

May 3, 2020

God Sightings: The Disciples
Behind Locked Doors
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 a miraculous or spectacular way. Sometimes it happens with a new insight or perspective. 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?

This is the final sermon in my three-part sermon series called *God Sightings*. We have looking at three God sightings from the Gospel of John. 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. The first one we examined, two weeks ago, was the story of Thomas' doubts. Last week, we looked at the miraculous catch of fish. This morning, we are looking at the disciples' God Sighting on Easter evening. You know the story. The resurrected Jesus came to them as they huddled behind locked doors. Our Gospel lesson for today is John 20:19-23. Let me call this message, *Behind Locked Doors*.

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."

T.S. Elliot (1888-1965) is considered one of the 20th century's great poets. He once said, *The True Church will never fail. For it is based upon a rock.* "That is exactly what we have experienced for the last few weeks. If you are thankful the church will never fail say, **"Amen!"**

We find ourselves today in the twentieth chapter of John. So much has already happened. This is all you need to know: Jesus had died, and Jesus had returned from the dead. We have had two thousand years to process 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, Easter 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 the Jewish leaders, who had orchestrated the death of Jesus, may be looking for them. The door is locked for their own protection. The disciples are afraid. Do you know of anyone in your life who is afraid this morning?

In my life I know a young woman who carries a great amount of responsibility. Her name is Candance. She is high energy. She is married and has two teenagers in her home. She is highly involved in both her husband's and children's lives. She has a responsible job, which forces her to be detail oriented. Her plate is always full, but the pandemic was one too many things on her plate. One day at work she started getting chest pains. She was taken to the emergency room. The good news is Candance did not have a heart attack. The bad news is she is a victim of stress. Her doctor made an appointment with a cardiologist. After all the tests we run, she sat with her cardiologist. She reviewed all her heart tests with her. There was nothing abnormal. Then he asked her about her life. She told him about his husband, children, and job. He enquired about recent changes in her life which were upsetting to her. She confessed the coronavirus did not just bother her, it terrified her. She said, "I am trying to get all the information possible about the pandemic, so I can keep myself and my family safe. My tv is always on 24/7 news." According to Candance, the cardiologist told her to turn her tv off, because it was causing her stress. She is not the only one. There are many who are locked behind closed doors afraid of the coronavirus.

You really cannot blame them because the numbers are not pretty. Did you know, as of Friday, there have been over 3.2 million confirmed cases of coronavirus in the world. (234,765 have died.) There have been over one million confirmed cases of coronavirus in the United States. (55,439 have died.) There have been over 18,000 confirmed causes of coronavirus in Ohio. (975 have died.) There have been 828 confirmed cases of the coronavirus in Mahoning County. (80 have died.) How many people do you know have had the coronavirus? Do you know anyone who has died of the coronavirus? Do you know of anyone who is afraid of the coronavirus and is living behind locked doors? I will admit, I was afraid how this church would respond to the coronavirus. I am proud to report, you are much braver than I ever knew. With this in mind, let us look at the Gospel lesson again.

This is the good news for today: Someone unlocked the door and the disciples came out. They did not just come out. They came out different people and transformed their world. Three things happened to the disciples behind that locked door which led to their transformation. Let us briefly look at those three things.

First, the disciples experienced the resurrected Jesus. 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 the women'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!

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 do not 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.

Third, the disciples embraced the mission. Look at the text with me one last time. 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 cannot tell me the disciples did not embrace the mission.

It is not just the story of the disciples over two thousand years ago. It is the story of disciples in every generation. Every generation must experience the resurrected Jesus for themselves. Every generation must experience the Holy Spirit for themselves. Every generation must embrace the mission for themselves because every generation of the church has been entrusted with the Good News of Jesus Christ. If one generation of the church fails to pass on the Good News to the next generation, then the faith itself will fail. With so many churches failing, I feared we would be that generation who let Jesus down. Then, the coronavirus entered our world and God reminded us the church exists not in buildings, programs and budgets. The church exists in the hearts of men and women who believe.

I got the news of Friday, March 13. I will admit it. It was a shock. East Ohio Resident Bishop Tracy Malone had suspended worship for the foreseeable future due to the coronavirus. Everything was really to go for Sunday, March 15. The sermon was written, the music was selected, and the bulletins were run. On that Sunday morning, I came out late in the morning. I walked around our empty building and thought about what should have been. I was filled with questions because I did not know how the congregation would respond. However, there was one thing I did know. We had to adapt if we were going to survive. Over the past few weeks, we made some changes to adjust to our new normal. We did four things.

Devotions – Several years ago, we began to write a Lenten devotional. This year my wife, Kathryn wrote it. They are not just theologically accurate. They are well written. Every day, a devotion was emailed to the entire congregation. The mailings were scheduled to end on Easter, but due to the pandemic we decided to continue. Writing a daily devotion is a big job and we owe her a great deal. Those devotion are a reminder our church is functional.

Facebook – Every Saturday morning at 10:00, I come to the church and record my message for Facebook. I meet two friends. The first is Doug Price who acts as my camera man, liturgist, and editor. The second is Mark Halls who is an accomplished pianist. I knew Facebook is a power tool, but I never imagined. I email those YouTube links ever Sunday morning for the non-Facebook members. Many have shared those links. More people listen to me now, than ever have in person.

FM Transmitter – The idea of parking lot worship was not original. I first heard about it on the local news. One of our sister churches was doing it and I thought we could do it. We purchased a FM transmitter on Ebay and had to wait several weeks. It was worth the wait. We will remain in the parking lot until the pandemic passes.

Contact – There is nothing high tech about this idea. I knew it was important to stay in touch with everyone, so I started to contact them. I went through the directory, A to Z. Then I went from Z to A. Then I started in the middle and went forward, then backwards. Some I called. Some I texted. Some I emailed. I cannot tell you how much I learned listening to you.

This is the truth. I knew, I could change. I did not know if you would change. After all, the church is not known for changing rapidly. Some churches will never change. However, that is not the case here. This church did change and seemed to be energized by the challenge. I have always believed churches vote in two ways, by attendance and financial support. If people do not like what is happening, then they will not come. If people do not like what is happening, then they will not give. If people do like what is happening in their church, then they will come and give. I did not know if they would come and give with all the changes. I was afraid people would stay at home tight fist behind locked doors. I am glad to say, "I was wrong!" I had nothing to fear.

People have been coming! On Palm Sunday, we tried something new. We called it, Palms and Prayers. Respecting our social distancing guidelines, everyone who came got a palm and a prayer. For two hours, I talked and prayed with people. In that 120 minutes, there were very few breaks. On Easter, approximately two hundred came to listen to our parking lot to hear about the resurrection of Jesus. Last Sunday, more than one hundred sat in their cars again on a cold wet day to hear the word proclaimed. For years, I have called this church the ultimate non-prophet. This church has next to no financial reserves. We exist on your generosity. In the economic storm we are living in, I was afraid you might forget us, but we have not been forgotten. I am humbled by

your generosity and moved by your Christian love. You are hungry for God and concerned about one another. The number of people who have offered to help others is really something.

The coronavirus has brought out the best out in us. I will admit it. I was wrong! You were not like the frightened disciples behind locked doors. You were like the disciples who left that once locked room to face a changing world. Can I be honest with you? I am proud to stand with you not just as your friend or your pastor. I am proud to stand with you as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Do you remember the quote from T.S. Elliot? He once said, "*The True Church will never fail. For it is based upon a rock.*" And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"