

April 15, 2018

God Sightings: the Disciples
How to Revive a Dying Church
John 20:19-23

Opening Words: When was the last time you saw God? There is no other way to explain it. It must be God. We call those experiences a "God Sighting." It happens all the time. A "God Sighting" can occur in the normal routine of life or in a random act of kindness. Some have experienced God in the miraculous, or the spectacular. Sometimes it happens with a new insight or perspective. When was the last time you experienced God? Our God Sightings are important because they remind us that God is active in our world. Let me ask you the question again. When was the last time you saw God?

The Gospel of John contains three God Sightings. Each one is miraculous in nature. In each case, the resurrected Jesus came and stood before individuals, teaching them lessons which have lasted for the ages. Next week, we will look at Thomas's God Sighting. In two weeks, we will look at the God sighting that accompanies the miraculous catch of fish. This morning, we look at the disciples' God Sighting on Easter evening. You know the story. The resurrected Jesus came to them as they huddled behind locked doors. This story has taught us many things through the centuries, but today it teaches us how to revive a dying church. Our Gospel lesson is John 20:19-23. Let me call this message *How to Revive a Dying Church*.

John 20:19-23 ¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

²¹ Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." ²² And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Pauline Phillips once said, "*A church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints.*" That quote is accurate and that quote needs to be remembered. If you think you can remember that quote, say, "**Amen!**"

We find ourselves today in the twentieth chapter of John. So much has already happened. This is all you really need to know: Jesus had died, and Jesus had returned from the dead. We have had two thousand years to accept the resurrection; the disciples did not have that luxury. They were forced to accept the resurrection in a few hours. That was a hard thing to do. According to the text, it is Sunday evening. The disciples were together. They must have felt as if it was them against the world. They really had no one else. They feared that the Jewish leaders, who had orchestrated the

death of Jesus, may be looking for them. The door is locked for their own protection. Their future seemed to be gone and their lives seemed to be nearing the end. How many people do you know who are living in fear? They don't believe they have a future and they believe their end is near. How many churches do you know that are living in fear – they don't believe they have a future and they believe their end is near? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"** You must know of a church, because there are so many out there. We have covered this ground in the past.

The American mainline Protestant church is dying. This is not a secret and it is nothing new. The mainline Protestant church has been dying since 1957. That was when our branch of the church reached her peak. That was when our style of worship and our ways resonated with American society. Historically, 57% of Americans belonged to a church in 1957. This is a sad fact: The fastest-dying part of the mainline Protestant church is midsize churches, like us. Ironically, I was born in 1957. That means two things. First, I have never known a healthy growing mainline Protestant church. I have only heard stories about a healthy mainline Protestant church. Second, my generation of clergy have spent our careers trying to recapture the magic of previous generations. That is why I have spent so many years going to church growth workshops. That is why our denominational leaders spend more time talking about marketing and leadership principles, then they have about Jesus. It is all been done with good intentions, but my generation of clergy have failed. The mainline Protestant church continues to die. It is sad, but true. It is just the reality. In many ways, the contemporary mainline Protestant church is like the story of the fig tree, come to life. Do you remember the story? It is found in two places, Matthew 21:18-22 and Mark 11:12:25.

It is Monday of Holy Week and Jesus is hungry. He passes a fig tree, which had some promise. It was full of leaves, but it was void of fruit. It is a story that baffles us because Jesus seems to do something out of character. Jesus curses the fig tree, and, within a 24-hour period, it withers to the roots. No matter how you turn the story, it is a story of judgement. In Jesus's time, the judgement fell upon those of the Hebrew faith. They were not producing. In our time, you can say the judgement has fallen on us. We are not producing. Can I ask you a question? How many disciples do you think the mainline Protestant church has produced since 1957? How many disciples do you think Western Reserve Church has produced in the last fifty years? Let me say it clearly. If we are not producing disciples, then we are open to judgement and our future is dark. In many ways, we are like the disciples, who sat behind a locked door, too afraid to come out. If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"** But, this is the good news for today:

Someone unlocked the door and the disciples did come out. Three things happened to the disciples in that locked room that changed everything. If it can happen to the disciples, then it can happen to us too. If it doesn't happen to us, then we will be as unsuccessful as the fig tree. So, what happened to the disciples?

First, the disciples experienced the resurrected Jesus. If you want to revive the church, then you must experience the resurrected Jesus for yourself. Look at the text with me. It is important that you look at the timeline. It is not Easter morning, it is Easter evening. The disciples have had all day to wrestle with Mary Magdalene's account of experiencing the resurrected Jesus. Did you hear what I said? They had heard about the resurrected Jesus, but they had not experienced the resurrected Jesus. Once Jesus appears to them, he shows them his hands and his feet to prove he is genuine. When they are finally convinced it is Jesus, they are overjoyed. There is a world of difference between hearing about the resurrected Jesus and experiencing the resurrected Jesus. Everything changes once you experience the resurrected Jesus! The question is, have you experienced the resurrected Jesus?

Last week, Kathryn and I were in Lexington, Kentucky. At one time, I knew quite a few people in Central Kentucky, but those days have passed. One of the people I used to know was a man named Mike Porter. He was a seminary classmate. One day, Mike told me how he came to know Jesus. His story started with a lot of drinking and driving. He got into an accident and found himself in the Emergency Room. In a semi-conscious state, he heard a doctor tell his mother that he might not make it. Mike didn't want to die, so he prayed. He said, God if you save my life, I will serve you. Suddenly, he said Jesus, himself, was standing beside his bed and his health began to improve. His story made my simple story of being raised in a Christian home seem quite small. However, both of our stories had one thing in common. Both of us had experienced the resurrected Jesus. However, this is the question: Have you experienced the resurrected Jesus? Or, have you just heard about the resurrected Jesus? If you have not experienced the resurrected Jesus, then pray that you experience the resurrected Jesus. If we want to revive the church, then we, each one of us, must experience the resurrected Jesus. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

Second, the disciples experienced the Holy Spirit. Look at the text with me again. When the disciples finally experience the resurrected Jesus, they are overjoyed. Verse 22 says, Jesus breathed on them and they received the Holy Spirit. Why is that line important? Receiving the Holy Spirit means you don't have to do the work of the church alone. The Holy Spirit goes before us and helps us. It is like cutting a tree down in your yard. You have a choice. You can cut it down with a hand saw, or you can cut it down with a chain saw. Which one are you going to use? The Holy Spirit made their divine work easier.

As Methodists, we appreciate the Holy Spirit. It is part of our spiritual DNA. Do you remember the date? On May 28, 1738, John Wesley, the founder of the great Methodist movement, recorded in his diary that he felt his heart "strangely warmed". That was a pivotal moment in his life. That experience changed everything. That experience changed Wesley himself. What happened to John Wesley on that date? His heart was warmed once he experienced the Holy Spirit. Before that experience, he was filled with questions and failure. After that experience, he only knew success.

I believe, the mainline Protestant church is struggling today because the Holy Spirit is foreign to us. Many within our churches have never experienced the Holy Spirit. Many don't even understand the Holy Spirit. Until we experience the Holy Spirit, we are going to continue to struggle. This is the question you must answer: Have you experienced the Holy Spirit? If your answer to that question is some form of "No", then pray to experience the Holy Spirit. If we want to revive the church, then we must experience the Holy Spirit. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

Third, the disciples embraced the mission. Look at the text with me. Once the disciples had experienced the resurrected Jesus and accepted the Holy Spirit, Jesus gave them a job. Verse 23 says, "*If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.*" What does that verse mean? It simply means we are to take the Good News into the world and win souls for Jesus. Only one of the disciples in the room at that moment, John, died an old man. The rest died a martyr's death. You can't tell me the disciples didn't embrace the mission. They won souls for Jesus Christ. This is the last question you must answer:

Have you embraced the mission? This is a more pointed way of asking the same question: How many souls have you won for Jesus Christ in your life? That is really the only reason the church exists. The church doesn't exist just to collect items for those in need. The church doesn't exist to provide wholesome activities for our young. The church doesn't exist to feed the masses or maintain buildings. The church exists to win souls for Jesus Christ. How many souls have you won for Jesus in your life? How many souls do you think this church has saved in the past fifty years? Have you embraced the mission? If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**"

For over sixty years, the mainline Protestant church has been failing. We have done everything to save ourselves. Denominational leaders have tried slick advertising campaigns. Pastors have tried to provide leadership, sometimes in a dictatorial way. The laity have worked hard at fundraisers. However, this is the truth: To this point, we have failed. The mainline Protestant church continues to fail. Our problem is not effort. Our problem is spiritual in nature. We need to become less like Madison Avenue and more like those frightened disciples. They unlocked the door only after they experienced the resurrected Jesus, experienced the Holy Spirit, and embraced the mission. Once we do the same, we will thrive again. Do you remember the quote from Pauline Phillips? She once said, "*A church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints.*" And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"