter ... A blessing is this new sweet air – that lifts the light curtains and rejuvenates the room so persuasively / that the oil portrait of your grandfather / appears to be smiling down / from the confines of his heavy frame. Even the goldfish turns in her round bowl / to face the light from the thrust-open window ... There you stand in your blue robe / breathing in the season, filling your lungs / with every bud and blossom, inhaling every spore and fleck of pollen / until the goldfish leaps into the air / at the sound of your thunderous sneeze.”

The image of the first, fresh breeze of spring is a powerful one. Jesus, by breathing on his disciples, is evoking an even more powerful image – namely, the image from the beginning of the bible, from the creation accounts in Genesis in which the wind, the breath of God was moving over the face of the waters, and how God formed humankind from the dust of the ground and breathed in the breath of life. In this Easter event, Jesus performed a new act of creation, blowing and breathing out to create a living community of faith. And through the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit, we know this act continues this day and every day.

In light of the recent tornadoes in Alabama, it is appropriate to offer a few more words about the power of wind and God’s Spirit. There is no denying that winds can be destructive as well as constructive. Few things point out the frailty of human life and the limited hold we have on the earth’s surface than to see images of homes ripped from their foundations and possessions scattered to the four winds in the wake of a deadly

tornado. Like all natural disasters, there is a pain and sense of vulnerability that lingers and causes us to ask “Where is God?”

The short answer here is that the presence of one does not negate the presence of the other. The presence of tornadoes does not negate the presence of the Holy Spirit. And our faith insists that ill winds and rough winds are not ultimately more powerful than the breath, the Spirit of God. Christ weeps for those killed in the recent tragedy, just as Christ rejoices for the inspiration and courage of the store manager who herded all his customers and employees into a concrete storage room so that none were hurt when the tornado destroyed the rest of his business. And an additional answer comes from what Christ said next on that Easter evening while Thomas was away.

After the twice-spoken blessing of peace and then the exhaled sharing of the Holy Spirit, Jesus then issued a clear commission to his disciples: *As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.* Quite a lot is contained in just a few words. How was Jesus sent into the world by God the Father? He was sent as the embodiment of divine love, of the Word made flesh, as the one to repair a covenant broken by sin and vanity and sheer busyness. Jesus did not crave wealth or power. He spoke up for the poor; he made friends with the friendless; he healed the wounded in body and spirit. He challenged the existing structures of violence and power. He reminded religious leaders of the scriptural truths they had forgotten; he reminded the political leaders that God is sovereign over all crowns, thrones and palaces; he told the military leaders that it was time to put away their swords. That’s how Jesus was sent.

Remember this simple equation: As Jesus was sent, so are we sent. We are sent to share the story of a risen Christ, a repaired covenant, a redeemed heart beating inside our chests and potentially beating in our whole community. We are sent as Easter people, to insist that death has no ultimate power – and therefore those who threaten us by rattling the dry bones of death also lost their ultimate power on Easter Sunday. We are sent out. That means we are to leave our locked door Upper Rooms, our sequestered sanctuaries and safe suburbs, in order to be blown out into the world of God’s first creation and Christ’s new re-creation. It means we are to be as savvy about our spiritual, Sabbath time as we are about our secular, spare time. Here’s an example.

The Internet is, among other things, a place where people go to play games – special multi-player games where you create a character for yourself and wander around an imaginary world populated by dragons and trolls and lots of other game-players. One such game is called World of Warcraft, which currently has 12 million members, almost five times more people than there are Presbyterians in the United States. And over one-third of those playing such games are adult women, who are discovering how much they like role playing games. As creative as these games are, part of their success is that they are designed to encourage alliances. Sure, you can wander these electronic worlds alone, but you won’t conquer certain challenges, capture the best treasures, or quickly reach the final stages unless you work cooperatively with other players.¹ Away from the computer screen, we too often believe we can be fully self-sufficient and don’t

really need others; but step into one of these games and you discover how much we depend on one another to make it.

Jesus said, “As I was sent, even so now I send you.” I can go into a long list of what that might look like – how we should act after the example of Christ in caring for loved ones near to us, honoring the elderly around us, nurturing the young, defending the weak, offering healing to tornado victims and sexual abuse victims and a host of walking wounded in our midst. But the simplest suggestion is similar to the model of online multi-player computer games: Christ called disciples and called us to love God and love our neighbor. We too need alliances, like-minded communities, or in church-language, covenants if we hope to survive the challenges of this world.

The disciples knew that – that’s why they were gathered in the Upper Room in the first place. Thomas knew that – even if he missed seeing Jesus at first, he eventually joined up with the other disciples and it’s as a part of that group that he did finally see the risen Lord. And it’s what we know – as we gather here, as we gather at this table, as we seek to welcome all and serve all as part of how Christ has sent us to live in this world.

Today turn the old pink memo notes on their heads. “While you were out” is not about what you missed while away from your desk. “While you were out” is actually where you are supposed to be – sent out as Christ was sent. And it is out there you too will encounter and discover and breathe in the risen Lord!

AMEN

¹ “It’s Love At First Kill,” Stephanie Rosenbloom, *New York Times*, April 22, 2011.