

**May 12, 2019**

**TEXT: [Acts 16:6–10](#)**

**TITLE: Come Over & Help Us**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

We are in the Easter season. Jesus appeared to the disciples, to Doubting Thomas, to the women and men and revealed to them a power stronger than death and a goodness victorious over all evil. Jesus is alive; now the question is: What do we do now? Our answer: We want to follow Jesus! We jump to our feet; we nudge our neighbor; we tell anyone who asks, “I want to follow Jesus.” We walk across the room; we open the door and step over the threshold. Our minds are made up. This is definitely what we want to do—to follow the risen Christ. We see a whole world before us, and suddenly we stop. We hesitate. We’re just not sure what to do first.

We think about the famous bible passages about what it means to follow Jesus. [Mark 6](#): Jesus sent out the disciples in pairs, two by two, telling them to share the good news and rely on other’s hospitality. [Matthew 28](#): Jesus said “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded. And remember that I am with you always, to the end of the age.” [John 20](#): The risen Christ said, “As I have been sent into the world, so now do I send you.” Clearly to follow Jesus means to go out into the world, to be sent as Jesus was sent. But what exactly does that look like? And what is our first step?

We are celebrating our church’s bicentennial. Two hundred years ago, a group of people—settlers, pioneers in this young city of Pittsburgh—asked themselves what it meant to follow Jesus right here. Their answers led to the formation of this congregation. And 110 years later, another group of people began talking about building a new church—this church—so that it could serve as a visible answer to the question about how to follow Jesus. One part of their answer is actually tucked away in the stained-glass medallion high atop the windows in the West Transept. (It’s hard to see, so there’s a picture of it in your worship bulletin.) It describes the story we just heard from Acts—the story of a vision that came to the apostle Paul telling him to cross into Macedonia, to cross from Asia into Europe. This story can guide us today when we think about how to follow Jesus.

Paul and his companion Timothy were traveling through the land on the eastern side of the Mediterranean—what is now modern day Turkey. They visited cities, talked in the marketplaces, and shared about the ethic of love and gospel of grace embodied in the risen Christ. But then they hit a rough patch. Paul felt compelled not to preach in a certain area; and later, when they tried to travel farther to the east, the Spirit compelled them to head in the opposite way—to the harbor town of Troas. Paul had a vision there of a man in Macedonia calling to him: “Come over here and help us.” It wasn’t what Paul had expected. But it was where he felt led to go—so that’s where he went.

What does this story teach us? First, it reminds us that Christians are not stationery, “stuck in the mud” folks. We get up and get out—we are to be on the move like Paul and

Timothy. Second, we shouldn't be too surprised that when we make plans for one thing, God may have something else in mind for us. Moses tried to run away from his destiny, but God sent him back to Egypt to set God's people free. Jonah tried to avoid what God wanted him to do, but a sea storm and whale ended up making sure Jonah preached in Nineveh. Even Paul had started out as an anti-Christian extremist until a vision of Christ on the road to Damascus re-directed him completely. Third, the Acts story tells us to go out and help others—to respond to people that are in need calling out to us every day.

This Acts 16 model of faith was a big influence on East Liberty Presbyterian Church 100 years ago. A global evangelism initiative had just burst forth from the 1910 World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh, Scotland. Presbyterians responded by sending missionaries overseas. When this sanctuary was being built, ELPC supported mission work in Brazil, China, India, Cameroun, the Philippines, as well as nationally in Appalachia, New Mexico and Oklahoma. During the war years and afterwards, we responded to the needs of displaced persons by welcoming refugee families—such as a family from Yugoslavia in 1952, the Fuentes family from Cuba in 1962, and a Vietnamese family in 1975. In the 90s, we built ties with a sister parish in Guatemala and began our partnership with churches in Malawi. More recently, we've sent out mission groups to repair homes damaged by hurricanes, partnered with the Latino ministries of Casa San Jose, and supported the work of missionary Chenoa Stock, who has served in Sri Lanka, Bolivia and Peru.

“Go into all the world” is certainly clear and compelling advice. But even as I describe our history of missionary activity, I am mindful that our mission stories are not perfect ones. Too often the goal of evangelism has been distorted by racism, colonialism and imperialism. Jomo Kenyatta once remarked that “when the British missionaries arrived in Kenya, the Africans had the land and the missionaries had the bible. They taught us to pray with our eyes closed, and when we opened them, they had the land and we had the bible.” Kenyatta was right to be unhappy with the history of global missions. The “white Savior complex” has not gone away completely, nor has the vain conviction that America has all the answers if only those “other folks” in other lands would listen to us. While today the Global North countries are reducing their missionary work, Christians from the Global South are actually increasing theirs—sending workers to evangelize in Europe and North America. Mission activity today is less about handing out translated bibles and more about social projects, helping dig wells, staff clinics or educate children as an expression of a living, active faith. In fact, we don't speak of missionaries any longer; we call them “mission co-workers,” reflecting the goal of faithful cooperative service alongside those in need, instead of the old paternalistic model of charity doled out to those we deem worthy.

Yes, we need to be working in the world - digging wells, fixing homes, caring for the wounded in our land and in nations overseas. But this is important: We also need to be comfortable saying, “*I believe in God, revealed in the life and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is at work right now in a hurting world through the power of the Holy Spirit.*” To follow Christ means being comfortable naming ourselves as Christians. Affirming what we believe does not have to denigrate someone who believes differently. It is

simply naming who you are as a moral person of faith—and hopefully you can allow your dialogue partner to do the same for you. It is how we answer the question we asked earlier—when we awoke on this post-Easter day and professed that we wish to follow Jesus, and stepped out our front door, saw the wide, wide world, and wondered what we should do first.

We are moving into a new century of ministry here at ELPC. It is right to feel the holy burden of deciding what we believe and how we shall act on those beliefs. We have the records of what was said and done here 100 years ago at our church's Centennial celebration—parts of which are very similar to what Harry Emerson Fosdick said when his cathedral church on Riverside Drive in New York City was dedicated in 1930. Fosdick (who, by the way, wrote our closing hymn "God of Grace and God of Glory") challenged his congregation with these words: "My friends, it is not settled yet whether or not this new church will be wonderful. That all depends on what we do with it. If we gather in this heavenly place with all its beauty and praise ourselves for what we had built, that would not be wonderful. If we should assemble a selfish company here, though the walls bulged every Sunday with great crowds, that would not be wonderful. If we formed here a kind of religious club of the right kinds of people, and though we tripled our membership, that would not be wonderful. But if in this city, this glorious and wretched city where so many people live in unheavenly places, if because of this new heavenly place we could go forth (each week) and lift some burdens, put light in some dark spots, help solve some real problems, then this would be a wonderful place."

As we look toward a new century of ministry here, I believe that the stained-glass medallion high atop our transept window is still speaking to us—still shining down its light upon us as a challenge and a holy commissioning. But I would add something to what might have been said by the Rev. Frank Sneed, who was minister here at our centennial. I would add something to whatever the wise Rev. Stuart Nye Hutchison might have believed when he guided the architect to include the reference to Acts 16 in our sanctuary windows. I would even add to what the Rev. Fosdick said at Riverside Church in 1930. Yes, we should go forth to lift burdens, solve problems and shine light in places of darkness and despair. But when someone, somewhere says to us "Come over and help us" may we go with a Christ-like humility that doesn't immediately prescribe the solution—doesn't immediately fix things according to our plans. Rather I pray that the request "Come over and help us" will be met by each of us responding: "Tell me what is wrong, what you need, that I may learn from you and walk beside you toward making things right."

Our work is not about saving the heathen. Our work is not about proselytizing a Christ that conveniently looks and talks like us. Our work is not about claiming that God is a possession we alone can share, as if God was a commodity to which we've been given an exclusive marketing contract. Our work is to listen as those near to us and far from us say "Come over and help us" and then to cross over borders by faith—step into new places by faith—be guided and strengthened and encouraged by the Holy Spirit through faith. Then we are to listen. To hear what others say first. To trust that God is at work in that person's life right now. And when at last we do speak, may we respond with grace

and humility. Let us offer help as they define what needs to be done—offering a help that builds up, not one that surrenders agency and wounds pride. And when we are asked why we are doing this, we can say honestly, “Because to be beside you is to be where Christ has sent me.”

We are an Easter people. We know that we want to follow Jesus. We will soon leave this place, step over the thresholds, and enter a wide world of God’s creation and Christ’s redemption. Someone assuredly will cry out “Come over and help us.” Will ELPC’s next century of ministry be wonderful? That depends on how we respond. May we respond by standing beside others whom God loves and protect them. May we respond by listening to those whom Christ died for and insist their voices be heard in our world. May we respond by crossing over all that would divide us, trusting that the Holy Spirit will provide whatever we need for the shared journey ahead. So one last time: Will our next century of ministry be wonderful? Come, O followers of Christ—let’s see—together.

AMEN