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Roland Park Presbyterian Church
Easter 2 (Year A-08)

Psalm 16
John 20: 19-31

Identity Crisis

In pastoral circles and perhaps beyond, the first Sunday after Easter, like the first Sunday after Christmas, is referred to as a “low Sunday.” The word low is both a reference to the dramatic drop in attendance and a description of the feeling of let down following such a wonderful celebration. In my previous church, one of the choir members would always wish me a “Happy Canon Ball Sunday” on the first Sunday after Christmas and Easter. The first time she did this I asked, “Why do you call it Canon Ball Sunday?” “Because, you could launch a canon ball into the congregation and chances are it wouldn’t hit anyone.”

I prefer a different moniker: “So-What Sunday.” As John Buchanan, pastor of Fourth Church in Chicago puts it: *“It is a good day to ask a very important question: What was the point of it all? Is there a point? Is Easter, with all its wonderful celebration, an end in itself, or does it lead somewhere?”*¹ In other words, it is a day to attend to the so-what questions. And so if we are disappointed in the drop in attendance or the feeling of let down than perhaps instead of placing the blame externally (as in, shame on all those who only come once or twice a year) we should be trying to find ways to convince them that Easter is not once and done, it is not a single day on the calendar, it is an ongoing reality in which we can participate, and it means, as Bishop Tom Wright indicates in the quote on your bulletin cover, that “we’ve got a job to do.”

¹ From his sermon “Sent,” delivered on April 15, 2007 at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, Ill.

If the idea that Easter is not once and done, that its message means that we have a job to do is news to you, don't worry, you have good company. It wasn't the first Sunday after Easter, but the night of the first Sunday that Jesus had been raised, when the disciples locked themselves in a room. They were confused and afraid, feeling low. The events of the past 48 hours had thrown them into a full blown identity crisis. Everything that they thought they knew about Jesus and who they were as his followers had been negated by his death on the cross.

Perhaps they gathered there to regroup, or hide out, or maybe they were there to console each other. Who knows? What we do know is that this is certainly not what they expected to happen or where they expected to find themselves. Gordon Kaufman explains: *“From early on...Jesus was regarded by some as God’s messiah (God’s ‘anointed one’), who was expected to overcome all earthly rulers and inaugurate the kingdom of God on earth. In his preaching and teaching God’s kingship was central; and signs of its imminent coming were seen by Jesus and his followers in his healings, his open table-fellowship, his respect for women, his forgiveness of sins, and other practices. It is important to note, however, that Jesus’ view of how God’s kingdom would come on earth was very different from the views of those who expected a military revolt against Rome. This apparently did not become clear to his followers until after his death. Jesus’ crucifixion was at first an enormous blow to the disciples.”*²

² *Jesus and Creativity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), p.10.

When we are dealt a blow such as the one the disciples were dealt, it can be hard for us to make sense of it all at once. Our brains, which are able to take in more from our senses than we can possibly acknowledge, must prioritize information in ways that help us to react to our environment most effectively. Placing a particular event in proper perspective and assigning lasting meaning are not tasks that are high on that list—they are reserved for when all the less pressing concerns have been resolved. Thus it can be weeks, months, or even years before particular events in our lives begin to be put into perspective and given lasting meaning.

Maybe that is why they went into that room—to make sense of it all, to attempt to answer the so-what questions that were floating in their heads. And that is when, as one commentator puts it, *“something happened that none of them would ever forget, something that made all the difference in the world, something that challenged everything they thought they knew about life and death. Suddenly he was there, Jesus. Was it an apparition? Did they imagine it? Jesus came. And what he said was ‘Peace be with you.’ He said it a second time so they wouldn’t miss the point: ‘Peace be with you.’ And then he told them why he was there, why they were given this Easter experience: ‘As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’”*

“The point is to get these people out of that room. The point here is to give them enough peace, enough of his spirit—his life and breath—to get them up and moving again. The point here—the point of Easter—is to get frightened, discouraged men and women who are very much inclined to stay put, to stay in the room as long as necessary, to get them up and moving toward the door, toward the streets

*of the city, toward their homes and families and communities—toward, that is to say, life in this beautiful world now suddenly, dramatically, and profoundly different because Jesus has come to them and breathed on them and sent them.”*³

But John tells us that one of the twelve wasn't there to receive this message: Thomas. Maybe he needed the fresh air. Maybe he was trying to avoid the so-what session. You know the type (or maybe you are the type), as long as there are chores to do and errands to run, you can keep your brain occupied on what is manageable and avoid the difficulties of trying to figure out the so-what questions.

But, of course, when he returned, the disciples tell him the good news; that Jesus had met them there in that locked room. How would you respond if you were Thomas? I can't imagine too many of us who would so, "Oh, really that's great." Most of us would react like Thomas, "Yeah right. You're yanking my chain. I'll believe it when I see it with my own eyes." And for that, the poor guy's gone down in history with the nickname Doubting Thomas.

The insinuation of the nickname—Doubting Thomas—is that doubt is the opposite of faith. If you were here last Sunday I think you know that I believe nothing could be further from the truth. But really if we look at the story, the only thing that Thomas doubts is the verbal testimony of his friends. And who can blame him after all that they had been through, if he wanted more than words, if he wanted them to show him? And that is what they did, it is what Jesus did and it is what he is calling us to do—not to rest in the certainty of our convictions, but

³ Again, John Buchanan from his sermon "Sent."

to have the courage to step out in faith and get to work even if we are afraid. The transition that the disciples had to make, and that we have to make as well, is from believing that Jesus is going to somehow bring about God's kingdom for us, to trusting that we are being called to work toward the realization of God's kingdom by doing the things that Jesus showed us in his ministry, to be as Christ-like in our own lives as we are able. The good news for us is that "*Once we start living our lives with [the conviction that we are sent by God],*" Henri Nouwen tells us, "*we will soon know what we are sent to do.*"⁴

To be honest, I am not sure the church has fully resolved this identity crisis that began with the confusion of very first disciples. Too often we still think in terms of the church being the building where we gather, instead of a people who are sent by God. Too many still try to equate faith with certainty of belief and forget that, as one theologian⁵ puts it, *faith is more a matter of trusting God...of following Jesus Christ, than believing ideas about him.* Too often we prefer to gather in rooms and close the doors, like the disciples did after the first Easter, instead of mobilizing our faith and going into the world with the good news that Jesus is raised and therefore, we've got a job to do!

Let us pray: *Thank you, O God, for the gift of peace that we have received from you through Jesus Christ. Help us to trust it. Thank you for the call you have placed on our lives to make your kingdom a reality. Help us to live it. Thank you for working through us, imperfect as we are. Give the courage to get up and go, toward the streets of the city, toward our homes and families and communities, into all the places we are needed that we may come to know more fully our identity as people sent in your name and for your purpose. AMEN.*

⁴ Daily reflection for April 23 from *Bread for the Journey* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1997).

⁵ Douglas John Hall.