

**Called Out Ones - Easter 2C**  
John 20:19-31

**Slide: Tulips**

*“Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you...As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”*

Have you ever asked this question: “What is Church?” I ask this question all the time. I never used to. When I was growing up, church was the building you went to learn about God and sit through something we called worship. I didn’t think much about it. Well, first, I was a kid, so why should I, and second, my parents made me go. Church was something I had to do, so it took some time before I realized that was not something that was true. The more I experienced Church in the positive sense and in a positive way, the more I realized that we truly need places like these faith communities, especially one like St. John’s.

**Slide: St. John’s Chalice**

But, think about this: our culture is becoming more and more (and I hate this word) unchurched. Unfortunately, we have used even more strange words to explain who people are who are not practicing the faith we call Christianity today. Some people call them “nones” and “dones”: which means the people who have no faith background, who have ‘none’ - a growing population in our country - or the ‘dones’ - those who have tried church but do not feel that, for whatever reason, it is no longer relevant to them. They are done.

Quite frankly, I think there is a third category that we may not talk much about and that are the faithful ones who are so overwhelmed with the pressures of the world that they may also look at the church as yet another pressure for involvement, something that we at St. John’s do not want to be seen as - a guilt trip. And, let me tell you, I know and see the anxiety surrounding this tendency to strive and be perfect, especially in our young people. How can we help them, not hinder them? That is often on my mind.

## Slide: St. John's Altar

Still, what do we do here as church? Who are we? Why does church matter? Are we different than the Lyons club? When we join in fellowship together for an event or fundraiser, are we different than the YMCA, the Boys and Girls Club, Feed My People Food Bank, or any other very good community service? You might say what makes us church then is worship...but is that all that makes us church?

In our Gospel reading today, think about this: This is a picture of the very first church. I think it's interesting if you look at it this way. This brand new church that we now call the holy catholic church, had no pipe organ or a Piano. It had no choir, no pastor, and no budget to keep. In fact, it's a picture of church at its worst, a misfit band of disciples, at least those who called themselves disciples of Jesus, who huddled instead behind locked doors in fear.

And just look at this miserable bunch. After Jesus told them time and time again

that he would need to leave them, after telling them to love one another, and after telling them to trust that he was the Bread of life, the true Vine, and the Good Shepherd, here is the first church, frightened behind closed doors.

And, they really didn't have an excuse, not totally. Jesus had already appeared to Mary Magdalene, who then in turn proclaimed, "I have seen the Lord." And, angels also appeared to the women at the empty tomb who then told the disciples that Jesus had raised. Yet, here they are, the ones who were supposed to walk out confidently into the world to proclaim the risen Christ, but instead they hunker down and lock themselves in. This is the church at its worst: scarred, disheartened, defensive and in grief. And, to be fair, just look at some of the tragic ways we have been church in our history and now as our Roman brothers and sisters' struggle with clergy abuse and cover-ups. Can a church truly be the church when they can't always get their priorities right?

What might an ad on Facebook look like to attract new members to this first church we see in today's Gospel: "Friendly church where all are welcome"? Hardly, since locked doors resist hospitality. "The church with a good heart and a bold mission?" No, for this church seems to be nervous and on shaky ground, with no sense of mission yet.

Could we even call this group of people, these frightened disciples, church? There's no sanctuary, no pulpit, no choir, no plan, no mission, and no parking lot. In fact, I bet if we sent out a survey to members here about what they look for in a church, they probably would say, "friendly, family like, caring," but not "frightened, safe, and secured against others" - I pray anyway.

It would seem that these disciples were not church, until...until Jesus broke through their locked doors, stood among them, and said, "Peace be with you. As the Father sends me, so I send you." And, that, my brothers and sisters, is what church is. Christ rips through our frightened lives, stands

among us in this assembly as the risen Lord and boldly grants us his peace while sending us out. Worship is for the purpose of being sent into the world to be the risen body of Christ in it. **Perhaps that's why the word "Church" actually means "The Called Out Ones". That's what church is; at least that is the literal meaning for the word.**

### **Slide: Beech Tree Blooming**

You know, sometimes I wonder if we forget what being church is. I include myself in this category, too. I want to set a high standard for how we do church here and I put a lot of pressure on myself to see that that happens. I spend hours and hours each week preparing and writing sermons, getting worship ready, teaching bible, confirmation and faith practices, hoping that what God helps me to say will mean something to someone. But, that is not an end in itself. The purpose is to enable others to be sent out.

But then, sometimes I come to wonder if all that evaluating, if all the expectations we have in a church, for all the planning and

laborious, painstaking efforts to make our programs come alive here, for all bulletins, Facebook posts, newsletters, fundraisers, and activities, that we aren't really like those scared disciples, those first known as church, who wanted to keep things perfectly controlled and the same as they always were, knowing that would be the only way to remain safe. Unfortunately, it's also the best way to die.

**Slide: St. John's Magnolia**

We need Christ to burst through our locked doors whatever they may be, to remind us what church really is: a gift. It isn't a creation of our own, it is something God creates. If you want to see what truly church is in this place, we must strip ourselves of our sacred trappings; our pretenses peeled away, and then look at this 20<sup>th</sup> chapter of John.

For, without the risen Christ to break into our closed doors, without that peace given to us by Jesus, who then sends us out, we are not church. In fact, if I may be so bold, there are churches out there still

waiting to be church because they have so lost the truth that it is Christ that makes them church, not the building, the choir, the pastor, or committees. Christ makes them church. The peace of Christ makes them and us church, the called out ones.

Both Luther and Calvin believed that to make church, the only two things that were needed were the preaching of the Word and the right administration of the sacraments, Holy Baptism and Communion. Well, yes, but I'm actually going to challenge Luther a bit here, too. While as the church is the only place you will receive those gifts or the tangible means of grace the bread, wine, water, and word, I beg to differ. The church also still needs one very important element to call itself completely church. The church needs the peace of Christ that sends us out to be Christ for others. Holy Baptism and Holy Communion aren't just for us. They give us life, but they also sustain us to give life to others, to be church in the world.

**Slide: Holy Communion**

As you know, I did my seminary training in the Bay area of San Francisco. There was a priest there, whose name I forget, but who was losing his faith. No matter what he tried, his congregation was dying. He brought a mission plan to the council who then applied that plan, but it didn't work. Then, they built a new sanctuary. That didn't work. They tried stewardship campaigns, evangelism tactics, offering classes that were interesting...but none of it worked. The people of that congregation ceased to see the risen Christ there.

So, this priest one day went to the local Laundromat right next to the church. He pretty much knew everyone who went in there. He went to a dryer, rolled out an altar cloth, and began mass with the elements for the sacrament right there. At first, the people just stared. Some were uncomfortable, but all of them knew their priest. One by one, each of them stopped folding their laundry, ceased their spin cycles, and waited as the priest finished. Then, they all shared Holy Communion.

These people became church. The risen Christ had burst into that laundry room, and I don't know if that priest got in trouble for doing that in a public place, but what I do know is that same Laundromat in San Francisco has mass every Sunday while people are doing their laundry. Some people even come on purpose. And, that priest had found some sense of call again.

### **Slide: St. John's Easter**

We pray that Christ will burst into this space and wish us peace, his peace, the peace that makes us church. Can anyone think of a time that we celebrate this peace of Christ during worship? Yes, it is the "Sharing of the Peace", which is the part of worship when I or Pastor Julie say, "The peace of Christ be with you always." You respond by wishing me or her that same peace. The peace we are actually wishing each other is the very same peace Christ gave his disciples. It is the peace of our risen Lord.

This sharing of the peace is not something we just do out of habit. It's not a time of

greeting such as, “Hey, how are ya” or “Good Morning”. Sharing the peace is not a greeting or a feeling as it is a condition we wish for each other. It is the time in worship when we reconcile with each other by wishing Christ’s peace to each other – the very peace of the risen Lord.

It is also the time in worship when Christ breaks down our doors and gives us a mission. “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” We are the called out ones. We are the ones who make up the church and even though our music, our preaching, our teaching, and our programs happen *because* we are church, we cannot *be* church, the called out ones, without Jesus sending us with the peace only he can give.

The rest we have to ask Christ to help us with, whether that be a new direction or not. I pray that we will continue to ponder how to be the peace of Christ here at St. John’s. And, I hope that you will join me in this mission we call church together, but of course, I can’t be church by myself. You can’t

be church by yourself. Christ needs you and me, all of us, to burst through the locked doors of people’s hearts, so that his peace may be theirs in this Easter joy of love and resurrection.

Christ, bring your peace here and send us out. Your called out ones are ready.

Amen.