

“Let the Building Begin!”

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John 20:19-31

On the church calendar this is known as the Second Sunday of Easter. There is an Easter Season – we don't just come here on Easter Sunday to celebrate the resurrection. This period of time between now and Pentecost is known as the Easter Season or Eastertide, and so we come today on the Second Sunday of Easter, which is also known as “Low Sunday.”

You have only to look around to see why we call it Low Sunday. The attendance is lower today, isn't it, than it was last Sunday? But it's called Low Sunday on the church calendar also because there is something of a letdown. Remember last Sunday, the choir, the brass, the lilies, all of that, and it is gone today. I shared with the members of the Ministry Council when we were talking about Low Sunday that this is also known in some churches as “Bowling Ball Sunday.” It would work in our church. Some churches are sloped from rear to front. The saying was that on Low Sunday you could get back at the back of the church with a bowling ball, and the attendance was so low that you could roll a bowling ball from the back all the way to the front and not hit anyone's feet, that's how many empty pews there were.

You might not have heard (an associate minister in another church told me this) this is known in many churches also as “National Associate Ministers' Sunday.” If you visit in many churches, and Carol is shaking her head “yes,” associate ministers are preaching today. You can understand why. The senior minister is worn out after all of the services during Lent and Easter, and there might be something else. We ministers have a little bit of a letdown. We think to ourselves, “Man, if the sermon had just been better last Sunday, all of those people would have come back.” But I think something else - maybe this is a rationalization on my part. I think that the sermon was so good last Sunday that people think to themselves, “That will last me till Christmas!”

I am grateful for those of you who come here on Low Sunday. This is Low Sunday kind of weather. I can imagine that some people woke up this morning and looked outside, and they might even have discussed this: “You know the last time it was misty like this was when it got so icy. It might be dangerous to get out today.” That's even if the temperature is in the fifties. Someone else might say, “That mist might turn into hail, and this time of year there could always be a tornado. We'd better stay home today.” I am grateful for those of you who come here on Low Sunday, and I hope you understand that the reason we're having the dinner today is

for the church to express its appreciation to you for your support through all of the year. That's why we're having the dinner today.

I am also grateful for that terrified little group of disciples who was behind locked doors on that first Easter Sunday evening. Remember there were only ten of them. Judas was gone. Thomas was gone. They must have been scared to death, but if they hadn't gathered there then, we might not be gathering here today. Suddenly, and John leaves no doubt, miraculously, Jesus appeared in their midst. He says, "Peace," to them. That is the first word that he says. First lesson from the scripture is this: In our times of darkest doubt or brightest belief, Christ comes to us. Christ comes to us. We come to worship, hoping to meet the risen Christ, but we need to be reminded that Christ comes to us wherever we are, no matter how bad things are or how good things are. Christ comes to us.

We don't know where Thomas was. Have you noticed that in the news, if there is a story about a certain person, instead of just saying the person's name, before they say the person's name there is an adjective — "the controversial" — and then say the person's name, some other adjective. It's not just Thomas, is it? What is it? "Doubting Thomas." That's how we remember Thomas, but we should be careful, shouldn't we? "Thomas the Twin" - I'd never thought of it until I prepared for the sermon this week - Thomas is my twin. Thomas is my twin for the times that I doubt. Thomas is your twin for the times that you doubt, when we have those times of doubt and maybe we should say "woundedness" that we all have.

Let me share something with you that you might or might not appreciate. The last thing I do before I come down to the sanctuary on Sunday morning, the last thing I do before I leave my office is get down on one knee and say a prayer. I shared with the Bible study group this past Wednesday evening that the most difficult part of preaching for me is, when I come into the pulpit, knowing if I will be able to get that first word out of my mouth. That's how seriously I take this task. And so before I leave my office I get down on one knee and say a prayer.

Last Sunday I didn't do that because I was afraid that if I got down on one knee I wouldn't be able to get back up. You need to understand what happened. The grandkids were here last Sunday, and I was out with two of the grandkids walking and they decided to run, so we had a little race. I was doing fine, but then someone picked up the pace a little bit, and I leaned forward a little to go into that sprinters' mode and kick it into another gear. Suddenly both of my quadriceps muscles said, "Buddy, that gear's been broken for years!" I pulled both quadriceps muscles; it wasn't a tear.

Something interesting about it, though — I know Suzanne believed me when I told her about it, but there wasn't anything visible. I'm not going to show you my wounds the way Jesus did. It took almost a week for the bruising to appear. You

know, sometimes when you get a blow to your arm or your leg there will be a bruise, but this was bruising that was caused by internal bleeding. I was wounded, yet the wounds were not visible.

We're all wounded. *All* of us are wounded in one way or another. I want to tell you about three little teenage girls who are wounded. We need to learn from them. Do any of you recognize the name Sydney Dailey? Sydney Dailey is the little 13-year old girl who was stabbed on her front porch. More of you will recognize the name Cori Baker. She's the little girl who was missing for so many weeks. Do you recognize the name Montoya Harris? Montoya Harris is the little 14-year old girl who stabbed Sydney Dailey. What are we doing to our children? What in the world are we doing to our children, that they live in this kind of world, that they suffer this kind of woundedness?

Some of you might recognize the name Sally Kern? Sally Kern is our state representative who singled out one group of people for a kind of hate speech. She compared them to terrorists. I read a story about a woman who had returned from fighting in Iraq. She was *fighting* terrorists, and she was a member of this group.

I was at a ministers' meeting recently, and one of the ministers was talking about how hard it was to conduct a funeral service for some people. He said, "The families want me to lie about that person." He said, "I'm not doing it anymore. I'm telling the truth." I'm telling the truth when I say I don't know if that guy would know the truth if it came up and bit him on the ____! (You know, the kind of animal that Jesus rode into Jerusalem). Where is the grace? Where is the mercy in that kind of language, in that kind of hate language that exists so much in our society?

Many of you are familiar with Garrison Keillor. You might have seen last Sunday that Garrison Keillor wrote something that relates to the story of Thomas. He says,

"God, in His humorous way, sometimes schedules high holy days for a time when your faith is at low tide, a mud flat strewn with newspapers and children's beach toys, and while everyone else is all joyful and shiny among the lilies and praising up a storm, there you are, snarfling and grumbling. Which happened to me this year. God knows all about it, so I might as well tell you.

Holy week is a good time to face up to the question: Do we really believe in that story or do we just like to hang out with nice people and listen to organ music? There are advantages, after all, to being in the neighborhood of people who love their neighbors. If your car won't start on a cold morning, you've got friends.

A year or so ago, I sat down and read the four Gospels in one fell swoop and somehow the jaggedness of some of it shook my faith, which maybe was based more on visuals — Jesus tending his flock, and little children gathered at his knee, sunbeams bursting through storm clouds and so forth — and then I read about how the early church cobbled the scriptures together, which has to raise doubts in anyone's mind. The Jews got stone tablets and the Mormons arranged for an angel to bring them their holy text, but ours was hammered out through a long contentious political process, sort of like the tax code, and that's something that you don't care to know more about.

I don't doubt God's existence — there he is — but I doubt his interest in us right now and I haven't the faintest idea what he wants from me.

So I sat and felt miserable....

There is a comfort for the doubter in the Passion story. You are not alone. Jesus' cry from the cross was a cry of incredulity. The apostle denied even knowing Jesus three times. The guy spent years with Jesus, saw miracles up close, the raising of Lazarus, the demons cast out, the sick healed, the water-walking trick, all of the special effects, but when the cards were down, he said, "Who? Me? No way."

He repented. I would too, but not quite yet.

Skepticism is a stimulant, not to be repressed. It is an antidote to smugness and the great glow of satisfaction one gains from being right. You know the self-righteous — I've been one myself — the little extra topspin they put on the truth, their ostentatious modesty, the pleasure they take in being beautifully modulated and cool and correct when others are falling apart. Jesus was rougher on those people than he was on the adulterers and prostitutes.

So I will sit in the doubter's chair for a while and see what is to be learned back there.

We have all been in one way or another where Keillor is in his faith journey. We could all share the times of our darkest doubt. And it's not all bad to doubt. You remember Tennyson's words, "There is more faith in honest doubt than there is in half the creeds." But at some point Christ expects us to move beyond our doubts. At some point Christ expects us to do better, to be better, to reach out beyond the

walls of this church to all of the Sydney Daileys and Cori Bakers and Montoya HARRISES of the world; to reach out to the Sally Kerns of the world and say, "The message of Christ is mercy and forgiveness, not hate."

Of all of the Sundays that we could choose to start our building program, perhaps there is no better day than Low Sunday. It is as if when some churches go to a cemetery for the Easter sunrise service. We go and dance on graves because we know death has been defeated. It is our task to build God's church. As I have said before, that means building people. That means building each other. That means building the least of these in our society. That means building those for whom "He is risen, He is risen indeed!" means nothing.

Let the building begin! Let the building begin today. There is no better time than now. Let the building begin. Amen