

April 12, 2015

2nd Sunday of Easter

John 20:19-31

The sales manager of a dog-food company asked his salespeople how they liked the company's new advertising campaign.

"Great! Best in the business!"

"How do you like our new label and package?"

"Great! Best in the business!"

"How do you like our sales force?"

They were the best sales force. They had to admit that they were good.

"OK, then. So we have the best label, the best package, and the best advertising program being sold by the best sales force in the business. Tell me, why are we in seventeenth place in the dog-food business?" There was silence.

Finally a salesman got up and said, "Because they dogs won't eat the stuff!"

A worn out sales joke is an odd way to start off a sermon about the disciples after the resurrection of Jesus, but it fits in a very real way. It is easy to focus on Thomas and his conditions and doubts. While on one had we want to upbraid him for his demands to literally see the risen Jesus, on the other hand part of us yearns for the same proof. We all have doubts.

We tell ourselves with some more proof we'd believe with confidence.

There's nothing wrong with such doubts and requests for proof from God. But to focus on that is to miss the real power of the doubts we feel - and the struggle the disciples were facing.

Ten of the disciples meet behind closed doors on the evening of Jesus' resurrection. They are scared. They don't know what to believe. Resurrection is just too fantastic to take seriously. But then the risen Jesus does come into their midst. How, we don't know. The doors are locked. But he is there - really and truly present in flesh and blood. Jesus says, "Peace be with you," and he shows them his hands and side. Then he breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

OK, so now you have the fully inspired and equipped disciples. They should then go out and begin to share the Spirit and to share the forgiveness of sins. But where do we find them one week later? Still locked in the same room. This

time Thomas is there too and the scene is set for his doubts to be overcome.

Why didn't they go out and share the story of Jesus? Why didn't they spread the greatest story ever told? Why didn't they create an advertising plan to spread the grace of God?

I don't know for certain why they were huddled there again one week later. But I have a hunch that at least part of the reason why they weren't evangelizing is because they didn't know how to!

Put yourself in their shoes. They are a little sect within Judaism, which in and of itself is not a major religion of the day. Plus they are uneducated people from nowhere. How will you share the story of Jesus? What's unique about it? There were lots of stories floating around about miraculous conceptions of people like the Roman emperor. The idea of gods or a god living with humans is right in line with Greek religions of the time. The idea of being raised from the dead isn't all that unique either. Other religions claimed the same sort of thing.

How were these salesmen to sell a product that wouldn't sell? A poor quality product or one people don't like won't sell no matter how good your sales force and marketing strategies are. I believe all the disciples doubted - maybe not doubting Jesus but doubting their ability to sell it.

I think the same doubts come into our minds today. If Christian faith and the church were a product would people want it? Could you even give it away?

If Kodak were to start mass-producing film again and put people out on every street corner to give it away, people wouldn't take it! What they would probably do is whip out their phones and take pictures of people trying to give film away!

Is the product wanted? I believe that inside each of us is the awareness that spreading the Christian faith these days is just like trying to sell an unwanted product. Every time we turn around there is another setback. Legislation in Indiana is portrayed in a way that gives all of Christianity a black eye.

We need to face reality. The vast majority of people in the neighborhoods around us don't care about the church one bit. They don't like to join organizations that require commitments

of them. And they have a basic belief in God that they are content with; convinced that they are good people who will go to heaven because they are good.

And let's be honest with ourselves, if every church in Victor were to close up after today and be torn down by next Sunday would it make a hill of beans difference? Nope. Take away the school and you've destroyed the community. Take away the mall and you've thrown the area into a depression. Take away the churches and you've only lost some pretty architecture; but you've freed up some great property that can be developed.

People in Jesus' day didn't care one bit what those disciples of Jesus taught. Who's Jesus of Nazareth? Wasn't he one of those guys the Romans killed at Passover? You say he was raised from the dead? What's so special about that? Every cult believes miracles about its founder.

You see, the product didn't 'taste good' to people. Spreading faith is not about the packaging or the programming or the sales force. It isn't about making a church appealing or better marketing.

It is about making the love of Christ real in your own life and in your relationships with people around you.

I think spreading the gospel starts with believing that you are actually loved and accepted by God. If you are loved and accepted by God then you aren't desperate to use other people as a substitute for that basic love and acceptance.

If you don't have to impress other people then you're in a position to listen to them; really listen. Evangelism to others starts by listening to them. Not talking to them. Listening takes time and effort. It involves building their confidence and being trustworthy. Whether you are conscious of what you are doing or not, you are actually showing them that they are worthwhile to you. Then you are prepared when the time to act arrives. It may be soon or it may take a long time. Opportunities will present themselves. And when opportunities come you will know how to respond.

Doubt the resurrection? That's an age old-doubt. But don't doubt God's deep love for you. From there the rest will happen. You won't be holed up in a room with the doors locked. Neither will you be trying to give away a product people don't want. You'll be embodying the value that they desperately crave, and you'll be able to show them where you get it. Amen