

SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER: SHUTTERED JOHN 20:19-31

In the last year and a half during the worst pandemic of the last two centuries, doors were shut, businesses closed, and communities became ghost towns. People became shadows of their former selves, as they hid away from a virus that could kill them and their loved ones and friends. The world drew in and shuttered itself from danger. And lethargy set in. Professionals are calling it Covid burnout: malaise, lethargy, low-grade stress, depression, lack of focus, lack of energy, faulty memory, lack of enthusiasm and purpose. People are less engaged, feel less successful, have suffered loss, are feeling fried. Many have lost inspiration and motivation. Some feel a sense of pervasive dread or chronic anxiety. Productivity and creativity are down. Weight is up. Lonely, isolated, sad, many have become pandemic zombies, wandering aimlessly through their shuttered homes with a faraway look in their eyes. Some have become glued to a computer screen or television for days on end. Some have lost their sense of engagement and excitement for the future. Others have become downright disillusioned and disoriented.

Burnout! It's the result of prolonged stress, worry, uncertainty, mental and emotional exhaustion, and it's pervasive across the world. We are living in a groggy state of mental fog. We have not only shuttered our buildings and businesses, we have shuttered our psyches. We feel disconnected, shells of our former selves. And we don't know what to do about it.

This must have been the feeling Jesus' disciples had as well after the crucifixion. Thousands felt their hope had been dashed and destroyed. Others felt disillusioned and betrayed by someone they put their trust in. He had promised change. Now everything felt just the same. Jesus' inner circle {the apostles} was hit hardest. They cowered and locked themselves away in a single house, fearing for their lives. They didn't want to be seen. They didn't know what would happen next. Their leader had been brutally murdered. And they felt their own lives in mortal danger. Their mourning period, their shiva, had turned into a long-lasting morbidity, a paralyzing fear of going out. Overwhelmed, they were stressed, worried, petrified, and didn't know what to do next. Even after they had experienced the empty tomb, the signs of the grave clothes left behind, still they remained locked in. Peter and John had run to the tomb, had peeked in, and then had hurried back to their home again and locked themselves back in. Now Jesus is appearing to them, right in the midst of their fear and pain, right in that locked room. And he was telling them to **“go!”** **“As the Father has sent me, so I send you,”** he told them. He breathed Holy Spirit power into them. And yet still, they did not go. The scriptures tell us that a week later, the disciples were still in the house, but this time Thomas was with them.

We don't know why Thomas was missing from the earlier appearance, or why he dared to leave the house when the others didn't. But obviously Thomas was the level-headed one. While the others cowered in fear, Thomas had left the house and was out and about doing something. Now he came back and needed to experience the resurrected Jesus for himself.

Perhaps he felt, the disciples' experience had been just one more crucifixion-fatigue symptom, a delusion concocted from an uncooked portion of beef, as Scrooge might say. Or maybe he felt they had hatched a communal illusion due to prolonged stress. Whatever he thought, Thomas needed to experience the resurrected Jesus on his own, and then he believed.

But they still didn't know what to do. They didn't understand what it meant. Or what they were supposed to accomplish next. Even after this appearance, when they left that locked room, they went back to their former lives, as fishermen. Jesus had to appear to them yet again on the shores of the Sea of Galilee before they really started paying attention. Jesus needed to tell them exactly what to do.

Crucifixion shock. Crucifixion fatigue. This is a real phenomenon. And the disciples were real people, just like you and me. It's no mistake that the aftermath of Easter lasts until Pentecost on May 23rd! That's nearly two

months away for us. Because it took that long for the disciples to “go out” and start fulfilling their mission. For the shock to wear off. For new life and new energy to set in. It would take the refreshing and renewing breath of the Holy Spirit to set them on their feet again and drive them out and on their way. In the meantime, they loitered, they hesitated, they dragged their feet and their nets, and they waited.

It may have taken Jesus’ disciples a long time, but eventually, they did understand. And after a period of time for them to figure out how to proceed and what to do next, they began a movement that changed the world. They couldn’t go out and preach the way they had when Jesus was with them for fear of being killed, so they formed house churches with secret passwords. They couldn’t just rent buildings and worship Jesus in public, so they hid and worshipped in caves and private homes. They couldn’t teach in the synagogues and in the Temple as Jesus had, because they weren’t educated. So they began to preach to small groups and individuals, a few at a time. They couldn’t change their current religion, or its structure, or its people. So, they formed the early church, an ecclesia of Jesus’ faithful.

As their courage grew, so did their ministry, their mission, and the church. And then came the Roman Paul, adversary turned advocate, who would revolutionize evangelism and create what we now know as the church of Jesus Christ. All this took time. Innovative thinking. Initiative. And yet caution. Today, we too are still called and sent by Jesus to make disciples of all people, to proclaim him to the public, to heal the sick and spread the good news. But like the early disciples, we are stumped on how to do it. Not only have we lost our momentum as the Church due to declining numbers and general malaise, but now the covid pandemic has stifled the “normal” way we have done things and has challenged us to change.

In a sense, we like the disciples are hiding in a locked room. We don’t know how to proceed with safety and yet with enthusiasm. We don’t know what we are to do or how we are to do it. The only thing we know is that Christ is risen, and he is asking us to “go!” We as the church don’t need to expect ourselves to have superhuman courage or lack of fear. We have much to be afraid of and years of stasis to overcome. But we do know one thing. Pentecost is coming. Pentecost has come! And the Holy Spirit of Christ is here to guide us and strengthen us, move us, and propel us into the future and into mission.

We don’t have to have it all figured out ahead of time. The disciples didn’t. We don’t have to know what we’re doing or how we’re going to do it. The disciples didn’t. We don’t even need to know what will happen when things start to change or how those changes will change us! The disciples didn’t. But we know, when Jesus tells us to go, we need to call on the Holy Spirit to come upon us in a big and powerful way, and we need to be prepared that our lives and our church will change. Because that is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. It’s not our job to “know.” Just to “go”! And he will do the rest. “Go!” people of God. Welcome this time of resurrection. Welcome the presence of the Holy Spirit. Submit yourselves to Jesus’ presence and power. And go to where he is sending us.