

April 11, 2021—The 2nd Sunday of Easter: John 20:19-31

Today is officially the 2nd Sunday of Easter; unofficially today is known among clergy and some laypeople as ‘Low Sunday.’ It is so-called because the contrast between the crowds on Easter Sunday and the significantly lower attendance today can be striking. I hesitate to bring this to your attention because it focuses on the wrong thing, and in a resentful, whiny kind of way. Of course, everyone is grateful and a bit pumped when the Church is full (even by Covid standards) and there is an emotional letdown when the following Sunday there are not as many attending. Our focus on the wrong thing is fueled by a mistaken idea of what it means to be “successful.” We are Americans; it is difficult for us to let go the notion that numbers equate with success. Of course, we want a full Church every Sunday. Yet simply filling the pews with people does not necessarily mean we are worthy disciples of Jesus Christ. We follow Jesus by being faithful to him, by being nurtured by His Word and Sacraments, by relying on the Holy Spirit’s strength and wisdom; we live our faith through works of mercy, words of kindness, holy thoughts, by being converted ever more into the measure of the full stature of Christ. ‘Success’ as the world defines it can more times than not stunt our growth in Christ, turning our attention from Christ. At worst, we can make an idol of ‘success.’

Here is a story that for me illustrates what success is for followers of Jesus. A productive, prosperous, type A person once decided to go on a retreat at a monastery, being urged by his priest to ‘stop and smell the roses.’ With profound skepticism, and impatience, the person went to the monastery. After a few days of following the monastic prayer schedule and, for this person, enduring the slower pace, solitude, and silence that monastic guests may experience, the person was thoroughly exasperated. Finally, he asked the guest master, “Brother, I’ve been here a little while and nothing seems to happen. What do you all *DO* here anyway?” Filled with compassion for the guest, the monk replied, “We fall, and we get up. We fall and we get up. We fall and we get up.” The driven, super-effective guest could not conceive what the monk meant.

Think about the first part of today’s Gospel; Jesus, himself having fallen and gotten up, comes to a tiny, fallen, terrified group of erstwhile followers. First, he says, *Peace be with you*. Remarkable. Jesus does not accuse or criticize, does not ask them why they fell away, does not humiliate, shame, or condemn them. Jesus gives them peace through his presence with them. Peace is not a prelude to or requisite for Christ’s presence. Jesus’ presence brings peace in our fear.

Next, he says: “*As the Father has sent me, so I send you.*” Unbelievable. The ones who had abandoned and denied him just a few days ago are now commissioned by him to share his merciful love. Obviously, what they will share is their own falling away from and rising with Christ.

Third, Jesus gives the Holy Spirit. It is through God’s power at work in us that we rise and share his loving-kind forgiveness indiscriminately. We live with a radically different life-compass: Our past falls and failings do not define us. We live from the future, into the present. Paul in Ephesians 1:13-14: “...*you also, when you...had believed in Christ, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit...the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people...*” We live now what we will be. We get up by surrendering to God our fallings and failures; we are not imprisoned by what has been; we live into God’s future for us.

Then Jesus says: *If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.*” Jesus gives THE defining activity of God’s people: In Christ’s peace we are sent, filled with the Holy Spirit, to help others get up. As important as worship, prayer and acts of mercy are, they are no substitutes for our ultimate getting up: forgiveness. An ‘unforgiving Christian’ is like a doctor who cannot stand sick people. Forgiveness is troublesome and costly, but it is our vocation, it is the surest sign that we are getting up in Christ.

If anyone asks you what we do at Calvary Church, Americus, a good answer is: we fall and we get up; we fall and we get up; we fall and we get up. Thanks be to God!

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive, be yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, now and for ever. Amen.