Who Dares To Preach?
John 20:19-23—A sermon

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Who dares to preach? Surely no one in *that* room, *that* night. Several of the men were sitting around a low table, talking with subdued excitement about the rumors they had heard. Two were pacing the room with quick, nervous steps. One big fellow sat by himself, head cupped in his hands—for once Simon Peter had nothing to say. It was Easter evening, but the doors were locked “for fear of the Jews.”

A strange blending, this, of faith and fear. The disciples feared that hostile environment outside, and yet they did not fear it enough to be scattered from one another. They were not yet ready to face the men who had crucified their Master, and yet their loyalty to *him* still bound them together. There they were.

This has been the stance of the church, hasn’t it, more than once—this mixture of faith and fear? The people of God often seem afraid. We fear the rude jeering of unbelief; we shrink from the winds of change. And so we lock ourselves in, hoping to shut the dangers out. We have faith enough to come into a fellowship and feel its warmth, but often not enough to face outward again. Faith enough, perhaps, to come to a seminary, though sometimes struggling with fears about what may lie beyond.

The New Testament tells how for these first Christians fear was overcome, and the very men who had huddled in hiding went out through those doors and proclaimed the Lordship of Christ and forgiveness in his name. They dared to preach. How did it happen? What made the difference in their lives? John tells it all in the brief compass of these few verses. It was the conviction that Jesus, their Master, was alive, risen, the Conqueror.

Suddenly, there in that room, he stood before them. Conversation died in a gasp. Then a stunned silence, and then his word, “Peace.” Still no one moved. He lifted his hands and turned slightly so that each could see. Nailprints. And, lest any doubt should linger, there—under his heart—he pointed to the mark of the spear. It was he, Jesus, their Lord. He was risen and they knew it. And the peace which he had spoken to them when he came was now theirs—what he had promised, what the twelve tribes had fervently longed for generation after generation, the Consolation of Israel, the victory of God over all the forces that had blighted men. Peace—and there he spoke it to them. And there he bequeathed it upon them as he had promised he would, and they were glad—glad with the kind of joy that you have to suffer first to know. The joy of a young mother after pain; the joy of being reconciled after a separation that has broken your heart; the
joy of hearing the doctor say, "Your boy is going to be all right" when you have as good as given him up for dead. That kind of joy, and more than that. The joy of knowing that all his claims were true and all the hopes that seemed to be strangled in his death could live again. They were glad. Suddenly, those fears seemed unimportant. The situation outside the doors hadn't changed. Roman rule was still as callous and as cold as ever, and the Jewish authorities just as menacing, but somehow it didn't matter then, because these men were different. They had seen the risen Lord.

And that's what releases men and women from fear today. Fears rise up to stalk us, to shut us in, to clap a cruel hand over our lips, when we forget. We forget that this Jesus is living, that this man for others is the Lord of all life. We forget that he has given history meaning and hope and there is nothing we really need to be afraid of any more. We've forgotten that he lives and reigns. We've forgotten the signs of his victory. And that's why sometimes we hide and we run from the problems and we're timid and shrinking, because it has slipped to the fringe of our consciousness that he really lives, and we don't presently believe it. That's why we are often negative and defensive and pessimistic instead of glad. But when now and then the conviction grips us afresh and the lights go on again in our hearts with the awareness that he is alive, then our fears seem silly.

Langdon Gilkey, in his fascinating book *Shantung Compound*, tells about life in a Japanese intern camp during the last World War. About fifteen hundred Westerners were herded into what had been a small mission compound in North China and there watched over by their Japanese captors. The compound was scarcely more than the size of two football fields. The internees had just enough food to make life possible, just enough space to make it bearable. Life was bleak there, sometimes relieved by a breath of humor or by some touch of the grace of God in human relationships, but for the most part, somber and ugly. For over three years they never stepped out of that compound, because on the wall and by the gate were the machine gun mountings of their Japanese guards.

Then one day a buzz of excitement began in camp. Word had been received somehow that the war was over and the Japanese had surrendered. The rumor leaped like an electric spark from group to group. Yet still the internees could see no signs of it. Nothing around them had changed. But about noon one day they saw a huge plane coming toward them, sweeping low over the compound, lower than they had ever seen a plane there before, low enough for them to see the markings on the ship. It was an American flag, and those watching internees went wild with excitement. They wept and cheered and sang and danced, and people that hadn't talked to one another for weeks embraced each other. Now the plane swept back low again over the compound. As it moved beyond they could see a cavern open in its underside, and suddenly seven white parachutes dotted the sky. Then, like the surge of an ocean tide the crowd swept toward the gates, broke them open, and spilled out into the surrounding fields. Those astounded Japanese guards didn't know what to do. In fact, no one even noticed them, because victory had
come. Salvation had arrived for the prisoners, and all their fears were forgotten.

It happened like that in the upper room—in an infinitely grander way. And so it happens in the life of the church, when our hearts are held again by the conviction that he is victor and he lives.

But Christ had more to give them than the assurance of his presence. When he had showed them his wounds and when their hearts were made glad, he had a commission for them. “As the Father hath sent me, even so I send you.” What could that mean? They knew it must mean the doing of the Father’s will, for that had been his meat and drink, but what would be involved? Maybe James and John looked at each other and remembered the time when they had asked for the chief seats in the kingdom, and the argument that followed, and how Jesus had said, “The Son of Man has come not to be served but to serve.” That was it—a servant people. Or maybe Matthew remembered the day when Jesus called down that little “shyster” Zacchaeus from a tree and made a new man out of him. The Master had said that day, “The son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.” Yes, that’s it—the shepherd people, seeking the lost. And some recalled how he said, “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it abundantly.” And they thought, “That’s our mission—that people may have real life, in all the fullness that God intended they should know it.” And perhaps they all thought back to that unforgettable day in Nazareth, when he took the scroll of Isaiah and read, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.” As all these things began, in the days that followed, to jell in their minds, they understood that they were sent as he had been sent on a mission to all the vast need of a broken world, and how at the heart of that mission they were to preach good news to men—the good news of God’s forgiveness and the new life that he offered in Jesus Christ.

The disciples would need that clear commissioning. They would need to know that the one to whom all authority belongs had sent them, because soon their authority would be challenged. People would say, “By what right, by what power, by what name have you done this?” They were making staggering claims, these men. They were preaching Jesus as a Lord before whom Caesars and Sanhedrins were like so many grasshoppers. They were confronting the religious elite of Israel and calling them the murderers of their own Messiah and summoning them to repent. They were telling men that the worst of outcasts and libertines could be forgiven through faith in Jesus, but that all the strictness and law-keeping in the world could not save a man who rejected him. They preached all that, and they were nobodies, unlettered. Where was their training? Where were their credentials? What was their right to talk like that?

And whenever we seriously begin to proclaim this Lord and his gospel, the challenge comes, doesn’t it? Sometimes overtly, sometimes in subtle ways. Men are angered at this unique and total claim of Jesus Christ. There is a pride in all
of us that can scarcely bear that forgiveness should only come to us through this man, Jesus, and his dying for us. And so the challenge comes: "What right have you to tell us the one way of life? That's 'spiritual imperialism'!" And we shrink from that charge. We fear it. And then there are challenges all the time that ring only too true and that probe at the weaknesses and the failures that are ours as the people of God. There are those who say: "You preach about eternal life, but what do you do to give men who are oppressed and forgotten a full life here?" Or, "You talk about God's love for all men, but there are some kinds and colors of men that you don't want in your nice churches." And, "You have all the answers about Christ and forgiveness, but look at the divisions and suspicions and the bitterness and the gloriety in your very separation that are present in the Church." And so challenges rise from inside the Church and out of it: "What right have you to preach about Jesus Christ and forgiveness through him?"

Who dares to preach in the face of all that? We freeze up. We become apologetic. And the only people who will dare to keep on proclaiming are those who know, in their bones, that they've been sent by God to do it, that they've been commissioned by Christ. Yes, they will acknowledge as their own the sins and failings of the Church and they'll give everything they've got to live down those accusations that are all too true. But they won't add to all the other failures of the Church the sin of a cowardly silence.

Martin Luther once was confronted with a long list of vile accusations that had been made against him personally, and against the work he was doing. When asked to reply to these charges he said, "I deny them. But if they were all true, remember this. I am not preaching Martin Luther. I am preaching Jesus Christ." That's no excuse, of course, for going on in things that grieve the heart of God. But there's something of Luther's abandon needed in our lives.

What made these men keep on preaching? What constrains us to do so, if we do? It's the fact that we have been sent, that we are on an errand, that this is not our work, that the whole Christian enterprise is not an idea for which we have to apologize. We are sent by Jesus Christ. We are his ambassadors. He is carrying on his ministry through us; and because it is his ministry, it always must bear at its heart a vast concern for people in all their need, but must always bear on its lips the message of forgiveness and new life in Jesus Christ. And the key to courage is the sense that we've been commissioned by Him.

But Christ gives even more. There in that room that night, he breathed on them and said, "Receive—take to yourselves—the Holy Spirit."

The most dogged and paralyzing of our fears often focus not upon a hostile environment or even upon the question of our authority, but upon ourselves. Sometimes it seems that even a great revelation and a deep sense of calling are not enough to dispel some of these anxieties. They weren't for Moses, at least. He had a revelation—the living God came to him in the bush that burned but was not consumed. And he heard God's saving word, "I have seen the affliction of my people Israel who are in Egypt and I have heard their cry... I know their suffer-
ings and I have come down to deliver them. . . Come, and I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people out of Egypt.” Moses had all that and still he said, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?” And what of the disciples? They knew that they had failed more times than one, and they wondered if they could really trust anything about themselves any more. Who can be, as Luther put it, “a Christ to his neighbor?” Who is sufficient for this ministry—to be a savior of life unto life, or of death unto death, this binding and loosing, this awesome responsibility? Who is adequate for it?

And we, we have our fears about ourselves. Here’s a man who never was able to express how he felt in his family circle as a boy and he wonders—will he ever be able really to communicate this good news? Here’s a student’s wife who hasn’t had what she feels to be the needed education and background to be a minister’s wife. Can she do it? Will she be up to it? Here’s a fellow who, although he has a deep conviction in his heart that Christ lives and Christ has sent him, is struggling with his grades and wondering if he’ll possibly make it and if there can be any place in the harvest fields for him. Perhaps there is a minister here who secretly fears that the days of his usefulness are past.

Upon all such, as on those men in that locked room, Christ breathes and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

Do we grasp what is happening here? Read in Matthew’s gospel, toward the close, of Jesus’ promise, “Lo, I am with you all the days.” And read in the second chapter of Acts of the coming of the Spirit in power on Pentecost. Then see how here the link is revealed between those two. It is Jesus Christ the risen Lord who gives the Spirit on Pentecost, and the Spirit that he gives is the gift of his own in-breathed life. And this equips them, this makes them adequate, for whatever he may summon them to do. It’s not simply that he says, “Here, you go on my errand and I’ll help you over the rough spots.” No, it’s “Here, take my life. I give it to you. I create your ministry.” Isn’t that what he said at the very beginning when he called them and said, “Follow me and I’ll make you fishers of men?” “I’ll create you to be fishers of men.” They learned about that in a number of ways. They put their nets down all night and caught nothing and then they put them down at his word and they could hardly pull in all the fish. Once they had just a few little loaves and fish and couldn’t possibly feed the multitude, but they gave them to him and he gave them back to them, and then there was more than enough, and they began to glimpse the fact that he was creating the work that they would do. He was giving them their apostleship. He was breathing eternity into it. And whatever would count and would last and would grow and flourish would be his work, though they would be planting, and watering, and cultivating. He would do it. In every life it’s that way. In Don De Young’s language, Jesus gives us our “thing.” He gives us our task and he makes us, by his own in-breathed Spirit, to be adequate for it, whatever it is.

Now there is a sense in which what happened there in that Upper Room was unique. They saw his wounds and they heard with their ears his voice of com-
mission and they felt on their faces his breath. And we don't have it exactly like that. And yet, the glory of the gospel and the great good news of the faith is that it's happening all the time for us. It has happened to you or you wouldn't even be here in a service like this. Christ still meets with his gathered people and still he speaks in this word which he has given to his church and still the winds of the Spirit are blowing. But like Timothy, we all too often forget and fear again. And we need to hear the word of a battle-scarred veteran like Paul, talking to us "timid Timothy," now, saying "I remind you to kindle again the gift of God that is in you by the laying on of my hands. For God has not given us the spirit of timidity, but of power and of love and of self-control. So be not ashamed of testifying to our Lord or of me his prisoner, but take your share of suffering for the gospel in the power of God."

Yes, rekindle the gift! Press on to know Christ better in the power of his resurrection! Listen eagerly to his word! And open your whole self in faith and prayer to his quickening life!

Who dares to preach? No, the question is different for us when our fears have been swallowed up by the one fear of this Lord, by a joyful, reverent trust in him. Then the question is, "Who dares not to preach?" Amos put it well: "The lion has roared; who will not fear? The Lord God has spoken; who can but prophesy?"

Amen.