

"A PROMISE KEPT"
John 14:15-31 Acts 2:1-4
June 9, 2019 Pentecost
York Center Church of the Brethren
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It has been awhile since Easter- and we have been traipsing through the book of Revelation for many weeks. So let's re-cap what the disciples of Jesus have been up to since Mary met the Risen Christ in the cemetery. They were astonished when the resurrected Christ appeared in their midst. Each of the four gospels ends with a different take on the unbelievable event.

Matthew tells us that the Risen Christ met his disciples in Galilee and commissioned them to go to all nations and preach, teach, and baptize in his name. Then he said, "I am with you always, to the end of the age." The End.

Mark has two endings- the short ending, believed to be the original, showed the disciples scared and amazed into silence. The longer ending showed the Risen Christ criticizing the disciples for not believing. Then he commissioned them and ascended to heaven. The End.

John writes that Jesus appeared to seven of the disciples on the beach, helped them catch a record number of fish, and then he cooked them breakfast. Then he had a private talk with both Peter and John. And that's it.

Luke is the one we want to pay attention to because after writing his gospel, he went on to write Acts- known as "the Acts of the Apostles;" although, it should probably be called "the Acts of the Holy Spirit." After Easter morning Luke tells us that the Risen Christ appeared to his disciples, showed them his scars and they fed him. Then he opened their minds to understand scripture. Then he says, "I am sending upon you what God promised, so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." Then he ascended into heaven. The first chapter of Acts shows the ascension of Christ and the disciples' choice of Matthias to replace Judas.

Then they were hanging out in one place- in Jerusalem- like Jesus told them to do. It was the feast of Pentecost so a lot of people were in town from all over the world. We don't know what the disciples were doing that morning- perhaps worshipping. Maybe they were just killing time. But their leisure time was about to come to an end in an extraordinary way. Seven weeks after the death and

resurrection of Jesus the disciples were probably still trying to figure out what exactly had happened to him and what exactly they were supposed to be doing about it. Yes, Jesus told them to go out into the world but what exactly did that mean? Wouldn't it be dangerous? Where were they supposed to start?

And then their world exploded with wind and fire and noise! It couldn't be missed. Even if they had been paying attention when Jesus told them to wait for what God had promised- they would never have expected it to come the way it did. But you can be sure that it got their attention. And what it was- was the Holy Spirit- the very life and breath and power of God.

This explosion of holiness that day was not just for the benefit of the disciples, it was the inbreaking of God's purposes for all humanity. Suddenly the disciples started speaking in the languages of places they had never been. And the people standing outside heard them. The visitors were astonished to hear their own native languages on the streets of Jerusalem- and especially coming from the mouths of uneducated fisherman and tax collectors. And the disciples weren't just blabbering- they were talking about God and God's great deeds of power. They were witnessing in languages that they had never heard before. And suddenly, right there, in that moment, they understood Jesus' promise to them.

John's Gospel gives the most thorough discussion of this promise. *"If you love me and obey the command I give you, I will ask the One who sent me to give you another Paraclete, another Helper to be with you always- the Spirit of Truth, whom the world cannot accept since the world neither sees her nor recognizes her; but you can recognize the Spirit because she remains with you and will be within you. I won't leave you orphaned."* (John 14:15-18, the Inclusive Bible)

This passage in the Gospel of John comes right after Jesus has washed the feet of his disciples. They were gathered around the tables, still speechless that their Teacher had performed the duties of a servant then he launches into a long monologue. First he tells them that they should do what he just did. Then he tells them that he will be betrayed by someone at the table. And Judas got up and ran off into the night. Imagine how the rest of the group was feeling at that moment. It was almost too much to take in. Jesus gives them a new commandment- "Love one another, just as I have loved you." Then he tells them that Peter, his number one guy, the Rock, will soon deny even knowing him. This just keeps getting worse and worse!

Then, in the first verse of chapter 14, Jesus says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled." That's an understatement. Of course their hearts were troubled! They were freaking out! Jesus is leaving them. Judas is a traitor and Peter is a coward!

Jesus was everything to them. He had called them from their ordinary lives to follow him. For the past three years they had walked with him and watched as he preached to ever-growing crowds; healed lepers, welcomed prostitutes, and fed thousands with a kid's lunch basket. They saw him display enormous courage and deep humility. They loved him. Jesus was the place where they recognized God. They were nothing without him and they knew it.

This passage from John's Gospel shows the love Jesus had for his disciples more clearly than any other. He knew they were afraid. He knew they were confused. He knew they were worried so he did what he could to reassure them. He made them a promise. "I will not leave you orphaned."

"Orphan" is a pretty powerful word. In my mind it conjures up a picture of a child, lost, alone, scared, forsaken. It is a word that breaks my heart. And I think, in that moment, that is how Jesus saw his friends. And he wanted to reassure them and make sure they knew how deeply he loved them.

Jesus didn't make this promise to just one or two of his followers- but to the whole community. Jesus was the founder of their community- he wanted to make sure they didn't disband or lose confidence when he left them. He wanted them to know that even without his physical presence- they still had important work to do. In fact, he told them that they would do even greater things than he did.

The Spirit, the Paraclete, the Advocate- would not only help them to feel the presence of the Risen Christ, she would comfort them and teach them. The Spirit would give them even greater clarity about what Jesus had taught them. The Spirit would give them power and courage to go places Jesus never went.

Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will allow them to live the abundant lives that God intends for them. He told them that their actions would show others the presence of the Spirit- and his presence as well. Though the world no longer sees Jesus, the world can see the works of the church and hear the words of the church and thereby know that God abides with the church and that the church is guided by the Risen Christ through his Holy Spirit. Or not.

In this time when so many churches and denominations (including our own) are fighting and dividing it isn't easy to see the presence of the Spirit. And the

message we send to the world, by our disagreements and anger is not a message of love and unity but hatred and chaos.

Jesus tells them, "If you love each other then everyone will know that you are my disciples." He doesn't say, if you quote this doctrine, or memorize this creed, or all agree on this specific Scriptural interpretation, then people will know you are mine- he says, "Everyone will know you are mine- IF YOU LOVE ONE ANOTHER." It appears that the church has some work to do.

I cannot prove to you that the Holy Spirit is moving in and through this world. But I cannot find any other explanation for what happened that day in Jerusalem. A group of fearful, dispirited, cowardly people spoke languages they didn't understand and suddenly one hundred and twenty became three thousand, and here we are today; still telling the story, still doing the work of the Risen Christ, still loving each other.

Even after all these years in ministry, I am still amazed every week when I sit down at my computer, stare at a blank screen, and end up with a sermon- I just don't know how it happens- especially when it goes in a direction I never intended it to go. Of course I do my praying and reading and research, but really, the only explanation I have is that it happens through the power and inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

I am still amazed every week when I stand in this pulpit

and look out at you- the gathered congregation. I am amazed that we have all shown up here- people from so many different places. And yet we gather in this place- week after week. And we love and support and challenge each other. How could this possibly happen, except by the Spirit?

Scripture tells us that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. I think the Spirit also surprises us with new understanding and new revelations about God and our world and what God wants us to do.

I have no doubt that the creative, unruly, and gracious Spirit of God is at work in this place. I can feel it in the Spirit that moves among us in worship. I can see it in the energy with which we do ministry and the ways in which we love one another.

I wonder-- what do people learn about God, and about the Risen Christ when they look at this congregation? Do they see a God of love and grace? Do they see the call of Christ to welcome and serve one another?

I am convinced that God's heart and God's Spirit is in this place.

I invite you to join me in welcoming the Spirit of God- the mysterious, surprising, challenging, beautiful, gracious Spirit of the Risen Christ. May we have the courage to allow her to do what she will-- with us.

Amen.