

SIGNS OF LIFE

There is a story by Leslie Flynn who told of a small boy being raised in a frontier city by his grandmother. One night the house catches on fire. The grandmother, trying to rescue the boy who was asleep in the bedroom upstairs, is overcome by the smoke and dies in the fire.

This frontier city doesn't have much of a fire department. A crowd gathers around the house and they hear a small boy crying out for help. The lower floor is a wall of flames and no one seems to know what to do.

Suddenly, a man pushes through the crowd and begins climbing an iron drainage pipe which runs to the roof. The pipe is hot from the fire, but he makes it to a second floor window. The man crawls through the window and locates the boy. With the crowd cheering encouragement, the man

climbs back down the hot iron pipe with the boy on his back and his arms around his neck.

A few weeks later, a public meeting was held to determine in whose custody the boy would be placed. Each person wanting the child would be allowed to make a brief statement. The first man said, "I have a farm and would give the boy a good home. He would grow up on the farm and learn a trade."

The second person to speak was the local school teacher. She said, "I am a school teacher and I would see to it that he received a good education." Finally, the banker said, "Mrs. Morton and I would be able to give the boy a fine home and a fine education. We would like him to come and live with us." The presiding officer looked around and asked, "Is there anyone else who would like to say anything?"

From the back row, a man rose and said, "These other people may be able to offer some things I can't. All I can offer is my love." Then, he slowly removed his hands from his coat pockets. A gasp went up from the crowd because his hands were scarred terribly from climbing up and down the hot pipe. The boy recognized the man as the one who had saved his life and ran into his waiting arms.

The farmer, teacher and the banker simply sat down. Everyone knew what the decision would be. The scarred hands proved that this man had given more than all the others.

Not too long ago, we spent an entire week in worship and hearing again the story of Jesus passion and death on a cross. We spent last Sunday in a triumphant celebration of Easter where we heard again the story of Jesus' resurrection

and we proclaimed again and again: Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed! We celebrated Holy Baptism, and confirmation, and Holy Communion together...which should lead us to charge out from this place in the name of Jesus Christ shouting from the rooftops about the transforming power of God in a person's life. And that's what you hear from Peter in both scriptures today...the Church is on the move through the power of Holy Spirit and the good news is being proclaimed boldly. That's the kind of church we feel we try to be: the attractive, powerful, life-giving community of faith who cannot stop praying with and for people, the Church talking with people and teaching them about God's love, and the Church doing works of justice and compassion in our city to highlight the outward change that happens when our inward person is set on the right path of Jesus

Christ!!! We are the Church that changes lives through the power of God the Holy Spirit! Amen!

But here we have this gospel reading, and it is read every year the Sunday after Easter...why? Because this picture is not pretty: John 20 paints the Church that is scared to death, locked behind doors and walls, confused, with no mission or purpose, no words of peace and love, only one word fits this picture: survival. Ever been in a church where the only purpose you hear and see is survival? Oh man, it's a terrible place to be.... When you are new and walk in the doors...everyone greets you with handshakes and hugs...not because the love of Christ compels them, but because they NEED you!

Their choir has three people left, every committee has the same people recycled over and over, the sermons are watered down for fear of offending the left or the right so the pastor drones on and on about stories he read in the latest book or newspaper. They want young people, but are afraid to talk to anyone under 60. Furthermore, these churches are very suspicious of anyone who doesn't talk like them, dress like them, or look like them, and so they only allow the same people in the church. There is a smell of musty death, and you can't wait for the service to be over so you can speed out of the crumbling asphalt parking lot.

What's the difference? Jesus is the difference! Jesus doesn't bash down the door or tear through the walls; he appears out of thin air! Jesus shows his hands, feet, and side as the proof of life that he really did die on the cross

and resurrected from the grave! Jesus gives the Church the Holy Spirit and a purpose: to preach and teach that humanity is no longer a slave to Sin and the consequence of death, every person is forgiven by God, all a person has to do is to believe in God's forgiveness and live a new life as a disciple of Jesus Christ! For all those who don't believe God's forgiveness, their Sin is retained, they are still in slavery to Sin and death, and they will be judged accordingly. So there is our purpose as the Church of Jesus Christ, there is our mission and what we are to be about doing: telling people that God loves them and has forgiven them, Sin and death are no more, and God will transform all who believe in this good news.

The Church that uses the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim and teach forgiveness of Sin, the amazing love of

God, and the transforming grace of Christ is a Church on the move in the neighborhood, all people will respond to the love of God because we are all hard-wired by God to ache in our heart for the love of God. There are people all around our church here that are aching for someone to pray with them, to tell them of the love of God, for someone to show a little compassion and justice, not out of pity or sympathy, but because we follow Jesus and want to spread the message of God's forgiveness and grace.

Of course, the reason we read aloud this ugly picture of the survival church every year is because it is so easy to lock the doors and go on defense. It is so easy to be Thomas who doesn't see Jesus, who is absent from church that day and refuses to believe the good news of God's forgiveness and love when his friends tell him. It is so easy as the

Church to close our eyes to the Risen Christ in our midst and fix our vision and mission on the financial records, and the attendance records, and the crumbling parking lot, and wring our hands in despair. It is so easy to look at the nominations report and cry tears of hopelessness because the same people do the same jobs year after year.

But what I've learned over the last six years is that we must keep our eyes on Jesus; that the song "Depth of Mercy" really does have power to change a life as we hear and proclaim the power of God to love others and forgive their sin. I've learned that statistics are important, but that the good news of God is more important! When the Holy Spirit is invited into the Church and we respond to the Spirit's leading, when we open the doors and refuse to be

stuck behind walls, the neighborhood responds by wanting more of what we have to share with them.

I firmly believe that we need to hear the stories of both churches every year after Easter...the Church of Jesus Christ on the move and boldly proclaiming the good news of forgiveness and grace and people responding by the thousands...and the Church of Jesus Christ locked behind doors of fear and hopelessness, the survival church that is musty and full of death because they have taken their eyes off of Jesus and refuse to believe the power of God to change anyone, especially them.

We absolutely need to hear these scriptures every year because we need to choose which one we shall be: the Church proclaiming God's love and grace, or the Church of fear and survival until we die.

You need to choose this year whom you shall be: a powerful disciple of Jesus with your eyes fixed on the Risen Christ; or a person like Thomas who is absent from worship, absent from small groups, absent from Life in the Body of Christ as we move into our neighborhood with acts of love, and as a consequence you refuse to believe when people you know come knocking at your door with the message of God's forgiveness and grace.

Now that you have heard, now that you have seen the Risen Christ...what is your choice this year? To believe or not to believe? To blow up the walls and rip open the doors through the power of the Holy Spirit, or to put another chain on the entrance to your heart? The Risen Christ is here, He shows His scarred hands and you know that He is the One who saved you; will you run to Jesus today?