

Getting the Word

John 20:19-23

The first time it really hit me that the whole landscape of theology had changed in a significant way—and not just from my experience in Sunday School, but actually had changed--was some twenty-five years ago when a friend gave me to read a copy of Matthew Fox's book *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*. By coincidence, or maybe not, this past Friday's online reflections that I receive from Fr. Richard Rohr began, "I hope your belief can be in the Cosmic Christ." Rohr went on to explain the difference between Jesus and Christ. They are two distinct faith affirmations.

To believe in Jesus is to trust and love the man who walked on this earth. To believe in Christ is to include absolutely everything in creation, especially our own self.... If we can receive it within us and believe that we are simultaneously son of God and son of earth, daughter of heaven and daughter of this world, and they don't cancel one another out, we'll fall in love with Jesus like never before. He trusted this mystery first—and was kind enough to include us in the process--[that] he is at the beginning of a universal procession, 'but WE'RE the procession!' (Richard Rohr, *The Cosmic Christ*)

At their heart, the Gospels were concerned with helping make the transition from the Jesus of history to the Christ of salvation. Christian scripture is all about turning the corner from the man who walked among friends, followers, and enemies--who was crucified by Rome--to the symbol of God's work in the world, the sacrament of God's presence with us and in us. Christ was literally God with a human face who shows all of us the way to God. Jesus became the cosmic Christ who opens the space for each of us to be in communion with God.

Today's gospel lesson was set on the evening of the first Easter. According to John's gospel, the fearful and confused disciples of Jesus gathered behind closed doors. Suddenly Jesus was with them. Of course, not all the disciples were there. Thomas was absent and that set the stage for him to carry the burden of being known as Doubting Thomas throughout Christian history. Credible scholarship suggests that there was a political effort to discredit Thomas as part of a rivalry for power in the early church.

When the resurrected Jesus appeared to the disciples, he told them three things, three commands, three instructions. First, he said, "Peace be with you." In other words, Don't be afraid!" Second, he said, "Receive the Spirit." In other words, take my life into your own. You, too, become part of the life of God. You be Christ as well. The third instruction was an unusual statement, a kind of priestly statement about forgiving or not forgiving sins: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." In other words, you are to be powerful! The evidence of history supports this encounter with Jesus because the disciples, and there were many more than twelve and included women, were clearly changed in a fundamental and powerful way. They changed the world.

The history of the Christian Church is checkered. On one hand, the Church established and practiced a great deal of charity and was responsible for significant social justice. On the other hand, far too often its leadership has found itself on the wrong side of important moral concerns, the doing of injustice, and other very human and ethical issues even in the present day. The risen Christ comes to us as we gather. Christ speaks to disciples today. To each of us, there are the same three words of command, the same three words of challenge: "Don't be afraid;" "Receive the Spirit;" and "Be powerful."

“Don’t be afraid!” Don’t be defeated by your fear. Some fears are really worth having because they keep us from great, pain, great harm, and even death. But what are you afraid of that causes you to back away from what would make you happy? What are the fears that may be distracting you from your dreams? You cannot bring peace in the world until we find peace in our lives.

“Receive the Spirit!” Take Christ’s life into your own. Allow the life of God in you to permeate all of your life. Embrace yourself as part of the life of God. Be Christ in your world and in your relationships. Be Christ by being fully yourself.

“Be powerful! Be powerful without being coercive—not using power to manipulate others for your own gain, but powerful to act to, to accomplish the vision we see for the world, for the Kansas City community, and for this congregation. Being powerful is to accomplish what you want for your life, what you feel God is calling you to do in your life. This is the promise of the risen Christ, the hope God has for your life and mine.

There is a line from the musical *Into the Woods*:

You can have your wish, but you can’t just wish
No, to get your wish you go “into the woods”

In words of faith, to live as Christ in this world, you have to listen, to think, and to act.

The first call to action is to listen for the quiet voice of your own soul, your own inner teacher, which I understand as the still, small voice of the Spirit. To listen takes discipline, practice, and the support of people who become your own circle of trust.

The second call to action is to think about what you want because God’s will for your life is strongly connected to your deepest desires for your own life. Think about why you have been able to get it, or perhaps why you haven’t, and what you want to do to find your passion in life—to get what it is you really want. I understand that as the wisdom of the Spirit.

The third call is to act on what you believe because, ultimately, faith without action, faith without works, is dead. Jesus’ life echoed the priorities of the prophets of Israel whom our faith tradition believes were speaking God’s own words. Through their words and the life of Jesus, we today can be getting the word. In that tradition, and I know in the depths of my own soul, God wills for us to act with and for justice with compassion and to bring about the inclusion of all people in the life of God.

Our challenge is to act with clarity and effectiveness and we cannot be effective by acting alone. That’s why there is church, a group to help us listen, discern, and act. And even within the church, we each need to find a group to help us listen, discern, and clarify our call. We need to find a group to support us in our action and hold us accountable in love for what we say we want to do. What you do in your own journey has great potential to enrich the journey of this congregation.

How Crossroads chooses to live our life as church has a great potential to enrich the community around us and the entire Kansas City metro area. You can be a powerful part of helping this city find and experience new life in Christ today. This is a new life in which people of all races, rich and poor, female and male, gay and straight—all people—can have access to the blessings and benefits of our society/

All this begins with you and me and how we respond to the challenge set before us by the risen Christ. This is actually a very good time at Crossroads Church to be discerning, clarifying, and acting. It's a good time to get done what you want to see gets done in the Kansas City community as well as at Crossroads Church. That's because of our annual direction-setting retreat and our financial stewardship campaign both coming up this spring. These are opportunities for each of us to invest ourselves in the work and potential of this congregation. These are also ways to invest yourself in your own future, your own journey.

The journey of faith is never about earning the love of a harsh God. You are loved by a power deeper than life itself—loved by the source of all life. You are loved already, accepted and invited to live fully and powerfully. You are invited to be the Christ-presence, to be the face as well as the hands and feet of God in your life. You are invited to live in full partnership in the life Christ shares with you: who Jesus was and who you are. How will you respond today?