

John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "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."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

You know what I've noticed? I get a lot of invitations in the mail and online to all sorts of conferences right about this time of year. I guess they figure that clergy are now able to focus on something beyond Lenten studies, Stations of the Cross, Palm Sunday processions, Holy Week, and Easter. They figure that things are about to slow down and maybe they can get some of clergy out to their seminars in the coming months. So, the notices and invites start to arrive. Please join us for: the American Clergy Leadership Conference, or the Planning for Tomorrow Conference, or the Young Clergy Women's Conference...OK, I didn't get that one but it is out there. Some others that I have seen lately are Family Values Conference, Epic Fail Pastors Conference, Clergy in Solidarity Conference, Gay Clergy Conference, and the Clergy and Alcoholics Anonymous Conference. I not sure who that last one is focusing on.

There are tax conferences, service conferences, church management conferences, and stewardship conferences. There are conferences that are pro-life and pro-choice; denominational and interfaith; on marriage and on divorce. They are targeted at full time, part time, interim, and retired clergy. They deal with time management, stress management, preaching, and worship. We pretty much have a conference or seminar for whatever and whoever might be willing to lay down a few hundred dollars to listen to someone who has a message to share. And most of them are pretty good. They convey to the attendees the collected human wisdom and experience on a particular subject that clergy seem to struggle with.

Not long ago I read a book entitled *The Ten Most Common Mistakes Made by New Start Churches*. It's a book on church planting and congregational growth by Jim Griffith and Bill Easum. These guys not only write books but they...yes you got it... conduct church planting conferences teaching their techniques and methods of how to implement church growth successfully.

Which got me wondering. Do you know when the first church planting seminar and workshop was conducted? Well, I looked into it and I can tell you this, the presenter was, and still is, considered to be THE most authoritative person on the topic of church planting in all of history. He set the standard.

The first seminar he conducted many years ago was somewhat impromptu. It was actually held in a private home. No fee was charged and those in attendance, probably not more than a dozen and a half people, were not professional clergy with university degrees and ordination credentials. There is no record of refreshments being served or door prizes being awarded or certificates of completion being handed out at the end.

It was held long before we had today's technology, so no tape recordings or CDs or DVDs were made. We do, however, have a transcript of what the presenter taught at that very first church planting seminar because it was written down by a few of the attendees. Amazingly, looking back, the curriculum gave the attendees everything that they would need to know, and all the tools they would need to have, in order to bring the Gospel to more and more people through more and bigger churches planted throughout the world.

The recounting of his presentation was short, I have it right here, and so I am going to read it to you. "When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'"

That experience, in that room, was arguably the very first church planting seminar ever conducted. In a room in a private home filled with a handful of scared and defeated people, Jesus taught them and equipped them to go and share with others what they were witnessing that day.

That evening he taught them a deeper understanding of himself. He taught them, through just the fact that he was standing there in front of them, that he was who he had been telling and showing them that he was for the previous three years. He gave them a new clarity that evening, through his resurrected body, of all that he had been teaching them through his words and miracles. His presence in that room, behind the locked doors, in the flesh, taught them that it was, and is, all real; all true. Even though their faith had been challenged by watching Jesus die on a cross at the hands of both the Jewish leadership and the governmental authorities, he taught them the reality that those people and authorities, and any worldly power or authority, had no lasting power over him...or them...or us.

In that room, at that seminar, he gave them all the knowledge they would ever need in order to be, historically, the most powerful group of church planters ever created. He even got Thomas on board in a special make-up session.

He showed them all his hands and his side. He didn't give them handouts with lists of demographic breakdowns and geographical target groups. He didn't launch into a professional power point presentation on marketing and promotional techniques. He didn't explain the intricacies of mailing campaigns and advertising placements. He didn't even speak to them about bulletins, and greeters, and clean bathrooms.

He simply gave them the one piece of information that they would have to know and embrace. He showed them his hands and his side and those future church planters knew what they needed to know. They knew that the resurrection changes everything because it changed them. That is the key to the church.

As the workshop continued, after he taught them the one thing that they would need to know and embrace in order to build Christ's church, he gave them the one tool that they would need in order to accomplish their work. It wasn't a copy of the phone book and it wasn't a strong pair of sandals. He breathed on them. He breathed on them and gave them the Holy Spirit. It was the tool, the companion, that would bring them the words to share when they were needed and the strength to persevere when it was in short supply. It was also a tool, a companion, that they could leave with everyone in every place they took the Good News, so that those new church planters in those places would be equally equipped for their mission.

The book that I read on planting new churches explained that the number one mistake that new churches, and churches that are trying to grow and revision themselves, make is that they put the Great Commission ahead of the Great Commandment. They put the Great Commission ahead of the Great Commandment.

It is not that both aren't important. You must have a passion for both, but there is an order to follow. The first thing must be the first thing. If you don't first have "love the Lord your God with all your heart strength and mind" and then have love for your neighbors that grows out of that love, then the Great Commission of going to all nations to make disciples through baptism loses its meaning.

Without being motivated and even consumed by the love for God and then, through that love, love for others, the effort to take Christ to the world is just selling a product, and most of us

aren't very good at that. Without having the burning desire to take the amazing love that we have and the gift that we have received to others, we are simply imposing ourselves rather than uplifting others. It becomes a self-serving endeavor to build and fund a club rather than being God's mission to bring Christ to the world and the world to Christ.

The number one mistake that churches make is that they put their attempt to share the Good News of Christ ahead of truly knowing and embracing Christ for themselves in their own lives.

So where to from here on this first Sunday after the resurrection? The resurrected teacher has arrived and seminar has begun. Can you see him? No really...close your eyes for a second to block out the surroundings. Can you see him now? Arms outstretched showing you his hands. The wound in his side visible to everyone. Our primary mission is to love this person who loved each one of us so powerfully.

Now, with the help of the Holy Spirit, let's go forth and share THAT with the world.

Amen.