

Now What? - Sermon Based on John 20:19-31
by David Hindman on Sunday, May 1, 2011

What a difference a week makes. The brass is gone; the lilies that adorned this space have been carried away. The crowd's smaller. Even the half-priced Easter candy at Martin's has been replaced by items for the next big holiday. Now what!?

Not much, according to a friend who attended a service elsewhere last week. The pastor at that church preached from the gospel of John's story of Jesus' crucifixion. His special focus was on Jesus' words from the cross, "It is finished," or more accurately, "It is accomplished."

According to my friend the preacher's message was that Jesus' death has done everything that needs to be done for our salvation and the world's healing. There's nothing more to do; we can simply sit back and enjoy the benefits of Christ's death and celebrate God's goodness.

There's some truth there. If things have been set right between God and us, it's all been God's doing. We're saved by grace, not by our works. There's nothing we can do to earn God's favor or deserve God's love. God's the lead actor; we simply respond to God's grace shown to us. In the dance of healing and hope God comes and asks if we'd like to be the divine partner. God takes the lead and is an agile dancer. But we have a part to play, too. We have to take God's offered hand. The dance becomes

elegantly graceful only if we follow the lead and don't try to go our own way. The beauty of movement happens when two dancers move as one, not when we act like a lifeless dummy being carried around or just aren't that into it. But as I understood my friend's report, that preacher really meant there's nothing for us to do. God's already done it all at the cross. All we do is await the next good thing coming our way, like being at the departure gate waiting for the next flight out.

I can't think of anything more mind-numbingly awful. If being a Christ follower is simply waiting in life's departure terminal for a heavenly destination, I'd rather take a bus. At least that way I'd have more involvement in how the trip goes and enjoy the scenery along the way. There has to be more to life than just being a place-saver in a divine waiting area. How utterly boring if Christ did it all and all I do is sit and wait.

That preacher should've read farther in John, at least to the story we just heard. The disciples are gathered on Easter evening somewhere in Jerusalem. They're hiding fearfully from the authorities behind locked doors. They've heard Mary Magdalene's report that Jesus is alive but apparently they're not buying it. But then Jesus shows up. He's not hindered by locked doors. He simply shows up in the midst of his friends and shows

them his nail-scarred hands so they know he's the real deal. And their fear becomes joy.

But they don't just sit there. Jesus breathes on them and fills them with the Holy Spirit. Sound familiar? In Genesis God creates a mud pie person and breathes spirit/wind/breath into it and it becomes a living soul. And later the prophet Ezekiel envisions a valley full of dry bones that come together to form lifeless human beings. And God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the wind/spirit/breath and when it enters them they stand up mighty and alive.

So on that first Easter night these terrified disciples are given joy and the presence of Jesus and life-giving Holy Spirit. It's as if Jesus gets inside them. Jesus' spirit power enters them, Christ in them bringing new life and power. They are new creations that only God can birth. The Jesus life is now theirs. The Good News? It's ours as well.

But instead of sitting around waiting, Jesus gives them with a job to do, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Jesus' work is now theirs - and ours - to do. And what is that work? To be the presence of God let loose in the world. To be the face of God so others will come to know there's a God of unrelenting love at the heart of the universe. To be signs of holiness and hope by living joy and welcome and healing and generosity and

life so abundant that it can't be kept behind locked doors. That'll keep us busy, but not always out of trouble. Certainly there's room to grow in my life as I breathe in Christ's Spirit and expand my spiritual lungs. I want his life to fill me more so there's less room for anything that's not of Christ.

Jesus comes and stands in the midst of his friends. Apparently meeting and following Jesus is a community event, not solitary. And he meets us as we gather, even in our doubts and fears, and says "Peace be with you." He breathes into us Holy Spirit power to continue his work and ministry, including forgiving sins. That's something to set us apart as followers of a very wise Christ. He's tells us that when we forgive, release happens. We're set free from anger or hurt or revenge or whatever has a death grip on us. They lose their power over us. But if we hold onto them, they stay with us to keep poisoning and fouling our lives. That certainly can happen in individual lives. It can happen in churches. That's why it's a key ingredient for the healing of our faith family to confess, confront and forgive each other when we lose our way or hurt each other. If we hold onto grudges or remember ancient wrongs, they eat us to death like a cancer. They keep us stuck in the past and trapped by our anger or hurt. And we can't go forward to follow the Jesus who goes before us into the future. But if we forgive we're free to move and live. Jesus came to give us life,

abundant life, life that's full. That's why John wrote his gospel story: that we might believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and believing we might have life in his name. In other words, life like his, life shaped by his character.

Two people contrast what happens when we don't forgive and when we do. One is a family member. For whatever reason he's angry with us and chooses to cut himself off from us. He's been holding onto his hurt and anger so long and fiercely that it's paralyzed him. His pain holds onto him so strongly that he can't open his hands to receive the good that might come his way. If his hands open it'll be by the miraculous healing grace of God. But we do still believe in a miracle working God.

The other person is unknown to me except by a picture seared in my mind forever. There's a Vietnam War photo of a young girl running in pain following a napalm attack on her village. She's naked; her clothes and some of her skin have been burned away by that fiery gel from Hell. Kim Phuc was that little girl. Eventually she became a disciple of Christ; her life shows the liberating power of forgiveness. On National Public Radio three years ago she said, "Forgiveness made me free from hatred. I still have many scars on my body and severe pain most days but my heart is cleansed. Napalm is very powerful, but faith, forgiveness, and love are much more

powerful.” That’s resurrection power not even locked doors can keep out. To let Christ’s life breath fill and form us is a life work worth doing. The good news? Such miracles still happen. They can even happen here among us gathered here in our fears and doubts and with our locked away hearts. Jesus still comes and says, “Peace be with you,” and gives us Holy Spirit power to send us on his way, thanks be to God.