

“Stirred, Not Shaken”

John 20:19-31

2nd Sunday of Easter – April 23, 2006

Sermon by Jan Edmiston

You’ve come back.

Maybe you were away last Sunday, visiting family or friends for the Easter holiday. Or maybe you were right here. But today, you are back – the faithful few who have returned for the Second Sunday of Easter.

Because this is a more intimate gathering than the First Sunday of Easter, my hope is that we can ponder more personal things today. Get a little closer. Talk about those things we would probably not shout from the rooftops about ourselves: The things we try to keep secret. The fears that make us toss and turn at night. The worries that bring wrinkles to our foreheads. The doubts we have about God.

Here’s a confession for you: I have a hard time believing people when they tell me:

- they aren’t afraid of anything,
- when they tell me they are absolutely sure 24/7, 365 days a year that God is on top of everything and they’ve never experienced a doubt in all their years as a Christian,
- when they tell me they have nothing to confess.

I visited a parishioner a few years ago who told me that she didn’t sin anymore, and I was so surprised (and fairly certain she was mistaken) that all I could say was, “Wow. Congratulations for that.” But I went home, knowing she was wrong.

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Thomas was the “show me” disciple and I love him for it. He had followed Jesus for three years in the prime of his life. He had been there when Jesus healed the sick, fed the 5000, and preached in the temple. He heard the parables firsthand. He was there when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. And then . . . Jesus died.

And even when 10 of his closest friends told him they had seen Jesus and that Jesus was alive – *he was risen from the dead* – Thomas didn’t trust them. He needed a sure sign. He needed to see Jesus with his own eyes. It was going to take more than words to make him believe. Thomas was so real. He dealt with this situation like most of us would have dealt with it. He has his doubts.

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A friend of mine who attended a Christian college told me that attending that college was brutal on her faith. A Christian college. Brutal on her faith.

She had some close friends there, but people never talked about their fears or failures because they believed that others would call them “unspiritual.” There was a constant façade of niceness. Everyone pretended that their lives were perfectly polished and they had no fears. And so people were very lonely.

Nobody could share their true feelings, their true fears because someone might “out” him or her as a faithless heretic. To be Christian, it was believed, meant that you never had doubts, you never had questions, you never had fears of any kind.

The funny thing is that the disciples in this story (read today from John) are the opposite of those Christian students. These disciples were terrified. They had serious doubts. And Jesus still loved them.

But most importantly: Jesus gave them something that calmed their fears and made it possible to go out and do amazing things.

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It was evening on the same day that Mary Magdalene had discovered the empty tomb. According to John’s version of Easter morning, there was a lot of running. Mary – after finding the tomb empty – ran to get Peter and another disciple. Those two disciples ran back to the tomb and yes, it was empty. Just like Mary said.

Then Peter and the other disciple went “home.”¹ Or did they?

“Home” for Peter was Capernaum -- a fishing village on the Sea of Galilee, about 80 miles north. But most scholars don’t think he went to that home. “Home” here was probably a local place in Jerusalem, maybe where the disciples had been staying for Passover.²

That evening, 10 of the disciples secretly met in a house, hiding behind locked doors “for fear of the Jews.” We don’t know whose house this was, or where it was. Jerusalem? The outskirts of Jerusalem? We don’t know.

¹ John 20:10

²Brown, Raymond E. "The Gospel According to John: XIII-XI" **The Anchor Bible Series** Volume 29A. New York: Doubleday & Company, 1970.

But the disciples were afraid, and for good reason. It's not spelled out here, but we can imagine reasons why they would have been afraid:

- They were afraid because the authorities had just tortured and crucified their rabbi, and it was a matter of time before those same authorities came looking for them -- the rabbi's disciples.
- They were afraid because rumors were swirling about the empty tomb and the word on the street was that someone had taken the body. And it was assumed that the disciples were the ones who had taken it so that they could tell people that Jesus was not dead. He had risen from the grave. Of course, the authorities would be looking for that body. And the first places they would look would be in the homes and meeting places of the disciples.
- They were afraid because they had all betrayed their Lord. Not just Judas. Judas did it for the money, but they did it to save their own skins. And so, if there was any faith left within them, they must have feared God's wrath. They had let God down. They had abandoned Jesus.

And so they had locked the doors . . . which might have worked if they were hiding merely from the Jewish and Roman authorities. But God can get past locked doors.

Jesus suddenly appeared -- locks or no locks.

And if the disciples were afraid before, imagine how they felt to be sitting there in the dark, with only an oil lamp or two, whispering to avoid being heard, when suddenly Jesus was standing there with them, saying -- ironically -- "Peace be with you."³ He said it twice.

Peace be with you.

Notice how gentle and helpful Jesus was here. He greeted them like gentlemen. He showed them where he had been wounded.

And he could have blasted them. "Where were you guys?!" "Why did you leave me there by myself?" "Didn't you see what they were doing to me?" "Didn't you see them whipping me?"

He could have shaken his fists. He could have bellowed. He could have cast them into the outer darkness.

³ "Peace be with you" was a common Jewish greeting.

But instead he gave them a new job to do: As the Father has sent me, so I send you.

He breathed on them, giving them new life.⁴ And then he said something that set them free: He forgave them. And he told them to forgive others.

*If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them;
if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.*

This was a rather scandalous statement to make – one that had gotten Jesus in trouble in the past.⁵ In traditional Jewish thought, only God could forgive sins and it took a temple sacrifice to seal the deal.

But here, Jesus seemed to be saying that he forgave them and that they too had the power to forgive others. They themselves were now temples of God. Within them, forgiveness could happen.⁶

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Every Sunday, after our prayers of confession, a human being has the audacity to stand up here and say: “Your sins are forgiven.” Or “Our sins are forgiven.” In the name of Jesus Christ.

I don’t absolve you of your sins. The liturgist is not releasing you. *God* is doing it, because of what has been said here by Jesus.

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So . . . what does all this mean to those disciples, and to those of us who try to be disciples today? People trying to follow Jesus.

We are not locked behind closed doors in fear. And yet we have fears. We are here in this house of worship. And yet we have doubts. Maybe it’s a day of many doubts. Or maybe it’s a day with very few doubts.

The truth is that, like the disciples, we are often shaken. But Jesus wants us to be stirred. Stirred, not shaken.⁷

What does that phrase remind you of? Probably not the cup of communion.

⁴ Genesis 2:7

⁵ Luke 5:21

⁶ Wright, N.T. *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is*. Intervarsity Press, 1999.

⁷ I’ve seen this idea – “Stirred, not Shaken” – in the past couple of weeks (the title of a recent Newsweek article, for example) which was frustrating, because it looks like I stole someone’s idea. While it’s surely not original, I spoke of this last fall as an idea for Fairlington Presbyterian’s 60th anniversary theme in 2007.

I was thinking that since next year -- 2007 -- is the 60th anniversary of Fairlington Presbyterian Church -- 007 -- that a good theme for this congregation might be: STIRRED, NOT SHAKEN. It's what Jesus wants from his disciples.

Jesus found his disciples shaken by what had happened in the past few days in Jerusalem. But he wanted them -- not shaken -- but stirred. Stirred by the Holy Spirit. So stirred by the miracle of the resurrection, so inspired by the power to forgive each other and themselves, so filled with God's peace -- that they could indeed go out and do great things in God's name.

I believe that God still wants his disciples to be stirred, not shaken. God wants us to be those disciples. And the church of Jesus Christ will never thrive unless we are stirred -- not shaken.

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Which brings me, of course, to martinis.

James Bond -- whose "license to kill" number in her Majesty's Secret Service is, of course, 007 -- is known for drinking his martinis shaken not stirred. "The very phrase conjures up images of Sean Connery, natty in his tuxedo, in a room with the beautiful double agent. James Bond has probably created more martini drinkers than all the gin joints in the world."⁸

Scholars have actually studied Bond's shaken, not stirred policy and found that he is a bit of a heretic, at least in the potent potables department. A real martini is stirred, not shaken because, according to Professor Christopher Bell, Head of the Physiology Department at Trinity College, Dublin, the drink that James Bond drinks is actually called a "Bradford." (Yes, scholars indeed study such things.) According to Professor Bell, what Bond drinks is not a real martini at all. A real martini is stirred not shaken (as opposed to shaken not stirred.)

<p>Is it possible, that <i>we are not real disciples at all</i> if we live our lives shaken, not stirred?</p>

Being real and being real disciples is the crux⁹ of the matter here. We are going to have fears as human beings. We might have moments of doubts. But if we are serious about following Jesus -- and that's what it means to be a Christian -- following Jesus. Not being members of a church. Not being labeled a Presbyterian or a Methodist or a Catholic, but following Jesus Christ and trying to live as he lived -- then we must live as a stirred, not a shaken people.

⁸ Quote from <http://www.straightdope.com/mailbag/mmartini.html>

⁹ Pun intended.

We in the church are among the worst offenders. Why should any of us be surprised that so many congregations – especially in the mainline traditions – are dying if we are still fearful, hiding out, hiding our faith.

Something happened to change the disciples of Jesus from terrified and shaken witnesses of a horrifying event to empowered and stirred witnesses with a clear call to serve. What was it?

Did it come from seeing Jesus which proved the resurrection? Or did it come from having his breath permeate their lungs which filled them with the Holy Spirit – or at least their first experience of it.

The point of Easter is not just coming to one great, big, inspiring worship service. The point of Easter is to be sent out into a hostile world where there are so many scary things to worry about -- but we are less scared because we are empowered – stirred – by the Holy Spirit.

As we begin to celebrate our 60th year in 2007, we want the congregation to thrive! We want our faith to be renewed.

Even more inspired than martini experts are church growth experts who say that church growth only happens when:

A distinct group of people expect the Spirit of God to challenge, direct, and empower them to reach their potential of being the church in the world today.¹⁰

It's okay to be afraid. There are many things to fear. But not forever.

If we in the church live by fear instead of faith, this church will not survive.

If we take our faith seriously at all, if we take the power of God seriously at all, we must be a church of stirred – not shaken – disciples.

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Today, when we baptize Evan O'Neil, I want you to listen very carefully to the promises that will be made on his behalf:

Do you trust in God?
Do you promise to be God's faithful disciple?
Do you promise to share the things of Christ?

¹⁰ Woods, C. Jeff. "Evaluation and Church Renewal" *User Friendly Evaluation*. Alban Institute, 1995.

This is what we are talking about here. It is our hope that all of us – and eventually this child – would be real disciples, stirred by the breath-giving power of God.

To have peace in our souls – especially in a world filled with terrible trials – that is just one of the blessings of following this Jesus who still whispers: Peace be with you.

Let us pray:

Holy God, you have appeared in cloudy and clear ways. You come to the doubters, to the fearful, to those who cry beside graves. We pray you would come to us, breathe on us, stir us. Amen.