

"Why Go to Church?"

Acts 4:32-35; Ps.133; John 20:19-31

Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church

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Easter 2, April 19, 2009

There are many reasons not to go to church. If you asked those who don't attend, why they don't, you would probably come up with a list that includes things like these:

- I don't need to go to church to be a Christian
- I can commune with God in nature, out on the lake or on the golf course
- The church is full of hypocrites
- I don't get anything out of the service
- They're always asking for money
- I'm running like crazy all week long. I need some down time. We need some family time. Church just doesn't fit into my schedule
- I don't get along with the pastor
- I don't like the music or the organist
- I don't like the Christian Ed. director or the person who always sits in "my" pew
- We're still very loyal to our old church in Cincinnati
- We'll be moving soon anyway, so there's no point in putting down any roots
- We did attend while the children were young, but now they're all up and grown and moved away. We did it for them.

Like I said, it isn't hard to come up with a list of reasons why people don't attend. How easy is it to make a list of reasons why anyone would want to go to church?

We are here today, obviously, and for a whole host of reasons. Why did you come? To hear the children's choir? To reconnect with friends? To please your mother or your father? To get something off your chest? To hear a word from the Lord?

Today's Scripture points out a key reason to attend church that I think is worth mentioning and remembering.

The Gospel writer John reports on the events of Easter evening:

- Doors bolted shut, fear filling the room
- Everyone was accounted for but the Disciple Thomas
- Jesus Appears out of thin air! Speaking words of peace
- He shows them his hands and his side.

The disciples were overjoyed! Jesus breathed on them the Holy Spirit and commissioned them to spread the good news. Their first assignment is to tell the good news to Thomas - - who refuses to believe it. So much for their special task given to them by the risen Lord himself!

Thomas had missed church that night and as a result he missed Jesus. Jesus could have appeared to the solitary Thomas wherever he was that night, but he didn't. Jesus appeared to those who were gathered together. Could this have something to do with his promise that wherever 2 or 3 are gathered he is there as well?

One of the first things we learn is that where Christ is, is where the church is. This does not mean that Christ is not a part of our individual lives, or that it only "counts" when we're together. It points to the fact that faith is more than just personal, "me and Jesus" piety. There is a value in the community of believers and we are meant to be together.

The New Testament refers to the church as a family, a household, a flock, a race, a body, a holy nation. All of these are relational, gathering words.

The point the Bible is trying to make is that there is no "home correspondence course" in salvation. Christ made his presence known in the midst of his gathered disciples, and the same thing happens each and every time Christians gather.

On the face of it, one might say that a good reason for coming to church is this: if you aren't there, there's a good chance you are going to miss something special - a Jesus sighting; evidence of the risen Christ at work among his people.

Perhaps this may account for the fact that Thomas was with them a week later. Perhaps he had made up his mind not to be absent again. Even so, what kind of a week do you think that was for all of them? John doesn't tell us anything about it.

But think about it: What has the past week been like for you? How has it unfolded? Have you been waiting for news about a job or a diagnosis? How slowly or quickly has the time gone by waiting for an appointment or working on a project or hoping that a loved one might call? Have you been at odds with close friends? Struggling to get your mind around news that is just too fantastic to believe?

Depending on what we are waiting for, a week can either fly by or seem like an eternity. What kind of week do you think Thomas had? How about the other disciples?

After Thomas issued his ultimatum on Easter evening John takes us immediately to today and the gathering of the disciples this evening. Although they were unable to convince Thomas of the reality of the resurrection of Jesus, apparently the Peace with which Jesus had blessed them with was sufficient to enable them to be at peace with Thomas and his lack of belief and his unwillingness to trust their words.

A week later Thomas is there. They didn't kick him out, nor did he go off on his own. There was room in the fellowship, even for Thomas.

Perhaps this was due, in part, to the disciples' realization that they had been just as doubtful as Thomas until Jesus appeared to them and they were confident that Jesus would sort this one out too.

They were not responsible for his faith, or lack of it. All they were responsible for was giving the glory to God with their praise and thanksgiving and to be a community of hope, peace, joy and love, confident that God would provide all that they (and Thomas) would ever need.

This is a story of Grace in Action.

One of the beautiful things that can happen in church is that we can practice the connection between faith and forgiveness, and get ourselves out of the driver's seat and allow God to shape us into his body.

I have seen God's gifts of faith and forgiveness at work among us. I have seen how we have come together and worked together even when we have not always been of the same mind on the issues before us. I have watched as we have extended grace and tolerance toward each

other as the love of Christ has bound us together, warts and all, into his body.

Thomas wanted to be part of that body, but he had his ironclad doubts. You may have ironclad doubts of your own. How can we love you into the community of faith? How can we practice a hospitality that is broad enough to leave room for each of us and allow room for the possibility that God will be true to his promise and will meet us here?

We gather around this old, old story because we know it has the potential to bring new life. We know it is by practicing the customs of Christ, eating the food of heaven, praying our way to peace and wholeness and seeing one another not as strangers but as brothers and sisters in Christ that love is born and hope is renewed. It is by experiencing the risen body of Christ in community that faith has the potential to develop, sometimes even in spite of our best efforts to resist it.

Jerry Cook shares a story in his book titled: Some Things I have Learned Since I Knew it All. It's a story about when he had open-heart surgery. Jerry was the pastor of a large church in Oregon. That church believed in and practiced healing. During his recovery a woman in his church asked him, "Were you embarrassed to have a heart attack?" Jerry assured her that he wasn't embarrassed.

Later, after he recovered, he had a visit from a man who was fearful facing the prospect of his own bypass surgery. "I want to see your scars," said the man.

Jerry took off his shirt. The man gently traced with his finger the red scar that ran down Jerry's chest. The man said, "The doctor says the most painful part of the operation will be the surgery on my legs.

They're going to take out veins from my calf to use in the heart bypass."

He looked at Jerry and asked, "Can I see your legs?"

Jerry rolled up his pants. The man got on his knees to touch the scars on Jerry's legs. When he rose to his feet there were tears in his eyes. "Thank you," he said. "Now I have hope." He had heard about the surgery from others but it was touching Jerry's scars that made the difference for him, made it real and made recovery real too. It gave him hope.

Touching Jesus' wounds gave Thomas hope and faith, and the blessed assurance that the Easter story is not some fairy tale. It is a faith tale. It is true: Christ is alive! Death has been conquered.

This old, old story that we love to tell is the story that has shaped us as a body and claimed us as a community. Like the song says, we love to tell the story "because we know 'tis true. It satisfies our longings as nothing else can do."

The story of Jesus answers our fears, gives us hope, reminds us of the importance of grace and binds us together in love. And so we rehearse God's new world order, inaugurated at the cross. We practice living together in a new way, in the hope that God's grace might so infuse our life together that our individual, common lives are also transformed.

And we rejoice in the Good News, because there's just simply too much bad news in our world and we need to remember whose world it really is and that we are called to be witnesses to this bigger and better story of God's redeeming love for us and for all. AMEN.