

## **Proclaimers of Peace**

**John 20:19-23**

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Russell Grubbs was a mean little kid. So mean, in fact, that the volunteer van drivers for the New Hope Baptist Church used to skip his house on occasion simply because they did not want to deal with his misbehavior. When I, the pastor of the church, rode with the drivers as back-up, they'd pick him up, begrudgingly. One Sunday, I had to hold Russell in my lap in the passenger seat to restrain him and he hit me right in the mouth. He was that kind of kid.

Clifford Earls was a grumpy old man. Maybe he was in a perpetual bad mood because his wife Nora had been in the painful grip of an excruciating headache for twenty years. Or maybe it was the arthritis. Clifford's rheumatoid arthritis made any movement an act of suffering. The high-powered medication he had to take just to walk made him sleepy. So, every Sunday morning, after he gave the Sunday School report, he took his seat on the front pew of the little clapboard church and, as soon as the hymn singing ended, nodded off.

That is unless Russell Grubbs came to church that day. For reasons never fully understood by anyone in that congregation, Russell and Clifford formed a friendship. Russell surely needed a stable male figure in his life and Clifford was made of granite, so that part made sense. A fidgety little delinquent, however, would have seemed to be the last person in the community that Clifford would have befriended. Yet he did.

When worship started, Russell would run from whomever he was antagonizing at the time and sit on the front pew, leaving just enough room for Clifford. When Clifford finished his report, he'd sit down by the boy. As pastor I appreciated the seating arrangement because Russell's restlessness kept Clifford awake and Clifford's viselike left hand, when placed on Russell's rubbery leg, kept the little urchin in line.

Both Russell and Clifford were in their normal seats on Easter Sunday, 1978. I was preaching about the resurrection and getting kind of carried away. My hair was flying off in every direction, my feet were scooting around behind the pulpit and my arms flailing in the wind. At one point, I brought my right hand down to emphasize a major point of the sermon and as I did, I caught my glasses with my finger, just inside the frame and sent them sailing out into the congregation. Everybody in the sanctuary gasped and grew silent. Everyone except Clifford and Russell. That grumpy old man began to laugh so hard he shook the pew from one end to the other. Russell giggled loudly and then turned to Clifford and in full voice and asked, "What are we going to do if he gets loose?"

The place broke up in hilarious laughter which continued until Clifford captured the deeper meaning of the sermon. Speaking above the remaining chuckles, the grumpy old man turned to the mean little kid and said, "He is loose Russell. That's what the pastor's trying to say. It's Easter and Jesus is loose."

On the first Easter, as the afternoon turned to evening, the disciples were gathered behind locked doors because they were afraid the local authorities would arrest them for being associated with Jesus of Nazareth. The last time any of the followers had seen Jesus, he had been beaten to a bloody mess and nailed to a cross at the command of a coalition composed of Jewish religious leaders and Roman governmental administrators. Feeling the extreme danger of the moment, the disciples had gone into hiding. From their undisclosed location, they had received news that a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, a man by the name of Joseph of Arimathea, had fulfilled the

duty they abdicated out of fear and had placed the corpse of Jesus in a tomb he provided because of his admiration for Jesus.

That Easter morning, Mary Magdalene, an extremely devoted follower of Jesus, had brought disconcerting news. She had been to Jesus' tomb and found it empty. In response to Mary's alarm, Peter and John ran to the burial place, at great risk to themselves, and confirmed that the body was missing. (You know a man always has to confirm the testimony of a woman.) The disciples knew they would be accused of stealing the body and that this accusation would further incite the local rulers to round them up and very possibly crucify them as well.

Then, the day got even weirder. Mary returned late in the morning to say that she had actually seen Jesus and that he was alive. Poor woman. When Jesus met her she was possessed by seven spirits. Evidently, her overwhelming grief had caused her to revert to hallucinating again. Watching a person have a mental breakdown is never a comforting sight. The disciples must have figured that they were all just one trauma away from insanity.

"Stay together" Peter advised. "There is safety in numbers." So they huddled in a secret room, praying for protection and wondering what they should do next. Probably they would have waited until total darkness and snuck out of town if it were not for what happened that evening. For as they were entrenched behind locked doors, Jesus appeared to them. You know why? Because it was Easter and Jesus was loose.

Jesus showed the disciples his wounds so they would know it was really him and then he said, "Peace be with you." Even in the midst of their precarious crisis, the disciples felt the peace come upon them.

As John tells the Easter story, he underscores the impotency of the physical evidence of the empty tomb or the eye-witness testimony of people who had seen Jesus to convince anyone of the resurrection of Christ. The empty tomb did not convince Mary Magdalene that Jesus was alive, only a personal encounter with Christ convinced her that the resurrection had occurred. Likewise, Peter and John were not persuaded of the resurrection by either the empty tomb or Mary's witness, they had to see Jesus for themselves before they believed. One disciple, Thomas, was not present on the evening of Easter. He was not moved to faith by the evidence of the empty tomb, Mary's insistence that she had seen the Lord or the combined witness of every other apostle. Thomas didn't believe until Jesus came to him and showed him the nail prints in his hand. Of course Jesus could keep visiting the disciples one by one. You know why? It was Easter and Jesus was loose.

After proving himself to the disciples on the evening of Easter, Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit into his followers as God had breathed life into the first person of creation and then sent them out with a holy task. He said, go into the world and proclaim peace to those who believe. Your mission is to announce to true believers that their sins have been forgiven and to make clear to those who do not believe that their sins remain.

Notice Jesus did not say, "go forth and convince people that I have risen from the dead." That wasn't not their assignment. You know why? Because it was Easter and Jesus was loose. He would do the convincing. If this were simply a story about an amazingly wise and powerful rabbi that fought injustice to the point of death, then the whole responsibility of telling his story and keeping his memory alive would have fallen on the apostles. But Jesus is loose, so the Spirit of Christ can go to people one by one or in groups gathered around the world and convince them that He is alive.

Our job is to help people who have had a genuine encounter with the Spirit of Christ know how to respond. We are like Eli in the story from the Hebrew Scriptures. Remember how that story went? Samuel is resting on his bed when he hears a voice call his name. Immediately he rises and goes to Eli and asks him what he wants. Eli had nothing to do with the conversation, he was sound asleep. He tells Samuel to go on back to bed. When Samuel hears the voice for the third time, however, Eli finally gets his act together and helps the boy interpret his encounter

with God. "This time," the old prophet says, "when you hear your name, say, 'Speak Lord for your servant hears you.'" Eli doesn't fake the voice so Samuel will believe. He doesn't ask the boy every morning, "have you heard God yet? What's taking you so long? Are you sure you're listening?" No, Eli trusts God to do the calling, he is simply on hand to interpret the call when it comes and help the boy know how to respond.

Jesus commissioned us to pay attention and be ready to interpret his call on the lives of new believers. We are to help those who have had a genuine encounter with the living Lord repent of their sins and pledge their devotion to God. We are to help them say, "speak Lord for I'm listening." By the same token, we are also to make clear to those who rebuff the visitations of Christ's spirit that their sins cannot be forgiven any other way.

A few years ago, a very bright man came to me and announced that he had found a new way to know God. Jesus, according to this man, had not reached the level of spiritual and intellectual insight that he had achieved and therefore didn't really understand how to encounter God. This man actually told me that he was going to start his own religion due to his unique enlightenment. The religion, as he explained it to me, had something to do with his belief in the intellectual superiority of white people. Something was loose on this guy, but it wasn't Jesus and it was my job to tell him, that if he pursued his cockamamie approach to God, his sins would remain.

There are a lot of strange ideas loose in this world. I met a man in Bethesda who thought he could buy his salvation by building the church a new kitchen. We needed a new kitchen so I was tempted to go along with his misunderstanding. Actually, I explained that if he put his faith in his own money or goodness, his sins would remain. We prayed that he might be graced with a genuine encounter with the risen Christ and follow the risen Lord in repentance and faith. Months went by and the man came to my office to report that he had met Jesus in a desperate time of prayer. He wanted to receive baptism based upon his faith in Christ. After hearing about his genuine conversion, it was my joyful privilege to tell him that his sins were forgiven. The man then pled with me to visit his equally rich son with and tell him about Jesus. I dubiously agreed. We drove up to a huge house in Chevy Chase and were ushered into a palatial living room by a maid. The son came in, embraced his father and listened to me respectfully. When I finished, his father nearly begged him to accept Christ on the spot. With almost complete detachment, the son said he would think about what we had said, talked a little business with his dad and saw us out the door. My wealthy friend was despondent on the way home. I said the young man had yet to have a true encounter with the spirit of the living Lord, but I said, "don't give up hope." You know why? Because it's Easter and Jesus is loose. He'll find a way to visit that man again.

Some of you in this room this morning are prayed for every day by a mother or father or friend. You may think that they are only praying that you'll get better grades, find a job, date better people, stay away from drugs, party less or move out. They might be praying all that, but in addition, they are praying that when Jesus comes to you, you'll recognize the Spirit of Christ and believe. He probably won't appear in bodily form. More than likely, Christ's spirit will speak to your mind or impress His presence on your heart. When it happens, come see me or go and talk to another believer. We'll help you respond with repentance and faith. Then it will be our honor to tell you that your sins are forgiven and baptize you in the name of Christ.

Notice I said when Jesus comes, not if. The Lord will visit you, more than once. You know why? Because it's Easter and Jesus is loose.

On Good Friday I had an experience that was very similar to one described by the great American Baptist preacher Tony Campolo in his sermon "It's Friday, but Sunday's Coming." I preached on the second word from the cross, "Today you will be with me in paradise" and I did pretty well. It wasn't my best sermon ever, but those folks didn't know that because it was the only time they had ever heard me.

When I was finished, the congregation, other preachers and the choir stood and applauded the word I had delivered. As you might know, that doesn't happen every Sunday here.

As I took my seat and the next preacher headed to the pulpit, I thought, "I did pretty well. I believe I can preach with the best of these folks. Then a man about twenty years older than me took the pulpit and reminded me that as a preacher, I'm still in the minor leagues. He took one sentence and turned that sanctuary inside out. His assignment was "it is finished." After explaining how oppressed people have always spoken in coded language, he said Jesus was really saying "it is finished." Instead, he was saying, "Finished?! Why were just gettin started." Then the preacher took us through the whole gamut of life experiences and at each juncture said, "you may think you are finished, but Jesus says, "Finished?! Why were just gettin started."

To those of you who mourn the fact that your children or parents or spouses or siblings or friends don't yet believe in Christ, I say take heart. God's not finished, the Lord is just gettin started. Christ will yet come and speak to their hearts. You know how I know? Sure you do. I know because its Easter and Jesus is loose.