

Edina Morningside Community Church  
United Church of Christ  
Sunday, April 3, 2016  
Rev. Howard K. Bell  
*Sending*

In our lectionary, Easter Season 2016 began last Sunday and continues through for fifty days until Pentecost, which we will celebrate on May 15th. So, how has your life been changed by Easter Sunday 2016? Last week I suggested that God could actually change the reality of our lives by our experience of the resurrection of Jesus in our lives today. I also said that I hoped that each of us might have a deep personal encounter with the resurrected Jesus by remembering the power of Jesus' words and by remembering the power of his ministry on behalf of the poor the outcasts of society.

So, how has your life been changed? If not much has been different this past week, you still have six more weeks of this Easter Season to experience resurrection in your life. And after, that, we will experience both Pentecost and the Pentecost Season which lasts for another twenty-six weeks leading up to the Advent 2016. Then our story recycles yet again. Actually, I believe that transformation, new life, a resurrected life is possible with each new day of our lives; with each new moment; with each new breath.

I must confess, that my life this past week has seemed to be fairly comparable to my life before last Easter Sunday.

I endeavored to fulfill my responsibilities to serve in Interim Ministry with you – to write, reflect, listen to, care for, pray for, plan worship, prep for this sermon, communicate on email, in person and on the phone; and to seek to be open to the call of the Still Speaking God to new developments and opportunities for and with this beloved faith community. No radical transformation in my professional life occurred last week. I also continued life pretty much along the same track as pre-Easter in my personal life. I also am looking forward to a week off from the responsibilities of ministry with you as I start a week of vacation this Tuesday.

I share some of these aspects of my life hoping that together we can identify with how difficult it is to be a follower of Jesus 24/7. How difficult it is to enter into a new reality based on Jesus' resurrection. What are the challenges and opportunities you have faced this week? From Facebook, I have learned that many of you have taken a Spring Break and are enjoying times of relaxation and renewal. Some of you also are working on fulfilling your commitment to love, cherish and honor your spouse. Others of you are grieving the current loss of a loved one or are reminded of past losses when family celebrations occur. Others are facing overwhelming emotions of depression and despair or any number of other of life's emotional and mental challenges. Others are facing "the crud" or even more difficult chronic or life-threatening illnesses. It is my prayer that we have compassion for ourselves when facing so many demands and challenges while also seeking to experience the power of Jesus' resurrection during this Easter season.

In regard to our text today from the Book of Acts, Biblical Commentator, Kathryn M. Matthews, says the following: *“Our short passage from the Book of Acts, the story of the earliest Christians, is a marvelous glimpse of the passionate, exuberant conviction of Peter and his companions, the ones who walked “clueless” with Jesus and finally “got it” when the Holy Spirit came upon them at Pentecost, several chapters earlier in this Book of Acts. Now they feel downright compelled to speak the truth as they see it, even when they’re face to face with a body that we might compare to both the Supreme Court and a panel of the most esteemed theology professors of our time.”*<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, on this Second Sunday of Easter 2016, we are allowed a glimpse into the life of the earliest Christians after they not only had seen the risen Jesus, but also had received the gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. I am certain that the lives of these early followers of Jesus were far more challenging than our lives, today. We are not faced with imprisonment for sharing our faith. Yet faced with imprisonment and worse, we read; *“But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than any human authority.”* (Acts 6:29).

If we were to experience transformation this Easter season, are there ways that we might, individually or as a faith community, feel called to give witness to our faith in a more public way? Again, we hear some insights from Commentator Matthews: *“Are we merely passive observers, hearers, of the good news: does it stop here, with us? Are we afraid, or do we feel inadequate, to share something that has transformed our lives and given them meaning?”*<sup>2</sup> Let us also pray for discernment as we consider a new reality for ourselves and for this faith community during this Easter Sunday.

Our second text today from the Gospel of John, finds the early disciples locked in their room out of fear. The text says that it was out of fear of the Jews. However, commentators all agree that this is not accurate. The disciples were Jews. There were divisions within Judaism and there were challenges with how the various religious leaders were entangled with the Roman Empire. It is the Roman Empire whom the disciples feared.

Locking themselves in a room. This seems a strange response to the resurrection, does it not? No dancing in the streets. No expressions of jubilation. When we hear this text, we are often drawn to, and even identify with, the experience of doubting Thomas. However, all of the disciples were huddled together in that room. This suggests that all of the disciples may have been doubters in regard to the resurrection. Their doubt was resolved in the moment in today’s text that the risen Jesus appears before them in their locked room showing all of them – except for Thomas who was absent - his hands and his side. It seems that Thomas gets a bum rap. No wonder that Thomas also wanted the same experience the others had had in his absence.

Commentator Matthews also helps us to enter into this moment with these words: *“And suddenly, in the midst of their fear and confusion, there he was, not with angels, trumpets, or legions, but quietly, without a hint of anger. No accusations, no trouble or turmoil. Only*

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.ucc.org/worship\\_samuel\\_sermon\\_seeds\\_april\\_3\\_2016](http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_april_3_2016)

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.ucc.org/worship\\_samuel\\_sermon\\_seeds\\_april\\_3\\_2016](http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_april_3_2016)

*peace.*"<sup>3</sup> Jesus' first words to his disciples are: "*Peace be with you.*" (John 20: 19b) This is a remarkable expression by Jesus given the fact that he was entering into a room of his closest followers who had abandoned him in his time of greatest need, and even Peter who had denied him three times. He could have scolded them for their lack of faith, for their not remembering his words, for their doubts. Rather, he begins his interaction with "*Peace be with you.*" May we also experience this peace offered by Jesus in our experience of resurrection 2016. May we be forgiven our doubt and all our shortcomings.

The next key phrase spoken by the risen Jesus in today's text from the Gospel of John is "*As the Aba God has sent me, so I send you.*" (John 20:21) Even in this first appearance of the risen Jesus to the followers of Jesus, Jesus makes it clear that there is a purpose to his resurrection beyond personal salvation. Jesus was sent by God and Jesus now is commanding that his followers be sent into the world to fulfill his ministry.

Jesus not only sends us, but Jesus also equips us for the journey. Commentator Matthews continues: "*And then, the very next thing, he gives them the gift of the Holy Spirit – he doesn't just give it to them, but breathes the Spirit into them.*"<sup>4</sup> This is yet another aspect of a text that seems to have escaped my notice over the years. I remember the text as the risen Jesus providing physical evidence of his resurrection by showing the mark of the nails. I have not remembered these words, "*He breathed on them*" (Acts 20: 22). Eugene Peterson in his adaptation "*The Message*" says, "*He breathed into them.*" I find this level of intimacy and this connection to the risen Jesus to be more powerful than seeing his hands and his feet.

Jesus was sent by God and is commanding each of us who claim to be his followers today to be sent to fulfill his ministry. I believe we are not called simply to witness to the resurrection so that others might believe, but we are called to go out into the world on behalf of the poor and the outcast. We are called to work to bring God's love and justice to all God's children. With the breath of the Holy Spirit breathed into us by the risen Jesus, we can do no other. Please pray for discernment for the ways that God is sending you. May I suggest a couple? Is God sending you to say "yes" when asked to be a lay leader here at church in the coming year? Is God sending Edina Morningside Church into the world to work on behalf of the poor and the outcast? If so, to which specific ministries is God sending us? Is God sending our faith community to grow in numbers? Is God sending our faith community to also be revitalized in our engagement in ministry? May the resurrection we experience in Easter Season 2016 lead us to answer the call of Jesus to be sent into the world. Peace be with you. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.ucc.org/worship\\_samuel\\_sermon\\_seeds\\_april\\_3\\_2016](http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_april_3_2016)

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.ucc.org/worship\\_samuel\\_sermon\\_seeds\\_april\\_3\\_2016](http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_april_3_2016)