

Rev. Tasha L. Blackburn

5/1/11

Shut Up

John 20: 19-31

Some of you may have noticed the title of today's sermon. Yesterday, working at a member's house to raise money for the mission trip, the member said, "Tasha! What is up with that sermon title! You know, in our house that is a bad word." I told her I agreed. For goodness sakes, I've got a three and a five year old at home! We say "hush" or "shush" but never those other words. Over this past week, I've changed the title several times, going back and forth, driving our new administrative assistant crazy, and all the time wondering: can you say this in church? In the end, I left it and there they are: printed in black and white in your bulletin today: "shut up."

These aren't the only "no-no" words in church. Thomas, himself, has a pretty dark cloud around him. For two thousand years his name has been synonymous with "doubter" and "doubting." It is the only thing we know about him. We never remember when he supported Jesus who wanted to return to dangerous Jerusalem. We do not call to mind the day that Jesus called him and asked him to be a disciple. No, all we remember is the day he stumbled in his faith. You've just heard the story read. It is the Sunday night of Easter and the disciples cannot believe the reports they are getting from the women. They lock themselves into a room, fearful of the authorities, and Jesus shows up—as if the doors were wide open—and he gives them his peace, shows them his wounds and, finally, he breathes on them. "Take the Holy Spirit" he says. "Breathe it in." Of course this is how it went. We remember it well. And, of course, Thomas missed the whole thing. He returns to the disciples with his sacks of bread or olives or toilet paper, whatever it is they sent him to buy, and he finds the world has turned upside down while he is left right side up.

So, he doubts. Who wouldn't? He says, "Until I see him and touch those wounds I refuse to believe." Thomas only wants what all of the others have just so joyfully received. He might as well be that man or woman who slinks into the back of this sanctuary to sit on the very last row. They have heard all these stories: stories of a God who cares and a Savior who can forgive the worst and a Spirit that sustains. They have heard of the miracles and the changed lives but they haven't been in the room to know for themselves. "I just want to see him; to meet him. Until then, I cannot believe." He is not a bad guy, Thomas. You may know him. You may be him. He just wants to feel this resurrection for himself.

No, Thomas is not a bad guy; not a bad word. His friends though, they are another story. I've got a bone to pick with them. John writes here that eight days after Easter these men and women can be found where? Behind shut doors. You are not confused, they were behind those doors on Easter evening too when Jesus came among them, and here we are again, eight days later and they are shut up. Jesus came among them a week ago, gave them his peace, showed them his wounds and breathed the Spirit upon them. Are they on the streets? In the synagogues? Forming Bible studies to meet at Panera? No. They are shut up in that room, filled with fear. Talk about a bad word.

How quickly they have dismissed that they are no longer simply disciples, which means followers. They keep that title and role but, since he conquered death and came back to breathe on

them, Jesus also gave them a new role: apostle, one who is sent out. He breathed on them and they breathed it in but, since then, they've just been holding their breath: out of fear, or nerves, or confusion. Whatever it is, they have refused to breathe out. But that is the only way breath works of course. You breathe in, filling your lungs and your spirit, and you breathe out, filling the space around you so others can breathe in. The breath he gives us cannot be held forever but these new apostles are giving it a good try.

You know, this all makes me think of my grandma's death. She died this past week and it is a good thing. Her death is not a painful one since she was 92 and has been riddled with Alzheimer's for the last 7 years. The grandma I knew and loved has been gone since then and that is the real problem. With her passing I have passing thoughts like: what does this life mean if you can love so many and be loved by them but it ends like this? Are we humans really special to God and what makes us special? Our souls? Then where has grandma's been all this time? Maybe this really just is how it ends. With these thoughts in my head and my hand on the knob, I am turning it and slamming the door. In no time at all I am shut up; locked away in the fears that sneak in as if I'd never met Christ at all. As if the sounds of the trumpets from a week ago do not still ring in my ear. Life can get like this though, can't it? Jesus turns the world upside down but we live in it while it is still right side up where fear still holds a firm grip and weariness has some sway as well. It doesn't take a death to get us to recognize the small tragedies of life. It can be disappointments and detours, diseases and the defeats that get the best of us. So we shut the door and shut up our faith, as if Christ has not been raised at all. "Shut up." It really is a bad word.

No wonder the disciples turned apostles are a bad word here. Thomas, sitting in the back pew, just wants to breathe in what they have received. But the disciples, to whom Jesus has given it all, refuse to breathe it out. By the time we meet them in the book of Acts their lungs are working again. They have opened their door and opened their mouths, telling everyone how Jesus changed everything. And thank God because, before that, they were simply people who had the Spirit but they weren't yet the Church. They had to open the door to become that.

It has been a week. Have our lives been turned upside down by the love we witnessed here last Sunday? Are we the Church or are we people with the Spirit but the doors are shut? The disciples were. But Jesus walked through that shut door as if it weren't even there and he met them again. Over and over, he sought them out no matter where they'd shut themselves up. And, over and over again, he seeks us too. Now that is a good word. Amen.