

Sunday April 11, 2021

Sermon Series Message: Holy Sightings Part 1

Scriptural Lesson: Acts 4: 32-35

Preacher: Kirstie J. Engel

We are beginning a new sermon series entitled
“Holy Sightings.”

- The purpose of this series is to name the observed activity of God; occurring both in our scriptures and our daily lives; that might inform us, restore us and encourage us; in our work towards reconciliation, restoration and repair;
- I think it is important for me to also name that every sermon series that we have explored together up until now; Power of Story, Awakenings, Holy Darkness, Holy Disruption and more; **has hopefully prepared us** for this series;

- **It has hopefully prepared** us to be able to name God's activity, in a way that transcends our 5 senses of sight, touch, hearing, taste and smell that Terri Storer referred to in her Maundy Thursday message;
- Senses that inform us that although we may not always have tangible evidence of God's role or activity in our every day lives; **we have on some level** a measure of confidence that God is at work in our lives.
- And we have this confidence because **our sixth sense** (as I like to call it) has become awakened;
- For in my mind, **our sixth sense** is the God within us; the Imago Dei that reveals to us that we are all created in the image of God;
- **So our sixth sense**; is the voice of God that is always speaking within us;

- **It is the voice** that tells us to move forward or to hold off;
- **It is that voice** that tells us that something may be wrong with our children, even if we just tucked them in at night;
- **It is that voice** that informs us, guides us, teaches us and encourages us;
- **It is the voice** that invites us to step out, to reach out to dig deeper, to explore further; Our call, our role, our gifts, our impact;
- **It is the voice** that informs us that everything is going to be ok even if at the moment; **things do not feel ok.**
- **It is the voice** that takes a lifetime journey to be able to discern who, what and where it may come from;
- But over time, as we become wiser in our faith journey, because we have taken the time to pour

into our faith; through our time, talents, gifts,
service and witness;

- The **voice becomes** clearer; **the voice becomes** more detectable; **the voice becomes** more audible; **the voice becomes** more reliable;
- Making the scripture come alive when Jesus tells His disciples; **My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. (John 10:27)**

- **So it is in this revelation that a tremendous burden has lifted off within me as I get personal with you this morning; for just a reminder; the 8:30 worship service is designed for you and I to be able to become more intimate with God on an individual level; so that we may be able to take our individual learnings, awareness and spiritual growth and development to the larger church community;**
- That one of the Church's major job is to help teach the people how to detect, listen and respond to God's voice.
- Furthermore in letting you in my personal revelation this morning; I think I may have cracked the code in my own heart and mind as it pertains to the relevancy of church; and that is the Church is the only one who can do this work;

- Just **as you and I do not go to** a cardiologist to receive counseling services;
- **Or you and I would not go** to an ophthalmologist and expect to receive a root canal;
- The Church's major role and task, is to help the people to know that not only are we all part of God's family;
- But to also declare that **there is a voice** inside of all of us; **a voice** that in Genesis 1 said *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2 Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. 3 And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light;*
- **There is a voice inside of all of us** that said in Genesis 1:26 *"Let us make humankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over*

the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, [a] and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

- So it is **This same voice** Church, that it becomes our job, to name and proclaim is there; within each and every person;
- **It is a voice** that was there from our birth...
- **It is a voice** that will call us on home in our death....
- **It is a voice** that will never die within us;
- **It is a voice**, that once we are all able to proclaim and identify clearly; this is how we begin to live out the Resurrection of the here and the now and forevermore.

- **You see, pre-pandemic, I have named that the standing of the Church was shaky.**
- Church attendance worldwide has dropped drastically, because more and more studies are revealing that people are not finding the relevance of being in church communities as they used to.
- Many people **are identifying** as spiritual but not necessary religious;
- Some people **have identified** that they like Jesus teachings, but not so much the church.
- **Some have even abandoned** this idea of a physical resurrection of Jesus altogether or seeing Jesus as God even;
- Instead Jesus for some has been identified as just a prophet for some; or for others just a really cool dude who had a really good message of love and inclusion for all.

- So fast-forwarding to where we are now; the status of church as we know it; reveals that US Church membership has fallen below 50 percent for the first time ever.
- In speaking with my best friend Valerie who lives in Wichita KS, yesterday; she talked about how her routine has become checking out two churches online weekly; one being our church of course;
- She revealed to me that this sort of routine has been enriching to her life; not to mention my BFF's admission to this being her truth, is not the first time I have heard this from someone;
- For as I have done my pastoral visits, others have shared this same truth; that they enjoy a new morning routine of being in their pajamas; watching whatever church they want to;

sometimes attending 5 different worship experiences a week without guilt;

- All revealing to the church as we know it; a major wakeup call and reality that we will have to work through together;
- That whether the church as a whole is ready to step out of our comfort zone as it pertains to change or not; the people are already making the church have to own this new reality.
- **A reality that** presents a tougher mission for the Church as a whole; in how we share God's love to all;
- **A reality that** will require the Church to do everything we can to ensure that we do remain relevant and vital.
- **A reality that** although may seem daunting; today a burden has lifted off of me as a result of studying this passage of scripture today; to let me

know that this reality does not mean that the church is doomed.

- For even though this reality is a hard truth to swallow;
- There is another reality that I have discovered and that is this;
- In the John scripture that I shared earlier about the sheep listening to God's voice;
- My aha moment is that **as long as the Church** stays focused on our work of naming the voice of God within us;
- **As long as the Church** understands that identifying this voice as being just as vital as one's heart beating and or having the lung capacity to breathe;
- Then the Church remains vital and very much alive.

- **So I suppose the mindset shift that has occurred within my own mind as I witness this community in our Acts text today;**
- Is this understanding that our faith is important.
- Our faith is relevant.
- Our faith is necessary...
- For just as I named in last week Easter message; that Holy Week and Easter tends to be the most important week of the church calendar life to both the leaders and communities;
- However, it is not meant to be an isolated event, but the jumpstart towards a lifelong mission movement; seeking to overcome the evil and oppression of every form through God's infinite love for all of humankind;
- In the same regards Church, our faith in this movement for love and inclusion for all that Jesus began, must not become an isolated event either.

- Our faith in this movement **has to remain vital** in our hearts or the church as a whole will die.
- **For this is the essence of our passage today of Acts; a passage that represents a community that we all ought to strive to become in my book; if we wish to remain vital in the world.**
- For the community being depicted in our passage of scripture today, is a community that has embodied what the Resurrection of the here and now and forevermore might look like;
- For in our text today, you and I are witnessing a community that represents a multitude of people that believed—
- **They believed** that every individual person, were of one heart and one soul—

- **They believed** that their love, their hopes, their passions being joined in Christian harmony and unity could only produce one consequence;
- A good consequence where we might all together *have all things in common*;
- **All things in common** as it pertains to love being the common denominator for why we do what we do;
- **All things in common** as it pertains to the understanding of human worth, sanctity and quality of life being of the utmost priority;
- **All things in common** as it pertains to our overall commonwealth being vested in the common good for the people.
- This my friends is what you and I are witnessing occur in our passage of scripture today.
- A reconciling movement forming right before our every eyes; where you and I are getting a glimpse

of how the lifelong mission towards inclusion for all people that Jesus fought for during that Holy Week — **continues on.**

- **It continues** on when people realize that part of our faith invites us to align into being of one heart and one soul;
- **An alignment** that will require you and I seeking a righteous life that gives moral weight to the the way you and I see one another.
- **An alignment** that invites you and I to invest in this idea that Aristotle taught; where “All things is shared between friends”;
- **An alignment** that suggests that congregational solidarity evinces more than shared beliefs; but to share ones heart and soul; implies a level of intimacy; with a commitment to others that blurs the boundaries of personal rights or private property.

- **An alignment** that understands that a community of goods is a community full of friends; precious friends; even soulmates....
- **An alignment** that invites us to consider this idea that to the extent, we come to value others and what they need; more than we do our possession and what we want;
- **An alignment** that enlightens us to discover that what we actually own becomes common property;
- **Common property** that invites us into this idea that I have, so you have....making it so that everyone has what they need to thrive as a human being; love, security, equity and so forth.
- **And so the only organization that I know that has the time to do this work...**
- The only organization whose mission reflects this work...
- Is the Church.....

- **So as long as you and I** understand this as work that is relevant;
- **As long as you** and I understand and proclaim this work to be necessary;
- **As long as you and I** understand the work and role of the Church and her mission as being essential...
- Then the Church lives on...
- The Church evolves...
- The Church transforms...
- The Church adapts....
- But yet the Church lives on!
- Let the people say Amen!

Sunday April 11, 2021

Sermon Series Message: Holy Sightings Part 2

First Lesson: Psalm 133

Gospel Lesson: John 20: 19-31

Preacher: Kirstie J. Engel

We are beginning a new sermon series entitled
“Holy Sightings.”

- The purpose of this series is to name the observed activity of God; occurring both in our scriptures and our daily lives; that might inform us, restore us and encourage us; in our work towards reconciliation, restoration and repair;
- And before unpacking this familiar gospel directly, I need to say this;
- That this is perhaps going to be one of the most important sermon series that I will ever preach and you might ever hear;

- Because generally speaking, I am normally able to see the activity of God and the beauty of God's creation very clearly.... until 2020 hit.
- For if I can be real, the year 2020 has tested my faith and tested my faith a lot.
- For I would have never imagined enduring a global event, that would literally put virtually all of humanity and the world's living creatures on the same metaphorical playing field; as 'Rona (since this virus has been lingering around so long, we are on casual first name basis) has been able to do.
- **It has been stressful you all.....** and I know that many if not all can join me in this sentiment.
- For this period of isolation, has left so many unanswered questions for me as it pertains to the state of the church, **how we** move forth, **how we** move through, **how we** adapt, **how we** let go,

how we transition; I tell you the how's and the why's and the what's are a list that keeps getting longer and longer and longer within my own head;

- **It is a list** that if I am not intentional in laying down, can keep me up in night...
- **For I have** cried over this list...
- **I have prayed** over this list...
- **I have yelled** at this list....
- **I have even** attempted to crumple this metaphorical list in my hand and chuck it in my wastebasket....
- I stopped by to say that I must have missed the wastebasket;
- For this list keeps reappearing again;
- Revealing to me that I am no Michael Jordan even in my head....that's sad...really sad....that I can't even make the shot in my own head.....

- So I say all of this to let you know where my headspace and heart is, as we approach our gospel this morning that is talking about doubting Thomas;
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- A gospel that I have preached so many times; that I almost chose to not even thoroughly research this passage as I have done other biblical passages....
- **For one**, it is because this story of Thomas's doubt is such a relatable story;
- For Thomas needing to see tangible proof of Jesus Resurrection I can relate to; mainly because lately I have found myself needing to see some of the same proof.

- Not to mention, doubt is such a real truth for most people's faith journey; that many of us could probably write the story of Thomas ourselves.
- For even in our very own faith community of First UMC Lincoln; I think it is important to name that there are varied belief systems as it pertains to theology.
- **There are some** whose faith informs them that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine.
- **There are some** in our congregation, who believes in the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ;
- **There are some**, who fully support the birth story of how Jesus came to be; that Jesus was born from a virgin Mary; that Jesus was born into the world, but is not of the world.
- **Where there are others** in our faith community who are exploring their faith journey;

- **A faith journey**, where Jesus is a gentle friend that teaches them more about love and service;
- **A faith story**, where the birth story serves as a powerful metaphor for humanity to still find value in;
- **Where the Resurrection** of Jesus is a symbolic movement that represents what a community can be, if we were to lay our prejudices and biases aside.
- And I stopped by to declare and decree that I am proud to be the Spiritual Leader and pastor for both sets of beliefs...
- And in many ways as I am re-living and re-experiencing our gospel for another time as if it is the first time; I am beginning to name a Holy Sighting that I never considered before;

- That perhaps Jesus is proud to serve a similar congregational context that I have just shared.
- For doubting Thomas as we know him, was not a seasoned church person as I talked about last week in my Easter message either.
- For Yes, Thomas was Jesus disciple; this is a historical fact;
- However, for the first time ever, I am naming and recognizing that Thomas was most likely more from the second category of faith seekers and explorers that I just named.
- And yet even in this discovery, Jesus loved Thomas just as much as he loved Peter; who declared Jesus to be the Son of God; The Messiah.
- **Furthermore in unpacking the story of Thomas further;** For some reason Thomas was not at the

meeting when Jesus made His first Resurrection appearance.

- When told later that the risen Lord had been there, the Word reveals that Thomas was not easily convinced.
- The story reveals to us that Thomas must be able to see and feel the body of the Lord and be assured of the wounds which had killed Him.
- Thomas as the story is presented, was only asking for signs sufficient to satisfy himself, even as others had done all through the ministry of Jesus; and Jesus obliged him by appearing to the group at their next meeting, evidently for the sake of Thomas alone.
- So you see, Thomas' problem was not the Person of Christ and His relationship to God—
- For Thomas, it was the Resurrection which bothered him.

- You see Thomas has become so thoroughly labeled a doubter that it is difficult to think of him in any other light.
- **But I stopped by to suggest that some of the greatest doubters are also the greatest believers,**
- This is because with people like Thomas; their powers of perception are sometimes more penetrating than those of the average believer.
- The worst that one can say of Thomas is that he **was an honest doubter**—that he doubted only, so that he might secure more evidence for his understanding.
- However, Thomas being this honest doubter does not erase this possibility; that because of Thomas's quest for a greater insight into the deity of Jesus; it allowed him a deeper comprehension of Jesus' teaching on the Holy Spirit than the average listener.

- **So although** Thomas needed to know that the Resurrection was both inevitable and necessary;
- **Although** for the moment, Thomas needed tangible evidence for what others said was true.
- **Although Thomas** was perhaps slower than the rest of the group and needed to follow through logically on every point of his syllogism; I don't believe that any of this should be held against him.
- For God, if more Christians would follow the example of Thomas and strive for greater assurance for their beliefs; this would be something to celebrate.
- **For once Thomas** reached his finger to see the hands of Jesus;
- **Once Thomas touched** Jesus side as Jesus urged Thomas to respond with faith whether than unbelief;

- The five words of Thomas that followed: **My Lord and my God;**
- **Became as life-giving** as the woman who saw Jesus at the well.
- **It became as impressive** upon Jesus heart, as the woman who touched the hem of His garment;
- **So you see church, the five words expressed from Thomas, revealed that the discipline of self-questioning ; followed by the revelation of tender compassion; enabled Thomas to rise to the loftiest view of the Lord given in the Gospels.”**
- **Those five words** encompassed the totality of Jesus faith in Christ;
- They were not the words of a chronic doubter, **but those of a believer** with an ever-expanding faith;

- **And so as I attempt to make these revelations connect to where we are today;**
- I believe that **it is this ever-expanding faith** that it will take; to ensure that the Holy Week/ Easter that we just experienced does not remain an isolated event that we acknowledge once a year;
- **It is this type of ever-expanding faith** that it will take for us to strive to have the Holy Vision that God has;
- **A Holy vision** that invites us to see the **wounds** of injustice in the world...
- **A Holy Vision** that teaches us how to begin to dress these metaphorical wounds that have severely fractured our society; to promote healing and protect the wound from further harm.
- Furthermore, for all of us who are nervous of what the Church might look like as this pandemic persists on;

- My major Holy Sighting and Epiphany for me is that the future of the Church is statistically revealing that the Church's potential constituents are going to look a lot like Thomas;
- For the latest Gallup poll revealed that for the first time ever, as I named in part 1 of this message at 830am; that the US church membership has fallen below 50 percent for the first time ever in eight decades.
- U.S. church membership has steadily been declining for the past two decades.
- Before 2000, church membership had generally stayed around 70 percent from when Gallup began measuring it in the 1930s.
- In 2020, membership reached an all-time low of 47 percent.
- So according to this poll; "The decline in church membership is primarily a function of the

increasing number of Americans who express no religious preference,”

- So this is a long way of my naming that there are a lot of “Thomases,” out there .
- However the celebration of our gospel this morning;
- The Holy Sighting to be celebrated in our gospel this morning;
- Is that Jesus teaches us that the doubting Thomases **can still be reached.**
- **Those five words “My Lord and My God” lets us know that “They can still be reached.....”**
- This is the great work of the Reconciling Task.
- This is the life-long missional work of the Resurrection.
- And the good news is that **it can be done!**
- Let the People Say Amen!

