

**John 20. 19-31 (St. Michael's – April 23, 2017)**

June 25<sup>th</sup> 2011, my best friend was nearly murdered in cold blood. My friend Chad is an Anglican priest in Beaufort. He was practicing his sermon one Saturday evening in the church, and as he was locking up he felt cold steel on the back of his head.

The gunman forced him back into the church office and tied him up with an extension cord. The gunman then said, 'Give me three reasons why I shouldn't kill you now.' Chad replied, 'I have a wife and children whom I love very much...I'm here doing God's work...and if you kill me, you're going to have to answer to God.'

In response, the man once again put the gun to Chad's head, said 'I'll be back,' and left to steal some other things. By God's grace Chad was able to wriggle out of his bonds and call the police, who unsuccessfully gave chase. The next morning Chad preached three sermons on the peace of God.

Today we conclude our preaching series on the fruit of the Holy Spirit and we close with the fruit of faithfulness. What does it mean to be faithful? Certainly it means witnessing to God in the midst of harrowing circumstances, like my friend Chad. But what does it mean on a *daily* basis? What does it look like in *ordinary* life?

The great Easter passage of John 20 is a beautiful window into faithfulness, conveying not only what faithfulness is, but also what it is not. It begins the evening of Easter Sunday. The disciples have heard reports that Jesus is risen from the dead, and yet they are still afraid. Hiding behind locked doors for fear of the Jews. When suddenly Jesus appears in their midst.

My friends, let me suggest this is where Biblical faithfulness always begins. It begins with Jesus showing up in our weakness and fear. No, Jesus comes not to supplement our natural strength, wisdom, and abilities. But rather he meets us in our places of brokenness and failure.

These disciples after all, had behaved shamefully. They'd abandoned Jesus at his arrest, they'd denied Jesus at his trial, and now they're hiding in fear.

My friends, if you'd been betrayed like this. If you'd been abandoned like this—by your closest friends—would you go back to them? You might, but you probably wouldn't say what Jesus says, 'Peace be with you.' What a breathtaking response. The crucified and risen Jesus comes to his friends bearing the gift of forgiveness. And the good news is the he does the same for us.

No matter what we've done. No matter how we've rejected God. No matter how we've been cowards and failures, in the light of that empty tomb, there is forgiveness.

And notice that God doesn't wait for us to come to Him. He comes to us. As he came to Adam and Even in the garden when they were hiding in shame, and said simply, 'where are you?' Inviting them to step into the light. So he comes to us when we are hiding in our shame.

And his first words are not a rebuke or even a command, but a gift. 'Peace be with you.' Now naturally of course we do not have peace. The Bible says our default setting is to be at war. To be enemies of God. But Christ died for the ungodly, that we might have peace with him.

And so faithfulness begins not with *our* faithfulness to God (which is meager at best), but rather with *His* faithfulness to us.

Now this is not to say that we are the simply *passive* recipients, and there's nothing for us to do. No, what does Jesus do next? After giving them His peace, and after showing them his hands and his side—demonstrating that this is the real Jesus, not Jesus the friendly ghost—what does he do?

He commissions them. 'As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.' And so after we've been embraced by God's peace, He doesn't call us to some secluded mountain,

where we throw up a hammock amid the wind chimes and drink tea the rest of our lives. No, we are sent as Jesus was sent.

But what does it mean to be sent as Jesus was sent? After all, we're not God. We can't walk on water and multiply loaves and fishes. Isn't being sent as Jesus was sent a little bit above our pay grade?

Well no, because the essential character of Jesus' sending was not the power and the glory and the miracles, but something much deeper:

As Paul writes, 'though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant.'

No, the *essential* character of Christ's sending was humility, servanthood, and sacrificial love. And this is precisely that to which God calls us. Going out on the highways and byways of the world. Seeking the lost. Seeking the broken. Identifying with sinners. Being friends with tax collectors and prostitutes, and pointing *everyone* to the Savior. This is what it means to be sent as Jesus was sent.

And the opportunities are endless. Next week a team of prayer ministers is heading up to North Charleston to pray with ex-cons coming out of prison through Tim Terry's Fresh Start Ministry.

Last Good Friday St. Michaelites gathered outside the abortion clinic in West Ashley to pray with fellow Christians including the Roman Catholic Bishop of Charleston. We prayed for the doctors and staff, the moms and dads, and the babies losing their lives. We prayed that the light of Christ would break in to that darkness and pain.

And so again you could volunteer at the Low Country Pregnancy Center, a ministry that has offered 120,000 *free* client visits to struggling people. Again, the opportunities are endless.

The point is, as John Stott notes, is that we have to enter into this broken world as Jesus did. We have to get our hands dirty. We can't shout advice to drowning men from safety of the shore.

Now before releasing them into ministry, Jesus does one more surprising thing: He breathes on them and says, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.' Now you might well ask the question, 'but I thought the Holy Spirit was given 50 days later at Pentecost.' Isn't Jesus getting a little ahead of the story?

The answer seems to be that Jesus was giving his disciples a *deposit* of the fuller gift that was to come. As John Calvin writes, first they were sprinkled with grace, then saturated with power on Pentecost. Or as one of my professors observed, this is the conception of the church, Pentecost, is the birth.

The point is, the Holy Spirit is essential to mission. You know, Jesus' own ministry was powered by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit descended on Jesus at His baptism, the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness. Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit, and he began his public ministry by announcing 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.' And so part of our daily walk must be seeking the empowering and infilling of the Holy Spirit.

Again, faithfulness begins with the faithfulness of God. It involves answering God's call to be sent as Jesus was sent, and it relies on the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

Now at this juncture there's something of a break in the narrative, and we pick up one week later. Again, the disciples are gathered together, but this time Thomas is with them. Apparently, he'd missed the prayer meeting. And so Thomas is still refusing to believe that Jesus is risen. You might say he's a bit of a wet blanket.

Well lo and behold, Jesus shows up as before and invites Thomas to touch His wounds. And so *finally*, in light of this overwhelming evidence, Thomas surrenders his skepticism. And he

responds with probably the most significant line in the entire Gospel. ‘My Lord and my God.’ Yes, Thomas finally sees the light. And so there’s hope for all of us wet blankets, all of us skeptics, all of us gloomy Norwegians.

And then Jesus responds with a gentle chastening – ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.’ Essentially, Jesus is saying, ‘The evidence is sufficient. Don’t hold back. Believe the Good News.’

Now this is a point of strong contention in today’s world. Is the evidence sufficient? The famous atheist Richard Dawkins once wrote, ‘The four evangelists almost certainly never met Jesus personally. Much of what they wrote was in no sense an honest attempt at history...the gospels are ancient fiction.’

And so are the gospels fiction? Did the apostles make them up? Prioleau Alexander has a piece in last month’s Carolina Compass where he envisions the apostles doing precisely this – making up a fake religion.

Peter: Okay, men ... Jesus was just a man, but we should make up a religion based on him being God. Here’s the plan: We’ll travel around and make up tall tales about Jesus’ miracles and teachings and — get this — we’ll say he rose from the dead, thus offering proof he is the Son of God. ... Questions?

James: Won’t that infuriate the Jewish elders? They just crucified Jesus for that same thing. Won’t they try and have us crucified?

Peter: Yes. Next question.

James: Won’t the Roman leaders go ballistic? View this as an affront to Caesar? Think we are radicals and imprison and kill us?

Peter: Yes. Next question.

Matthew: Won't our lives be abject misery? Maybe even worse than they are now? Can't we make up a religion where we live like bigwigs?

Peter: No. My idea is better — and remember, once we spin this web of lies we've got to refuse to go back on them. Even if they torture and kill you.

Again, how implausible that a bunch of people would make up a fake religion knowing it would get them persecuted and killed.

No, a major part of faithfulness is faith. Not *blind* faith, but letting the evidence speak. And Jesus is saying to all skeptics, 'the evidence is sufficient.'

And so in summary, we've seen how faithfulness comes from the faithfulness of God, how it involves being sent as Jesus was sent, empowered by the Holy Spirit and walking by faith.

Now you may be thinking, 'Yes, this is all well and good. I can embrace this vision. *But* there's one more piece that's still troubling me. Something you've been hinting at throughout this sermon. What about suffering? Because a major part of faithfulness seems to be a willingness to suffer.

After all, 11 of the 12 apostles, including Thomas, were martyred for their faith. In today's reading from Hebrews 11, which all about the heroes of the faith, Abraham, Moses, etc. the passage ends with this really disturbing verse: 'Some suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated- of whom the world was not worthy.' And even in the story of my friend Chad, and his faithfulness under pressure, clearly he was willing to die for his faith.

And so you may be thinking: 'You know I want to be a good Christian. I want to be faithful. But is a willingness to suffer horrible things really an essential part of faithfulness?'

Well the short answer is yes. Jesus said, ‘Anyone who would be my disciple must take up his cross and follow me.’ And even in Thomas’ great confession, ‘My Lord and my God,’ there is tremendous risk. By saying ‘Jesus is Lord,’ you are also saying Caesar is *not* Lord. And thousands of Christians were martyred over this simple statement.

Last week I baptized a man at the 6:00 service. And beforehand I put it to him plainly. I said, ‘In your baptismal vows, you’re saying you will follow Jesus as Lord. And so if you leave here tonight and someone puts a gun to your head, you’d better be willing to take a bullet for your faith. This is what it means to be a Christian.’

Now you may say, this is extreme. What are the chances of anyone here ever face anything like that?

My friends, there is a power rising in the East that is unlike anything the world has ever seen. The vision of Radical Islam is staggering in its scope. As Peter Moore points out in a recent article in the Carolina Compass, studies show that over 100 million Muslims believe the 9/11 massacres were justified. Yes, the storm is coming. In the last 18 months we’ve seen the first raindrops falling on the West. In Paris, Brussels, Nice, Berlin, London, San Bernadino, and Orlando.

And so opportunities for this kind of faithfulness may be closer than we think. Now is a time to reflect on our faith. To ask the hard questions. Am I willing to pay the price?

In closing, I’m reminded of another Thomas, Thomas Hauker, a young Englishman who was martyred in 1555. The day before he died he was visited in prison by one of his friends who said: “Thomas, I have to ask you a favor. I need to know if what people say about the grace of God is true. Tomorrow, when they burn you at the stake, if the pain is tolerable and your mind is

still at peace, lift your hands above your head. Do it right before you die, Thomas. I HAVE to know.” And Thomas whispered back to his friend, “Yes, I will.”

The next morning, Thomas was bound to the stake and the wood was lit. As the flames blazed up Thomas attempted to preach to the onlookers, until his voice was drowned out by the crackling and he slumped against his bonds. Soon his skin was burnt to a crisp. Everyone supposed he was dead. But then, suddenly, Thomas lifted his hands, still on fire, over his head. He raised them up to the living God, clapped them together three times. The people broke into shouts of astonishment. And Thomas’ friend had his answer.

Yes my friends. God is good and God is faithful. That is the beginning and end of all that we are as Christians. It’s all about Him and His faithfulness and not about us. And he has *promised* to carry us through whatever we face in this life, and in the life to come.

And so as we celebrate his faithfulness to us, may we trust that his grace is sufficient, and may we be willing to lay down our lives for His sake, in ways small and in ways great.

To Him be the glory, now and forever.