

Arvada
United Methodist Church

April 19, 2009

A Good Beginning!
John 20:19-31; Acts 4:32-35

Rev. Rusty Butler

The Poet Rumi, wrote, "Spring...and no one can be still, with all the messages coming through."

That is so good isn't? Even after these days of cold and rain and snow. For crying out loud, Spring is coming - you can feel it in your bones. The green is coming, the messages are coming through.

We attempted to have our visioning but it got snowed out. That doesn't stop the vision though. We have rescheduled the meeting for May 29 and 30th.

And all the messages will come through.

Would you pray with me?

O God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts lead us down the Easter road of faith.

Last week, we ran out of chairs in the 7:45 service. In the 9:30 service, we had to set up chairs in the alcove and along the front of the pews. That is exciting isn't it? Big crowds...great singing, good feelings about everything. Easter is the High Holy Day. We can be thankful for the High Holy Days.

This week at the staff meeting, we were talking about this Sunday. The Sunday after Easter.....and how, well, it's when everyone takes a breath and sometimes they make it to church and sometimes they do not! That is what we are doing this week, taking a breath. There is a rhythm to this Christian life we lead. And this week it is a week to take a breath.

But then Sunday comes, and the pastor has got to do his or her thing again, and Sydney and Carolyn have to learn those hymns, and the Bell Choir plays, and we work on the bulletin and the Circuit Rider and we simply begin once again.

One of the great gifts of religion is that it gives people opportunities to begin again. That is a great benefit. Some people do not understand why you come here week after week, sit here and listen to the same stories year after year, come and listen to the pastor tell the same sermon (cause you know we've only really got one or two sermons in us).

Some people simply do not understand. But our scriptures are just full of this piece of the human puzzle. People like us who come to a kind of an ending and then are given the opportunity to begin again.

We take stories like Abraham and Sarah...they are so old...they cannot have a baby...but then surprise! Here comes a baby named laughter.

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We get stories like Moses, he kills a person, becomes an outlaw and outcast, hides out in the desert for years and then...a new beginning, the leader of the Hebrew people.

There is Meshach, Shadrack and Abednego, they get thrown into the fire...but then what do you know, they do not burn up...and out they come.

There is Peter, denies Jesus three times...but then death, resurrection, a new beginning.

This is my fourth Easter here. It doesn't seem possible. It is like a blink of an eye. And here we are, the fourth time I've given a sermon the week after Easter. Begin again...and so the cycle continues.

New beginnings. They keep on coming. Religion, our religion tells us this is the way it is.

But you know that.

My wife, Lynn, is a very good cook. She is getting better all the time, and my weight is beginning to show it. Last week she made an Apple Pie, for Easter. She makes the best Apple Pies, we think she should be in a contest. This last Apple Pie she decided to try something different...her family was not so sure...why mess with a good thing, no not a good thing,...why mess with a great thing? It seemed like an unnecessary risk...something that could upset the balance of the...well...the world. But brown sugar went in instead of the regular old white sugar.

The pie was baked and out it came. It looked like one of her regular pies. But we knew things had changed you see. Anticipation with some trepidation.

But I knew in the back of my mind this little fact. You see when I was young my mother had this Tupperware container of brown sugar. She would put it on the highest shelf in one of the kitchen cabinets. I do not know why she did this. Sometimes, do not tell her this, I would come home after school and I would climb up on the counter and reach up for that Tupperware container of brown sugar and I would take out a chunk of brown sugar and eat. Ahh sweet memories.

Back to the pie. A dollop of ice cream on top and then the big test. Good...we said. Mmmm delicious, we exclaimed...and so this experiment, this new thing...very good.

New beginnings.

You probably have heard of Larry Walters. He was a 33 year old truck driver. He is the guy who wanted to fly. But he never had the time money education etc. to become a pilot. So he hooked his lawn chair up to 45 surplus weather balloons. And with a bb gun, a parachute, a CB radio, a six pack of beer and some peanut butter and jelly sandwiches lifted off. He thought he might go up a couple hundred feet but no...he shot up to 11,000 feet...right through the approach corridor to Los Angeles International Airport.

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When asked by the press why he did it, he replied, “You can’t just sit there.” When asked if he was scared, he answered, “Wonderfully so.” When asked if he would do it again he said, “Nope.” And asked if he was glad he did it, he grinned and said, “Oh, yes.” (Robert Fulghum, All I really need to know I learned in Kindergarten)

Sometimes we sit in our chairs don’t we? There is the idea that there is nothing left to do, the situation is hopeless. There is nothing new under the sun. And then there are the Larry Walters of the world, saying you know what I had an idea and I tried it.

Today’s scriptures are two stories about beginnings. The first is about the disciple Thomas, who I think has gotten a bad rap through the years. We know him best as “Doubting Thomas” but he is the one who says, “My Lord and My God!” And Thomas like the other disciples, according to legend, was executed for his faith. Out of the community that followed the disciple named Thomas, came the Gospel of Thomas which is filled with sayings of Jesus and we have the Infancy Gospel of Jesus...stories about Jesus childhood.

We know this story of Thomas. This moment is pregnant with meaning...his disbelief turn into belief and he begins a new way of thinking and being in relation to Jesus the Christ.

On occasion, you will hear about a pastor or an evangelist talk about the church and hope that the church will get back to the way it was at first. They idealize the early church.

This week, I had lunch with a modern day evangelist. He was a nice enough fellow, but he and I spoke two different languages. That is ok...different strokes. But one thing, got to me, he said, you can go into almost every church in the country and they are not telling the true gospel. That kind of thing irks me, so his gospel is the true gospel? I let that go...didn’t want to get into an argument in the middle of the restaurant.

But you know how it is. Some people think the old ways are better than the new ways. Some think that should be the case. Maybe that is the case for the church too. In the book of Acts we get a little window opening to that early church. You tell me if you think you like it.

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul. And no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles’ feet.

I imagine if I were to call for that kind of church...I would have a rather short tenure as your pastor.

But it says that there was not a needy person among them. It sounds as if things were

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United Methodist Church

working pretty well for the church. It sounds like they had a pretty good beginning.

But here is the rest of the story. In Chapter 5 a man named Ananias sold his land and then he kept some of the proceeds and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet. Peter, the story says, railed at him, and Ananias, when he heard the words Peter said, fell down and died.

Then his wife came in about three hours later, she didn't know what had happened. And Peter instead of telling her about Ananias's death, asked her whether they sold the land for such and such a price and she said yes. And then he said, how is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Then he told her that her husband had died and she immediately fell down at Peter's feet and died.

And then it says, great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.

Well...I can imagine. Maybe I should have kept that story for the stewardship sermon! Oh well.

Aside from that story, I believe the early church had a good beginning. People watching out for one another. They thought about more than just themselves. But the church had to keep starting over...over and over again...to figure out what it was about.

That's one reason we are doing a visioning...to figure out once again what we are about. I think that's something that is exactly right to address the week after Easter. What are we about as a church, what are we about as individuals?

Hannah Arendt has written that human beings are not born in order to die, but in order to begin again. We carry within us the ability to begin, to start anew, to move life forward, to act with courage and conviction and commitment for the good of the world. We are not born merely to suffer and die, but to begin.

Let's begin again. Amen.