

April 14, 2007
Have You Seen Him?
John 20:19-31
Rev. Susan Bresser

My brother used to hide in the corn field when we lived in an old farmhouse down a long lane in southern Ohio. He would run into the corn field when he was in trouble, trying to get away from my mother's discipline. He would hide in fear. And he always got lost and my parents and grandparents would always have to walk the rows of corn to find him. But he sure seemed to gravitate toward that corn field.

Hiding ... children do it well. Today's gospel reading – traditionally the passage read on the second week of the Easter season – gives us an image of people hiding ... grown-ups hiding, not children. The reading today gives us a picture of the early church. I'm sure you're saying: "there wasn't anything in that passage about a church. It's a reading about fear, doubt, disbelief and misunderstanding." Well, I'm going to tell you it is the image of the church ... a church without hope, without leadership, without any of the trappings of the church as we know "church." It's a pathetic miserable gathering of the disciples and they are hiding.

Jesus was killed, he died. And then he rose. From the dead. Wow ... that's a lot for a disciple to process. And just look at the disciples ... a motley crew ... shaking with fear behind locked doors. All throughout John's gospel, Jesus has been preparing the disciples for his death. He has gone over and over again his commandments to love one another, to be bold, to trust him, to be ready to follow him at all costs. Have they been paying attention? Look at them! They've locked themselves in a room. There's no loyalty

there, no boldness, no conviction, only fear. They're very afraid. Some disciples, huh? Some church.

The disciples live in fear because someone might recognize them. And if they are recognized as friends of the outlaw Jesus, well, they might lose their lives, too. How would you advertise that church? "Welcome to the church of locked doors, sweaty palms and shaky knees. We hope you feel at home."

Could this ever be called a church? It seems like it has absolutely nothing going for it ... except ...

Except that, when it gathered, Jesus shows up ... pushes through the locked doors and gathers with them. And maybe that's as close any church ever gets to being "the church."

Even us, the SPUMC, with all our programs, our technology, our staff, our musicians, the size of our building, all of the trappings of sacred life – we are nothing without Jesus. Left to our own devices we are nothing but a bunch of confused, frightened, trembling disciples.

So, what makes the church "the church?" Lots of answers to that question, we know, but certainly worship is a priority. Here at the SPUMC we spend a lot of time planning and preparing worship ... everything's coordinated ... theme, scripture, songs, prayers. Some weekends are better than others, but for the most part everything is carefully selected and put into place. And yet we know, and many of us have learned, that real worship is not our creation.

We are nothing but empty vessels without the acknowledgement of the presence of Christ.

We are so good at planning, preparing, proofreading, coordinating, situating, being timely so we can keep a total of three hours of worship every weekend fixed, predictable and under control. All of this careful planning and control really just becomes another form of a locked door, another form of hiding, because what, pray tell, would we do if Jesus actually shows up?

I think we believe that because we're a successful church, Jesus is obviously present. We are a big church, with a large staff, lots of resources, good programs, hard-working committees, powerful music, an attractive building, coordinated worship. In this annual conference, we are a successful church, **but if we're not careful, all we will ever be is an attractive building with busy people.** We can be successful and at the same time fail at being a church. Without the presence of Christ, all we will ever be is a pitiful huddle of frightened souls behind a locked door.

But the amazing thing is sometimes Jesus does show up. He slips through the closed doors, breaks into our uptight middle class worship posture, horns in on our respectable and very coordinated hour of gathering ... and worship happens. And we don't know what to call it. Maybe we've been nudged. Maybe we've been filled. Maybe we discover that we're actually very hungry and want more. Maybe we're uncomfortable with something that has been said or done and that discomfort continues to wrap around our heads and our hearts causing us to ponder, pray and respond. Maybe a switch has been turned on. Maybe we've been moved to tears, to laughter,

to silence. Maybe we feel as if we've been hit over the head with a 2 x 4. Maybe we nod our heads ... maybe we shake our heads. Maybe we clap our hands. Maybe we do these things or have these experiences because Jesus really does show up ... and it's called worship and its called community ... and it's not of our own creation. It's a gift from God.

Before coming to SP to serve this church, I did my field education or practicum at Crossroads UMC in Waunakee. At that time Crossroads was simply a gathering of people. They didn't have a church building ... they didn't have all the sacred trappings. They worshipped in a warehouse. I've told the story before and some of you know it, but within the story, there's an important lesson.

The DS called me and asked me to meet her at Crossroads. I had heard about this new church start and was interested in seeing what it was like. She assumed it would be a win/win situation: I'd get great educational experience and Crossroads would get another pastor. I walked into that warehouse and was very skeptical. I'm sure it was written all over my face as the pastor, Dave, took me on a tour of the space: "how in the world do they exist in this warehouse? What are they doing? And they call themselves a church." I was so turned off; I almost said to the DS, "it's not for me but thanks for the invitation." Well, it wasn't an invitation. It was an assignment. And it was one of the best experiences of my life. I learned about the presence of Christ. What Crossroads had while gathering in a warehouse was the presence of Christ. They knew without that presence they were nothing. I just assumed Jesus wasn't interested in a warehouse. And I was wrong.

Last year on our confirmation retreat we traveled to Cassville on the western side of the state to do some clean up and repair work at the Cassville UMC. It's a small church ... sometimes 20 in worship. Their good news last year was celebrating the three children in Sunday school. Our confirmation kids didn't know any of this history but we did let them know ahead of time that it was a small church. I had a van full of kids and we pulled into Cassville and found the church. We pulled up to the church and one of the girls in my van said, "This is it? It's not very big."

Another girl: "Where's their parking lot?" I replied, "They don't have a parking lot." "They don't have a parking lot? That's weird."

We unloaded our gear and moved into their education space, a separate building from the church. The space: 2 big rooms and one smaller room. Additional comments were overheard: "this is it? Where do they have LOGOS? Not a lot of room for Sunday school?"

We unpacked and laid out our bedding on cold floors. "Don't they have any heat? Why don't they have any carpet?" That's when the bathrooms were discovered and a voice yelled down the hall: "there's only one toilet and one sink in the girls bathroom ... how is this ever going to work?"

We moved into the sanctuary for some worship time before going to bed ... it's about the size of our chapel and the kids were surprised ... "How do they worship here? It's so small. It smells old."

They weren't complaining ... they were seriously concerned about the spiritual and emotional well-being of the Cassville church. They weren't

complaining ... they were asking questions based on their experience that bigger is better and bigger means success.

At first I shook my head in disbelief ... not at the church or the size or the smallness or the stillness, but at my confirmation kids. “Have I not taught them anything? Haven’t I taught them that we are all a part of the family of God because of our relationship with Jesus Christ? Why can’t they understand that the Cassville UMC – regardless of size or space – is a viable and living ministry? Why don’t they get that?”

While gathering in the little sanctuary, Scott Bethke, one of our lead adults in youth ministry and a product of the Cassville UMC, said, “Jesus says: when two or three are gathered in my name, I am there also.”

After that statement, it seems the questions stopped and our ministry of serving the Cassville UMC began. We had the best weekend, with good worship, strong fellowship, commitment to service and determination to be the church of Jesus Christ.

We are the church, not because of the building we’ve built and cared for, not because of Radiance, the preaching, or the various ministries. We are the church because to us, even to us, Christ has come, Christ has given us his gifts of Spirit, mission, and forgiveness, commissioning us to give them to the whole world in his name.

That’s why we’re called the church.

Have you seen him? Have you seen the risen Lord? Has he broken in to your hiding place? Has he slipped through the doors you keep closed? I've seen the Lord. I saw him today at a fundraiser in fellowship hall. I saw him at my Bible study early this morning. I saw him at a wedding this afternoon. I see him ushering. See, he's singing with Radiance. OH, he's teaching church school. Did you hear him leading prayers with Ruth? Every time I share God's word, I know Jesus is with me. And he'll bless us when we leave.

We claim quite loudly to be the church of Jesus Christ. Let's make it so.