

“The Spirit of Coming Out”

Sermon by Joe Summers for April 11th, 2010, the 2nd Sunday of Easter.

It is Easter Sunday. The disciples have been told by Mary Magdalene that she has seen Jesus risen from the grave and that he had told her to tell them that he was ascending to God. How crazy that still sounds.

That night they are hiding behind closed doors, for fear of the authorities. Jesus comes bringing peace, but they don't experience his presence until they see his hands and his side. Somehow, it is only seeing those wounds that convinces them that it's really him resurrected and not some ghost or hallucination. Jesus breathes on them his Holy Spirit. This always makes me think of The Chronicles of Narnia and the courage Peter, Susan, Edward, and Lucy experienced when the Lion Aslan breathed on them. And Jesus then says to them, “As God sent me, even so I send you.” This must not have been exactly welcome news, given what they've just seen happen to him.

This may be why, over a week later, they are still behind closed doors. Again Jesus comes to them. Then we have this marvelous encounter with Thomas and Jesus where again we find that it is somehow the wounds of Jesus through which Thomas experiences grace and is able to experience Jesus as the Risen Lord. And, by the way, here I would like to say that when we hear the word “Believe” in our gospels, it is very hard for us to hear what was really being said, for “belief” has come to mean giving assent to some set of propositions, but at the time of Jesus, it meant something much closer to something like “experience this” or “trust.”

This image of the disciples hiding behind closed doors, even after they have experienced the resurrected Jesus is, I think, something of a biting critique of the church, certainly now, maybe also at the time the gospel was written. According to what we hear from the book of Revelation today, the risen Jesus is “the first born of the dead.” “The first born” means that many, many are meant to follow. According to Paul, the risen Jesus is the first fruits of the new creation. He is the seed which grows out of the dark cold ground of death, growing into a plant whose fruit is for the healing of the nations. And yet, the living community, through which this is all supposed to happen, is behind closed doors, hides from the world, hides behind ideologies and creeds and customs that protect us from--- what?? What is it we're afraid of? How is it we justify not going out? We think we don't know enough, or are not skilled enough, or lack resources? Or is it by telling ourselves it is really bad out there, dangerous, and we might get hurt or even killed? How do we justify it?

I want to talk today about the Spirit of coming out, because it is at the heart of the gospel today, and I think it's at the heart of the good news of our own lives. It is the Spirit that gives us the courage to be. The Spirit and Jesus are calling us out. Now hearing this, some of you may experience a big disconnect, as voices within you say something like “Who is Jesus and what do you mean, he's calling me out?” I want us to wrestle with those voices and the spirits behind them today, for I believe, if we will stand on the truth of our own experience, we will find that

everyone of us has experienced a Spirit calling us to come out, calling us to claim who we are, calling us to come out of our heads and other hiding places, calling us to come out into the world and to encounter it and people in all their fullness. That Spirit that has called us out is, according to the church, the Holy Spirit, the spirit of Jesus. So if we want to know Jesus, who Jesus is, we really need to reflect on this Spirit.

Let's take a minute to remember the power of coming out. What kind of coming out stories have you heard? What kinds of coming out have you experienced?

*The power to claim your sexual orientation or gender identity, even though you grew up in a world that kept telling you that you couldn't, without despising yourself? Where did you get that power to do it, in the face of such messages?

*The power to claim who you are in terms of what you wanted to do with your life, even if it collided with powerful family or societal expectations? How/where did you find the power to overcome the oftentimes overpowering influence of those who love us and/or claim to care for us?

*The power to own who you are in terms of your race, ethnicity, gender or class, your religion or faith path, the power to own a disability, such as a mental illness, the power to admit something terrible that happened to you, all these things that might lead others to stereotype you, to see you as less than a full person, or worse, to reduce you to a victim. When the most powerful voices in our society keep saying it's only those who got who get-- where/how did we find the power to say, "This is who we are. We've also got some holes, some wounds. Alleluia!"

Listen closely to the stories others tell about coming out. Listen closely to your own story. They/you may not use religious language to describe them, but what's being described is a spiritual experience, the powerful mystery of how, what might seem small and insignificant, has allowed us to overcome voices and forces that seemed overpowering.

Until we claim the power of our own experience and the power of the Spirit that enabled us to begin to become who we are, to be born again as ourselves, I don't think we are ever going to find the courage to go out into the world, I don't think we're ever going to be able to find our way into really making sense of the Jesus story and to make it our own.

In a discussion a number of us had this past week, one of the striking things that emerged was how each of us have voices that say, very strongly, you don't belong in this congregation, or this or that group --- because -- you are unworthy or they are unworthy, they are all that way but you are this way, you are this way but they are that way. In this same community we have folks who hear voices that say they don't belong, because they don't really feel connected to Jesus or the Jesus story. At the very same time we have people whose voices tell them they don't belong here, because they do really connect with Jesus and the Jesus story. One described her own ambivalent journey towards Jesus by quoting Ann Lamott, who said that Jesus was like a cat

that just showed up and wouldn't go away, so finally she let him in.

Whoever we are, wherever we come down, we seem destined to hear voices that say we can't be who we are and be part of this or that group. For me this is the essence of the devil, who is always trying to try to rob us of our inheritance, which is the reality that we do belong, here and everywhere.

There should be no more maiming or killing ourselves to fit in, no more high-tailing it, trying to find the margins of the margins, in hopes of finding some empty space that nobody else has defined as their own. Either we live belonging here and now, or we will keep postponing belonging anywhere, indefinitely.

The power of coming out is the power of belonging. It is the resurrection power we hear in Paul's writings but perhaps most powerfully in 2nd Corinthians (chapter six) where he contrasts how others view him and the early church with how they experience things:

“We are treated as imposters, and yet we are true. We are treated as unknown, and yet we are well known. We are treated as though we were being punished, and yet, behold, we live. We are treated as though we are sorrowful, yet we are always rejoicing. We are treated as if we are poor, and yet we make many rich. We are treated as if we have nothing, and yet we own the world.”

We own the world. If we really want the meek, the little ones (our children, the poor, those always pushed to the margins) to inherit the earth, we ourselves cannot stay hidden behind closed doors. Jesus is resurrected and is seated at the right hand of God, yet the vast majority of the peoples of the earth continue to allow themselves to be ruled by authorities, leaders, that don't have their true interests at heart and traditions and institutions that are often irrelevant to what they are really facing. But the authorities aren't the problem. It's our relationship to them that's the problem. It's our attempts to either blame them, or make them be responsible for everything, rather than exercising our own responsibility that is the problem. You cannot be free and blame others for everything. You cannot take responsibility for everything--unless you are free. Freedom and responsibility go hand in hand, and until we come out and claim our freedom and response--ability (the ability we have to respond) that is ours through the power of the Holy Spirit, our planet, our fellow creatures, and our fellow human beings are going to remain in the tomb, even though it is resurrection time!

So let us go forth living resurrection, practicing resurrection, bringing resurrection,

For if we are willing, God is able, and if we are ready, God has already gone ahead to prepare a way for us. Amen.