

We are a Church Family through . . . A Sense of Belonging

Or:

April 6, 2008

Year A: Third Sunday of Easter

Chadron United Methodist Church; Chadron, Nebraska

A man is rescued from a small island where he had been the sole inhabitant for years. Before leaving the island, he showed his rescuers around, and they were rather impressed upon seeing four small huts. One was his living quarters, he said, and another was where he stored gathered fruits. He pointed to the third hut and proudly said, "That is my church."

After that, the man said he was ready to go. But his rescuer asked, pointing to a fourth hut, "And what is that building over there, across from your church?"

The man snorted, "That's the church I used to belong to."¹

Today we continue our sermon series on the Chadron United Methodist Church's Core Values. These values are based on our Mission to be A Church Family that Makes a Difference. Today, our focus turns to our 2nd value: *We are a Church Family through . . . A Sense of Belonging*.

When you look at this list of Core Values you will notice that today's value is the only one not connected with scripture. Instead we have a guiding principal: We are the people of The United Methodist Church: Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors. You may recognize this as the advertising slogan of our denomination. This sense of belonging means that we as the Chadron United Methodist Church represent this guiding principal of our denomination. Now, The United Methodist Church does not make a decision without first consulting scripture. In fact, we believe that the Bible is primary. Our Core Value is to be A Church Family through a Sense of Belonging and to understand this value we turn to scripture.

[Matthew 28:1-10 \(NRSV\)](#)

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ²And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. ⁵But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ⁷Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you."

¹ Church 9. *Illustrations*. 2.

⁸So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. ¹⁰Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

When you look at this scripture the message that comes across is three fold. First, the tomb is open. Next, the message: do not be afraid. And finally, the instruction: go and tell others.

In 1970, while serving a short stint in prison, biker Ron Baptiste gave his life to Christ. A few years ago, he felt the call into ministry. Baptiste knew that after his conversion, he couldn't find a church where he felt comfortable. His rough past, his long hair, his Harley-Davidson attracted stares at most churches. And the sermons and hymns rarely connected with his life experiences. So Ron Baptiste opened his own church, Covenant Confirmers Ministries, Inc. near Nashville, Tennessee. Covenant attracts bikers, gang members, ex-convicts, former prostitutes, former addicts.

One member of Covenant is Sgt. Paul McKissack of the local police force. He says that it is "awesome" to worship alongside people he once arrested. Ex-con Tommy Hollingsworth is a member at Covenant, and he claims, "You don't have to clean up. You just get connected to God. Anybody is welcome here. Anybody."²

In that story I hear this message: the tomb is open – do not be afraid – go and tell others. This is at the heart of our slogan: We are the people of The United Methodist Church: Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors. That word "open" is vital to our sense of belonging. It is based on the belief that the tomb door is open. You see, it is important to know that the tomb is not *supposed* to be opened. If you have ever attended the committal service – that is what they call the service held after a funeral out at the cemetery – you will notice that great care is taken to make sure that the coffin will not be re-opened. After the funeral service, the coffin is sealed shut. After the committal service, the coffin is put into a vault, and it is sealed shut. And once the coffin is secure in the vault, six feet of dirt is poured over. Likewise, in Jesus' time, the deceased was laid in a tomb and a very heavy rock or stone or boulder was rolled into place. Now Jesus was special and many knew that. They also knew of these stories of the Resurrection and many of the authorities were afraid not that Jesus would rise from the dead but that his followers would come and steal his body. They were afraid that these stories would circulate and prove their assertion that Jesus could defeat death. If Jesus could defeat death and his followers believed that then executing these rebel rousers would do no good. And in one of the other Gospels, a guard is even put in front of the huge stone, just in case, some followers would come and move it out of the way.

The tomb is not supposed to be open. Some would say that the church is the same way. To some – open means everyone can get in. To some – open

² Church 7. *Ibid.*

means allowing ideas that not everyone agrees with. To some – open means changing what we don't want to be changed. And to some that is too much openness, but what does the scripture say about the word "open": do not be afraid. The Resurrection means the tomb is open and because it is open we are not afraid.

A man and his dog were walking along a road. The man was enjoying the scenery, when it suddenly occurred to him that he was dead. He remembered dying, and that the dog had been dead for years. He wondered where the road was leading them. After a while, they came to a high, white stone wall along one side of the road. It looked like fine marble. At the top of a long hill, it was broken by a tall arch that glowed in the sunlight. When he was standing before it, he saw a magnificent gate in the arch that looked like mother of pearl, and the street that led to the gate looked like pure gold. He and the dog walked toward the gate, and as he got closer, he saw a man at a desk to one side.

When he was close enough, he called out, "Excuse me, where are we?"

"This is heaven, sir," the man answered.

"Wow! Would you happen to have some water?" the man asked.

"Of course, sir. Come right in, and I'll have some ice water brought right up." The man gestured, and the gate began to open.

"Can my friend," gesturing toward his dog, "come in, too?" the traveler asked.

"I'm sorry, sir, but we don't accept pets."

The man thought a moment and then turned back toward the road and continued the way he had been going.

After another long walk, and at the top of another long hill, he came to a dirt road which led through a farm gate that looked as if it had never been closed. There was no fence. As he approached the gate, he saw a man inside, leaning against a tree and reading a book.

"Excuse me!" he called to the reader. "Do you have any water?"

"Yeah, sure, there's a pump over there." The man pointed to a place that couldn't be seen from outside the gate. "Come on in."

"How about my friend here?" the traveler gestured to the dog.

"There should be a bowl by the pump."

They went through the gate, and sure enough, there was an old fashioned hand pump with a bowl beside it. The traveler filled the bowl and took a long drink himself, and then he gave some to the dog.

When they were full, he and the dog walked back toward the man who was standing by the tree waiting for them.

"What do you call this place?" the traveler asked.

"This is heaven," was the answer.

"Well, that's confusing," the traveler said. "The man down the road said that was heaven, too."

"Oh, you mean the place with the gold street and pearly gates? Nope. That's hell."

"Doesn't it make you mad for them to use your name like that?"

“No. I can see how you might think so, but we’re just happy that they screen out the folks who’ll leave their best friends behind.”³

The tomb is open – we should not be afraid – go and tell others. The story of the Resurrection is about belonging to a place where no one is left behind. The story of the Resurrection is about belonging to a place where we are not afraid of those different from us and more importantly, recognizing those differences really do not matter. The story of the Resurrection is about belonging to a place that opens up our possibilities. The story of the Resurrection is about belonging to a place where we are not afraid. We value this message because we are the people of The United Methodist Church. We value this message because we are the people of the Resurrection. We value this message because we are the people of Open Hearts, Open Minds, and Open Doors. And why is this value one of our Core Values? Well, let me illustrate with two stories. Both happened to members of this church. The first story is about one of our parishioners that were asked to speak at another church. Before the service started this member was sitting in the Fellowship Hall having a cup of coffee when she overheard a conversation next to her. It went something like this: “what’s going on today?” said the first lady.

The other woman said: “I think we are having a guest speaker.”

And with that the first woman looked at the bulletin saw that it was someone who was not their pastor and then said, loud enough that *the* guest speaker heard, “well. . . I think I’ll be heading over to Gladys’ for some coffee.”

Now, let me share with you another story from another member of this church. This woman came one Sunday and I met her and her family out in our Narthex. We visited for a bit. We talked about the church and this woman said that she wanted to come to see if our slogan: Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors was indeed true. I told her that I hoped it was but only the people of this congregation could make that happen. This woman and her family they are not visitors anymore but are now one of the 132 members that have joined this church here in the past few years.

The tomb is open – we should not be afraid – go and tell others. Once we accept the value of what it means to belong, we accept the concept of the open tomb – open hearts, open minds, open doors – and we are not afraid. Because the tomb is open, we are not afraid, and because we are not afraid now we can tell others.

<Read: *Christmas Moccasins* by Ray Buckley. (Nashville: Abingdon Press. 2003)>

The tomb is open – we are not afraid – go and tell others. This is a powerful scripture, with a powerful story that come straight from members of this church, and this book is a powerful message of the open tomb. You see I do not just read this book because it is Native American Awareness Sunday. I read it because it is about us. I personally met Ray Buckley in Mission, South Dakota this fall and we had a great time visiting. I told him about how much I appreciated his book and he told me something that is not mentioned in the

³ “Dog and heaven.” *Seth’s Compiled List of Jokes & Illustrations, Part III.* 30-31.

reading. You see Ray grew up on the Pine Ridge and he and his family visited Chadron often. Then he told me something that hit home. Those drunken youths in the story who stole his grandmother's moccasins, they were from Nebraska. But here is the most powerful part of the message. His grandmother never told the family where these boys lived. He said that she believed so strongly in the act of forgiveness that who they were would always remain a mystery.

The story of the Resurrection is about belonging to a place where we learn the power of forgiveness from our brothers and sisters that are not so different from us. The tomb is open – do not be afraid – go and tell the others – this is what it means to be the people of the United Methodist Church: Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors for we are A Church Family that Makes a Difference.