



## Christ's Community Church

### **THE HOPE OF HIS PRESENCE**

**April 19, 2009**

**John 20:19-31**

Let us pray.

When I was in seminary I had the opportunity to be part of a travel seminar in Korea for the school's May term. I was excited to go and learn about Korean culture and study the theologically rich roots of Protestant mission in that country. So off we went, eight of us led by Dr. Syngman Rhee, our professor as well as an ordained clergy-person in the Presbyterian church. Dr. Rhee also happens to be Korean...he escaped North Korea when the communists took over in the 1950s and has been serving as a religious diplomatic liaison between the U.S. and Korea for much of his life. So, although I had never traveled in Asia, I felt confident that our leader certainly knew what he was doing and we could trust him to take care of us.

What I hadn't realized, however, before we went abroad, was just how difficult it would be to do anything in Korea without our leader. I had traveled in other countries before and had always managed to make myself understood by at least a combination of bad attempts at the language and hand gestures. But in Korea, that just didn't work. We had thought we could just head out and walk around and see the city, but realized pretty quickly that if Dr. Rhee wasn't actually present with us, we were in big trouble. Not only did we have no reference whatsoever for the language which meant that we couldn't read signs or ask questions, we also discovered that even hand gestures didn't seem to translate. The result of all this is that we were almost never without Dr. Rhee.



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There were only two times that I remember being without his presence. The first was humorous...at least now it is. It involved me thinking I had seen a sign for a bathroom outside of a restaurant, going in and locking the stall door, and then suddenly hearing a group of Korean men enter after me. I have never prayed so hard for people to leave a place in my entire life! The second experience without our leader, however, was a lot more frightening, if you can believe that!

We had all stopped at a place called the East Market, a huge shopping market in Seoul, which was a rabbit warren of vendors. We were told to shop for about an hour and then meet back together at a central location. Well, four of us took off shopping but after about 15 minutes realized we had absolutely no idea where we were. And, worse yet, none of us could even figure out the general direction we were supposed to go to get back to the meeting place. We were completely lost. There were what seemed like miles and miles of small aisles and tents and narrow passages that we couldn't figure out how to get out of. I had visions of us wandering around in this one little block of shops for years and never even being able to speak to anybody! That was one of the few times in my life I felt the beginnings of genuine panic, deep fear that I would not have the ability to get myself out of this situation. I would have given everything I had that day in the East Market to have Dr. Rhee suddenly appear by my side right then.

It's not too hard to picture how lost I was without the presence of my leader on that trip to Korea, and that is the same kind of lostness, although on a much greater scale, that the disciples experienced after Jesus', their leader's, death. Remember, with Jesus' death all that the disciples grew up understanding and believing suddenly seemed to be



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erroneous. Jesus was supposed to overcome Rome and restore Israel to its throne but, at least as far as they could tell at this point, Jesus hadn't done that. Instead, he had left them, had died, and been buried. And although they heard he was alive again, they sure didn't have much proof of that and it wasn't helping them as far as daily living goes. The *presence* of their leader was no longer with them and they were flat out lost and afraid, unable to function in their daily lives, locked in fear.

But then suddenly the resurrected Christ does return to them, does bless them with his presence once again and what do we see happen? We see their fear turn to hope. The resurrected Christ returns to this group of people who not only don't really believe that he is alive again even though Mary has told them so, but who also disappointed Jesus, fell asleep when he needed them most, who misunderstood Jesus and fled from him in the time of his greatest suffering. Why would Jesus Christ do this? Why return to the people who betrayed him in the worst way when he could have returned and proven his resurrection to the great leaders of the day in some grand and dramatic way?

Well, the answer to that is the great Good News of Jesus Christ. He returned to his fearful, unbelieving, fickle disciples because he died and rose for THEM and for you and for me. He didn't die and rise again for himself or to somehow fill a need that God had. He died and rose again simply so that we could be forgiven and never again be torn from his presence. That is how Jesus turns fear into hope...by being with us. Noted scholar and preacher William Willimon writes this: "The message of the resurrection is not first, 'Though we die we shall one day return to life,' although that is certainly part of



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the message, but, 'Though we were as good as dead *Jesus Christ* returned to *us*.'" He chose us and he wants to share his presence with us.

You'll notice that that first Easter the disciples didn't go out looking for Jesus. Instead, Jesus appeared to them, he came back to them. The disciples gathered behind locked doors that day weren't out combing the streets for Jesus even though they had heard he was alive. Instead, Jesus broke through the bar on their door and blessed them with his presence by driving out their fear.

You'll also notice the disciples didn't seem to believe he was resurrected from the dead until they had the proof of it before them...and the proof was in Jesus' very presence in their locked room. Jesus' presence with us is all the proof we need of his resurrection, all we need to abolish fear. No one who has seen and felt and known Jesus with them can anymore question whether or not he is alive. An empty tomb doesn't prove to the disciples that Jesus' lives but his presence with them proves it beyond doubt and beyond fear.

Just like Jesus erased the disciples' fear with his presence and the hope that he brings, he also replaced their doubt with the hope of his presence. We see that so clearly in the exchange between Jesus and Thomas. Thomas, otherwise known as "doubting Thomas," pretty much says, "I'm not going to believe it, Jesus' resurrection, until I see it!" And Jesus gives Thomas the gift of his presence to erase those doubts. Thomas sees that Jesus is indeed alive. And Thomas' doubt turns to belief, to awe, to hope so beautifully captured in his words, "My Lord and My God."



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Like these disciples we, too, find our hope in Jesus' resurrection only when we experience his presence with us. But also, like the disciples, out of our fear we often try to keep Jesus at arm's length, to bar his presence in our lives, thereby losing the hope that he brings us. We don't always even realize we are doing it. Think for a minute about what it is you really fear. A 1997 poll showed that people are most afraid of the following things: being in a car accident, inadequate Social Security, not having enough money for retirement, of food poisoning from meat, of pesticides on food, of being a victim of individual violence, of being unable to pay current debts, of national disasters, and the list actually keeps going...anywhere from 25-55 percent of people polled were afraid of these things. That's quite a hold fear has on our society today, isn't it? And today I think we would find even greater fears surrounding our increasing economic instability, the lack of job security, and rising international tension. Now, you might be wondering how feeling fear about these things keeps Jesus locked out of our homes, so to speak, at arms length.

Well, let's look for example at fear stemming from financial insecurity. That is a real fear, believe me, it is a reality not to be diminished by easy words. But when we focus on that fear, when our every decision is motivated by money or lack of it, what happens? We begin to have more of the presence of money and budgets in our lives that we do Jesus. We begin to stop sharing the money we do have out of the fear that we won't have enough. We begin to start thinking in bitter ways about money, asking questions like, "Why would God let me struggle to have enough money? Don't I deserve



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better?" These ways of thinking begin to drive a wedge, or pound a bar into place between us and Jesus' presence.

Think back with me to the story I told at the beginning of this sermon about being lost in Seoul's East Market. I couldn't have found Dr. Rhee that day if someone had given me detailed directions to him. I was so confused at that point and so fearful that I was literally walking around in circles and wasn't able to find anything anymore, let alone Dr. Rhee. My fear was separating me further from trust and hope in my leader. But Dr. Rhee knew that I needed to be found, that I needed his presence to erase my fear. He came looking for me and he found me. His presence immediately erased the fears of all our group because we knew that he knew what he was doing, that he would guide us in this unknown country, leading us where we needed to go, and he would never abandon us.

Like my professor did for us in Korea, Jesus leads us, protects us, and loves us all with his presence. The Good News is that in his resurrection he reaches through the bar we have across our lives, he comes through our locked doors and is present with us in our fear so that he can lead us out of it with the hope of his presence. His resurrection is the ultimate proof of his presence with us because in it he has come back to us, despite us, despite our betrayal and fear, our doubt and our sin, and therefore we do not live alone. And that means even in the darkest times of our lives, Jesus is there with us, reaching through our fear to touch us and lift us up, replacing our fear with his hope.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian knew what it means to have Jesus present even in the most fearful times. Bonhoeffer was imprisoned in a German



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concentration camp because of his faith and was eventually executed. He wrote these words about fear: “Our life with God is not in the first place thinking about one’s own needs, problems, sins, and fears, but allowing oneself to be caught up into the way of Jesus Christ.” If we are caught up in the presence of Jesus, in his way, we will no longer fear for ourselves. We will be so in awe of the hope we find in Jesus’ resurrected presence that we will only be able to think with praise the words of Thomas, “My Lord and My God.” For we are an Easter people, people with a Risen Savior who comes back to us, again and again, even when our fear tries to keep him away. “He appears to us, seeks us, finds us, grabs us, embraces us, and holds onto us” and that is where we find our hope. The Risen Christ came back to us! Thanks be to God!