

“Have Life” – John 20:19-31 – Easter 2 – Apr 4, 2005

I hate it when this happens – well, not hate it exactly, but I do find it disturbing. What is it that disturbs me? It’s waking up at 3:30 on Sunday morning and realizing that God has just said, “you’re going the wrong direction with your sermon – you need to turn it around.” Well, it wasn’t in so many words that God steered me in the night – in fact it was only one word – ‘apostrophe’.

Yes, the word is ‘apostrophe’, that little doodad that signals a break in the sound when you’re talking – in fact one went by right there in “you’re” to signal a contraction of ‘you’ and ‘are’. The symbol that is used reflects the meaning of the word in its Greek origin, where it was pronounced ap-oh-STROH-fee. The word has two parts, ‘apo’ (against) and ‘strophe’ (stride), and literally means the turn that an actor or an orator would make at each end of pacing the stage – or in English, a ‘turning back’, a reversing of course. That’s what the little apostrophe symbol does – it ‘turns back’.

In any event, that’s the word that kept coming to me in the middle of the night, and I caught on fairly quickly what the significance or the meaning of the word had to do with this incident from the Gospel of John.

That reading is, of course on this Second Sunday in Easter, the appearance of Jesus as the risen Christ in the room where the disciples had gathered. The text tells us, “and the doors of the house ... were locked for fear ...” I guess so! Things were going so bad so fast for the disciples. A few short days ago all was cheering and happiness. Jesus’ time had come, and so had theirs. Riding the wave, his followers had exulted in the power, the attention, the royal welcome. And now, all that glittered had turned not to gold but to lead, or at least to a stone covering a tomb. His closest followers were devastated - Jesus was dead; arrested, tried, convicted and executed. Their whole world had collapsed, and it still hadn’t stopped ... his body was missing, Mary had gone off the deep end with grief, babbling about seeing him walking and talking near the tomb, and now the temple police are after us! We didn’t steal his body – why would we? How are we ever going to get out of here without getting arrested? The fear, the anguish, the terror. And now the ultimate terror, this person who looks like Jesus standing there. Are we losing our minds? Who is this? Is it a trick? “Peace be with you” How can there be any peace when our world is disintegrating around our ears?!

“Peace be with you.” Could the disciples have even heard it? They must have, because it was remembered and written, and perhaps in the confusion and terror it was one of those curious details that sticks in the mind. One word was sufficient for Mary to recognize him, but the disciples needed more than that. Perhaps no words would have been sufficient to break through their anguish and terror, but the silent words of action reached and touched the frightened disciples, as Jesus showed them his hands, and his sides. It’s ironic, for it was the signs of his death that were enough to break through to them and convince them he was alive. Signs of death, turned into signs of life. Life demonstrated and confirmed with the gift of the very breath of life, the Holy Spirit. Can you imagine the scene? Can you imagine the giddy excitement of all in that room, apostrophe’d, turned-around from grief and terror into glad exultation by the unbelievable appearance of Jesus, risen from the grave? Can you imagine how they must have sounded like fools, babbling to each other? I wonder if they had the character to apologize to Mary, now that they were behaving the same as she had? Can’t you just see how they appeared to Thomas, swarming around him, each one a little bit louder and more excited than the other as they try to convince him they had indeed seen Jesus? What chaos! What confusion! Who can blame Thomas for being somewhat skeptical?

And then it was Thomas’ turn. A week later, just when things were settling down, just when the trauma was turning to a memory, just when the disciples were starting to get a grip on life again, once again Jesus stands among them. Again their reaction must have been one of fear, for again he calms them, “peace be with you”. Jesus demonstrated both that he already knew what Thomas needed,

and also that he was (and is) the compassionate Lord, full of understanding and caring. “Put your finger here ... reach out and touch me”, he invites Thomas, who can only respond with all the passion that is in him, “my Lord and my God!” What a powerful, spine-tingling moment it was then, and still is now. Once again the signs of death become the signs of life, and a believer inherits that life.

Now here’s where the apo-strophe becomes relevant. I think most of us slip into thinking this is the end of the story – Thomas is convinced, Thomas believes in Jesus, the end. Even the closing two verses of the chapter provide a wrap-up kind of atmosphere, with what sounds a lot like a final footnote, that even the NRSV titles with a concluding “The Purpose of This Book”. There is another chapter that follows, with accounts of more appearances of Jesus to his disciples, but there is a certain finality to the verse “But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

But let’s apply that apostrophe – let’s turn it around. Let’s view Thomas’ statement of belief as being not so much that he believed in Jesus (which he certainly did), but that he believed he could live with that knowledge. Now what we have is not an ending, but a beginning. This is the most pivotal moment and point of the whole Christ story. This is the moment when the disciples are transformed into the apostles (literally, “sent back” or “sent against” or “sent out”). This is that moment when they had to start to come to terms with the fact that their belief in Jesus was not just a “Hosanna” kind of joy ride, but that they had committed their entire life to him. Thomas may well have been the first to see clearly the depth of and the significance of what believing in the resurrection of Jesus might entail.

In our 21st Century, highly-independent mind set that sounds a bit like a life sentence in prison, doesn’t it – committing one’s whole life entirely to Jesus. But certainly that’s what the early disciples of Jesus did, but instead of seeing it as giving up life, they clearly understood it as having received life, new and meaningful and fulfilling life. These encounters with the risen Christ were for them, and for us, not the end of the story but just the momentous beginning of a life-long story. “That you may believe ... and that you may have life”. That is not a summary of what had happened, it is a statement of purpose of what will happen.

It’s amazing to see how the church, and by that I mean most of the Western or North American church, has lost sight of what Thomas (and the other disciples) saw. Somehow we (again, a very broad ‘we’, but one that includes ourselves) drifted into a misunderstanding that being a follower of Christ, a Christian, was about membership, was a kind of status that could be claimed or conferred. Churches of all kinds across our land fell into what is now being described as a “membership model”; indeed, our whole denomination is somewhat geared that way. Statistics are kept and reported on members, and great attention has been paid to Reg Bibby’s observations and conclusions as to the trends of those statistics. Some church growth strategies even attempt to identify with great clarity several categories of congregations based on size, and some congregations or at least church leaders have fallen into the trap of thinking that changing the nature of the congregation to the one of the next higher size will automatically cause the congregation to grow to be that large.

There is a different kind of understanding emerging recently that attempts to recapture the essence of Thomas’ insight - and indeed that of the other disciples as well, and of the faithful of the early church. You’ve heard me mention it recently, and I suspect you’ll hear a lot more about it over the next decade or so. That ‘new’ understanding is called the “missional church” movement, and the term comes from a deliberate attempt to recapture the word ‘mission’. At the heart of this approach is an understanding that each congregation has a mission, is being called by God to a particular ministry in Christ’s name. Key to this approach is a related understanding that we need to also recapture the concept of what being a disciple of Christ entails.

Perhaps the main reason why a renewed or revived understanding discipleship is crucial as a congregation moves from a membership model to a missional model is that the focus of the congregation shifts at the same time. A congregation steeped in the 'membership' model tends to look inward and focus on itself, believing that the church exists to serve its members. These congregations are, in their later stages, characterized by declining numbers, aging members, worsening finances, undue attention to maintaining the building, existing programs and committees, and often talk only in terms of 'survival'. Expectations are mutually low – the members don't expect much of their church, and the church doesn't expect much from its members. I think if I asked you to name three such congregations you could do so without much trouble.

Congregations that are moving towards what is being called the 'missional' model have done the apostrophe thing – they have turned their thinking around, and see the congregation existing not to serve the members, but that the members as committed disciples of Christ offer themselves in serving others in Christ's name. The whole focus moves from inward-looking to outward-acting, and there are such congregations that are alive, vibrant, financially-healthy and growing. I believe we are one of those congregations – barely started out on the road to whatever Emmaus God is calling us to, and with much to learn, but well-started on that road already.

This whole field is somewhat new, although the basics are as old as faith in Jesus, and many are wrestling with what it means to be committed disciples. There are simplistic answers, but no really simple definitions. However, some characteristics are being recognized and documented. Michael Foss, senior pastor at Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Burnsville, Minnesota is one of the emerging authors in this area, and in his book *Power Surge* (2000, Augsburg Fortress) offers and elaborates upon these six characteristics: **PRAY** daily; **WORSHIP** weekly, **READ** the Bible, **SERVE** at and beyond the congregation, **RELATE** to others to encourage spiritual growth, and **GIVE** of your time, talents and resources. Others with demonstrated experience provide different details, but similar perspectives. Common to them all is the need for Christians to recapture the essence of being a disciple of Christ.

Frightening? Certainly! Frightening enough to make you wonder if you're up to it, to wonder if your faith is strong enough, whether it's worth it to believe. Starts to sound a bit like Thomas, doesn't it? But the answer was there, provided for Thomas by the risen Christ, demonstrating with his hands and his side that He was willing to lead by example those who would follow, and by his resurrection that He had the power to give the life He promised those who would follow. That same answer is there for us as well, still provided by the risen Christ, still with the promise that those who can, and will, and do say, "I believe", will indeed find new, rich, rewarding, fulfilling life.