

“Experiential Jesus”

John 20:19-30

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The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

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The first three gospels are called the Synoptic gospels: Literally: one eye. They see things from a similar point of view. The gospel of John is the maverick gospel. If the first three gospels were written when they needed to stabilize the church, John was written in a time when it was stuck: John's words are to set the church free! If the first three gospels were building an interstate to the Kingdom of God, the gospel of John sees the church has gotten stuck in a rut, so John gives the church the power to go off-road.

You see in the gospel of John Jesus was not a doctrine. Jesus was not an abstract belief. Not a disembodied fact. The Resurrected Jesus was an EXPERIENCE. How do we experience the resurrected Jesus? That is the real question for the Gospel of John. The Bible says it again and again. The resurrected Lord is experienced when people of faith gather together. John starts off not too subtlety: 90 % of what he writes is not written in the first person singular, but in the second person plural. People willing to speak the dialect of the American south Y'all. Jesus comes to his disciples and says: "Peace be with y'all." "As the Father has sent me, so I send y'all." "Y'all receive the Holy Spirit." Jesus is experienced in community. Koinonia: Greek word. If you want to see where people experienced the resurrection, it was, by and large, not experienced by individuals alone. The resurrected Lord was experienced among groups of believers in community. They did not necessarily know what they were doing. But it began when they got together. The doors were locked. That's what the story says. When the disciples were gathered, the doors were locked for fear. That's where it first hits us. The doors were locked when the church gathered. When you go to a Bible study, do you lock the doors behind you? Does the Presbyterian Women's Circle close the blinds?

When the Choir practices, do they sound proof the room? Does the Youth Group meet in the Catacombs, also known as the House of Hope Tunnel? When the disciples of the early church met, they had to sneak into the building, close up the windows, and lock all the doors for fear that the authorities would come barging in and discover what they were doing. This is a rogue group, these Christians. They are on the edge. They are vulnerable. Taking a risk. They are being faithful. Fascinating: It does not say: "They were looking for Jesus." It says: Jesus found them. Jesus finds them when they gather with other Christians in a risky situation.

At issue is what it means to be faithful. Some disciples see Jesus, some hear him, they feel his spirit breathing on the back of their neck. For some, that is enough. Thomas is not with the others, so he needs more. He is not judged for doubting. Thomas is the patron saint of doubters: It is OK to question. In fact, questioning may lead to deeper faith. Notice: there is another group: not gathered around that early church table, and not Thomas: this third group comes later:

These others (including us) are blessed because even if we do not see, or hear, or put our hands in the nail holes, still we feel the Holy Spirit moving up our spine, giving us faith, giving us belief. Blessed are those who have not seen him or heard him, but who still believe. What does it mean to believe? What does it mean to have faith? Bible scholar Robert Kysar has a wonderful insight as he ticks down a list of what John does NOT mean that faith is: Before I say what faith is for John, let me tell you what it is NOT. Faith is not an inner disposition.

Try as hard as we may, sometimes we think about faith like Methodists: Founder John Wesley said his heart was strangely warmed. That is a nice sentiment. And it may be helpful. But that is not what John experienced. Other times we think about faith like philosophers, faith is a set of propositions ideas in which we believe. That also can be helpful. But again, that is not what John experienced. For John: faith is different. John uses the word “faith” a great many times, and as John uses the word, faith is always ... a verb. Faith is what you do. Faith is about action. Y’all act out faith — again, and again and again. Doing faith is life giving. Experiencing Jesus: is about living out a life of courageous faith. For John, faith is not about thinking: Faith is about becoming.

1. Individually, You become the person God empowers you to be.
2. To become that person, we become the community God empowers us to be. We act out as the church together.

Faith is dynamic. Legend has it, notorious Bank Robber Willie Sutton was asked by a reporter: Why do you rob banks? His answer: That’s where the money is. Why do we act out like Christians? That’s where the faith is.

My preaching professor David Buttrick was preaching at a church he had never been to before. He was standing in the hallway, waiting for the service to begin. He was looking at the bulletin cover. Some religious publishing house had a picture of Jesus, who looked suspiciously like young Kirk Douglas, (think: Michael Douglas; Charlie Sheen) Handsome young Jesus standing in front of Mary in the garden outside the tomb, after the resurrection, with his hands stretched out in victory. There was something about the picture that bothered Buttrick. He could not quite figure it out. He’s staring at the picture and the church custodian is walks past him, takes a look and grunts “Humph, No nail holes.” Buttrick looks at the painting. The custodian was right. In it, the resurrected Lord’s hands and feet: there are no nail holes. Without the nail holes, it’s easy to miss the point of what Jesus was all about. His passion on the cross is crucial to how he becomes available as the exalted Lord. The reality is also a symbol: The nature of his life was one of sacrificial love. To forget the nail holes is to forget that his love is love in action. Jesus is about love in action.

So the question for the church today: If we want to EXPERIENCE Jesus, we have to ask, where is the action? You can see faith in action in our history. The church in Nazi Germany hid behind closed doors: they were being part of a resurrection life. You could see the nail holes among the faithful. The church in the Civil Rights era worshipped behind closed doors not knowing if their building would be burned down: You could see the nail holes. You talk with people from former East Germany and Poland, oppressed by the Soviet Union, they met behind closed doors: they took risks with their lives, you had a sense of the nail holes in their risky love.

"It's a horrible death to be bored to death." For all its excitement, the culture is boring itself to death. We live in a culture that is boring itself to death. Plenty of things to do, no time to do it in. Lost its bearing. Losing its humanity. Allowing itself no time to talk about what really matters. The million and a half refugees from South Sudan. The disease, the hunger, the thirst are brutal, and yet the average person would not even know it's going on. But We Presbyterians have a mission partner there: his name is Jim. Jim McGill. Used to work at Duke University: rock star when it comes to geology. Then he went on our behalf — mission partner for Presbyterian Church.

Some friends and I got him on the phone a few weeks ago. Pretty cool: talking to a guy in Africa from the middle of USA. For us it was a very comfortable 7 o'clock in the evening. For him it was 2 o'clock in the morning. Jim is teaching people there to dig wells for clean water that will save lives. His wife, Jody, is teaching the people about nursing and public health. Committed to be there 10 years. Asked him: Now, are the villages where you are going safe? Jim paused. It was a long pause. And then he said: "You have to know what time of day to go." If he can take the risk of helping save lives by being in a village where it is safe only part of the day, then can we take the risk of financially supporting a denomination that stands in partnership with him?

And over a hundred mission partners like him? That is one part for us today of what it means to take a risky stand behind locked doors today. I don't have all the answers. But I am committed to this wonderful denomination because of the risks the faithful take. Because these risks we take in the love of Christ inspire one another: to take risks. Which is to say: the Spirit of the Lord comes to us and inspires us: to keep up the risky love. Keep on acting out our faith, and therefore being faithful.

Love one another: inspire one another to acts of risky love. When we gather as a community of faith, we need to push ourselves to take the risks of sacrificial love: because that is what faith is. And in the midst of that experience, sometimes a mysterious guest unexpectedly shows up at the table. Jesus comes to the faithful behind locked doors! Which is to say: when the faithful put themselves on the line and experience again and again what it means to be alive In Christ.

Amen.