

Searching for Closeness

John 20:19-31 and Acts 4:32-35

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“As an agnostic, I have spent most of my life thinking about the decline of faith in America in mostly positive terms. Organized religion seemed, to me, beset by scandal and entangled in noxious politics. So, I thought, what is there really to mourn? Only in the past few years have I come around to a different view. Maybe religion, for all of its faults, works a bit like a retaining wall to hold back the destabilizing pressure of American hyper-individualism, which threatens to swell and spill over in its absence.”¹

These words provide the introduction to an article published by *The Atlantic* on Wednesday titled, “The True Cost of the Churchgoing Bust.” Derek Thompson continues to note how the ranks of nonbelievers has surged since the 1990s. “An estimated 40 million people—one in eight Americans—stopped going to church in the past 25 years, making it the ‘largest concentrated change in church attendance in American history.’” And in 2021, “membership in houses of worship fell below a majority for the first time on record.”

These statistics might not be surprising to many of us who already know we are in the minority as our friends gather at brunch while our children are invited to an increasing number of parties and practices on Sunday mornings. I may never forget asking our congregation to respond to the prompt, “If God is so good then...” with “then why do my friends look at me like I’m crazy when I tell them I go to church.”

But Thompson, who is again an agnostic, suggests the decline of faith and involvement in religious communities is impacting our health and overall wellbeing. Practicing our faith in community not only provides a connection to the divine, but a connection to others who teach and remind us that we are called to care for one another instead of living lives that focus on me, myself, and I. Religious communities provide people with a sense of belonging while also equipping people with the tools needed to care for others. In fact, the Pew Research Center has found that Americans who are religiously unaffiliated “are less likely to volunteer, less likely to feel satisfied with their community and social life, and more likely to say they feel lonely.”²

While I crave space to be alone, extended time alone has rarely made more of me.

While my go to way to end a day is to get lost in social media, this scrolling has yet to make me feel deeply connected to those whose faces smile at me on my small screen.

If my home is my first place, and my work is my second place, then my gym is currently my “third place” as a place where I spend four hours a week. While I can greet 15-20 people by name when I show up at OrangeTheory at 6:10 or 7:20 in the morning, none of them know whether I am filled with joy or navigating pain on any given day. But I can show up in our Wednesday Morning Small Group for an hour a week with people who can sometimes see my sadness or exhaustion long before we share our joys and concerns before praying together.

What about you?

Outside of your family, who are the people who *really* know you, the individuals who want to see you whole, the folks who remind you that you do not do life alone?

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/04/america-religion-decline-non-affiliated/677951/>

² Ibid.

Who helps you see that the fabric of life is more beautiful when it includes threads of compassion, generosity, and justice that seek God's best for everyone instead of a select few?

Many of you know how a 98-year-old woman named Mabel welcomed me as her pastor by looking me in the eye and saying, "Donna, Mount Vernon Place is in the center of Washington. Washington needs Mount Vernon Place. And Mount Vernon Place needs you. Don't you ever forget you have the best job in Washington." I have since spent the last 19 years pondering not only why people need the church but why Washington needs Mount Vernon Place.

Why do people need the church when we could meet people at the gym, in a neighborhood bar, or on the sidelines of soccer practice?

Why is this congregation needed on the corner of 9th and Massachusetts when there are dozens of additional congregations within a five-block radius?

You answered the question for me in several ways last Sunday.

Many of my clergy friends posted pictures of their church's outdoor crosses last Sunday, ones that had been perfectly created with the exact number of daisies, roses, carnations, lilies, and greenery on each side with a caption that gave thanks to their flower guild. At MVP, you enabled an old, wooden cross to be transformed into a sign of new life through the inclusion of children who adorned it with the diversity of flowers people brought with them. Our individual gifts contributed to something breathtakingly beautiful, and my favorite photo of our cross is one where my sidekick James is on a ladder, reaching out to secure a stem.

Many congregations sent people from worship to whatever restaurant had their table ready for Easter brunch, just as they had reserved it on Open Table. But you brought extra food, invited many of our guests to remain here for a meal, and fed every person who wanted to be fed before describing how you literally watched one's spirit rise as they experienced a generous welcome throughout the morning and early afternoon.

What if the proof of resurrection is not an empty tomb that only a handful of women saw, or a young man dressed in white who met Mary Magdalene and the other Mary with news that was so frightening that they went home in silence, but the communities that have formed in Jesus' name and bear witness to an alternative way of living—one focused on the good of the whole instead of individual or family units?

On the evening of the day on which Jesus was resurrected from the dead, the disciples retreat behind locked doors out of concern that the people who sentenced Jesus to death will do the same to them. While they are allowing their fear to hold them captive, Jesus shatters their isolation and offers them peace. Wanting to ensure they receive this gift, he says to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you," before breathing the Spirit on them.

As God has sent me to cast out fear and replace it with peace,
as God has sent me to cultivate communities in which people share the fullness of life together,

as God has sent me to see hurting people and sit with them,
as God has sent me to heal bodies, minds, and spirits,
as God has sent me to seek peace instead of violence and war,
as God has sent me to transform the brokenness of the world,
so I send you.

And I do not send you alone. I send you with the Spirit, an advocate who will be with you always and equip you with what you need to do this work that will proclaim that I am alive in and through you!

This same Spirit gives birth to the church fifty days after the resurrection, transforming the idea of life together into a fully embodied reality. The three short verses from Acts that we read reveal God's deep desire to draw people together as we witness the early followers of Jesus making themselves completely "responsible for and accountable to one another."³ "With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus," Luke reports. And while the testimony was proclaimed with words, it was even more powerfully proclaimed through the ways in which the followers of Jesus lived abundance.

My former professor Willie Jennings writes, "Money here will be used to destroy what money normally is used to create: distance and boundaries between people." He continues, "Distance and boundary is not merely between the haves and have-nots, but also between the needy and the comfortable, and between those who testify to Jesus and those who, like Jesus, help those with little or nothing. Jesus will join us and he will use whatever we have to make the joining possible."⁴

When we read descriptions of the early followers holding all things in common, we are prone to call it socialism and deem it an impossible way to live in 2024.

But what if, instead of focusing on the "spectacular giving," we focused on "the spectacular joining," and the ways in which the early followers of Jesus became "the bridge between uneven wealth and resources, uneven hope, and uneven life?"⁵

What if spectacular joining that reduces or eliminates uneven hope and uneven life is one of the greatest gifts we can offer the world?

Those who believed were of "one heart and soul," Luke writes. Other translations render the word "soul," "mind." Professor Alyce McKenzie notes how "To say that people were 'of the same mind' was a Hellenistic expression for friendship."⁶ She continues to note how holding everything in common was "a Hellenistic expression for sharing among friends before noting how biblical scholar William Kurz points out that they did not simply share material goods but also "spiritual goods of faith, love, suffering, and the charisms and fruits of the Holy Spirit."⁷

The resurrection of Christ leads to resurrected communities who are empowered by the Holy Spirit to share the fullness of life together with a particular attention to embodying patterns of mutual care and wholeness. And while we might struggle to believe in miracles, perhaps any community that rejects the myth of scarcity, focusing instead on what is needed for the good of the common whole, is a miracle.

How, then, might we model life together in a way that nourishes others and allows people to see how there is still a mysterious power alive and well within the church?

I saw it last week when tables were expanded, and all people were fed.

³ Willie James Jennings, *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible: Acts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017), 50.

⁴ Jennings, 50.

⁵ Jennings, 50.

⁶ Alyce McKenzie, *Connections, Year B, Volume 2*, ed. Joel Green, Thomas Long, et al (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2020), 204.

⁷ McKenzie, 204.

I saw it when I delivered two large bags to a weary soul sitting beside her beloved in a rehabilitation center—bags you filled with extra food you prepared so that a family who is going through significant adversity could feast and feel the love of a community that cares for them.

I see it each time you go out of your way to welcome a new person and see them the way we believe Jesus sees us—as creative, resourceful, whole, and so deeply beloved.

I feel it each time you inspire me to give more of myself for the sake of this community and the impact it can have on our city.

Jonathan Walton rightly names how “Easter is not merely about God’s power to raise Jesus from the dead. It is also a story about the Holy Spirit’s power to catalyze Jesus’ followers to participate in the work of Christ.”⁸

The work of Christ is rarely easy.

In fact, it’s rather costly.

But this work is still saving lives and revealing how Christ is risen.

He is risen indeed.

Amen.

⁸ Jonathan Walton, *Connections, Year B, Volume 2*, ed. Joel Green, Thomas Long, et al (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2020), 215.