

## ***Unrelenting Jesus – John 20:19-31***

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We're just getting started with the season of Easter, or Eastertide as it's often referred to. It will run up until Pentecost, the birthday of Christ's church, on June 8.

The season of Easter is, above all, a season of life. The last verse of this passage says, "and that through believing you may have *life* in his name."

"Of course, the "life" [Jesus speaks of here] is not actually "just plain" life, but is a distinctive kind of life, a distinction that is obscured in English but apparent in Greek. In John, and throughout the New Testament, the English word "life" translates three different Greek words: *psyche*, *bios*, and *zoe*. When John (and the rest of the New Testament) speaks, on the one hand, of life as *psyche* or *bios*, these words refer to what one possesses simply by virtue of being a living creature. This is the life possessed from birth to death by animals and by humans, whether they be good or bad, righteous or wicked.

"On the other hand, "life" as used at the end of this passage, is spoken of with the [Greek] word *zoe*. This is eternal life (literally "life of the age"), life given to those who believe; life given to those who are born of God; life that, in John, transforms us from merely existing to living in the abundance and eternity of God. This life was present from the beginning and lies at the core of creation ("in him was life (*zoe*), and the life (*zoe*) was the light of all people" (1:4)). This life connects the deepest purposes of God with the ultimate purpose of John's gospel: "these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah ... and that believing

you may have life (*zoe*) in his name.” This *zoe* does not replace *psyche*; we are still the same creatures we were before. It does, however, bring us into the fullness of grace; so that we are, also, *not* still, the same creatures we were before—at least potentially not the same.

“In this passage, we find the disciples demonstrating more *psyche* than *zoe*, hunkered down behind locked doors, fearful of what might happen to them at the hands of those who killed Jesus (verse 19). The risen Christ steps into the room, into the midst of their fears with the first of a three-fold “Peace be with you.” This is the peace that comes when our worst fears are not realized; the relief that against all odds, death has not won; the profound realization that out of the blood, the nails, the thorns, the beating, and the cross has come this life, this *zoe* of God, right into their midst.” (Frank Crouch, *Working Preacher*, April 28, 2019)

Twice in this first encounter with the disciples, Jesus conveys this *zoe* life to them: “Peace be with you.” He says it to them, he shows them his hands and his side, and then he says it to them again, “Peace be with you.” And then he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

Jesus intentionally went to them. It’s doubtful that he just happened to be passing by the house with locked doors that contained the disciples inside it. No, he searches them out on the evening of his resurrection—the evening of the most dramatic life-changing event the world had seen. Them. These followers of Jesus who never fully got it with Jesus, one of whom denied knowing him in his final hours before he went to the cross.

And he didn’t just go to them and say howdy. No, he delivers his peace to them—this *zoe* life. And, in case they didn’t believe it was him, that he really wasn’t the one they killed with

nails and a spear on a cross, he offers them his hands and his side. He gave them visible proof that he was indeed alive.

Thomas wasn't with them at the moment. So, with such a full agenda ahead of him, we would've expected Jesus to just have the disciples tell Thomas of this good news and have them convince him that what they had seen was for real.

But no, Jesus comes back again to that same house a week later. He offers all of them peace again and invites Thomas specifically to touch the nail marks in his hands and put his hand in his side where the spear had struck him on the cross.

Jesus was unrelenting in his desire for those closest followers of his to know and believe that he had indeed risen.

Jesus exhibited such love and grace throughout his ministry and in his post-resurrection appearances. And that came as a result of what we often don't acknowledge was an unrelenting spirit or drive or commitment to having others know him.

We tend to think of Jesus having a more passive and contemplative personality. But in this encounter with the disciples, there's an eagerness here, an aggressiveness even, in his approach to having others embrace the hope his resurrection represents.

It is difficult today, more and more difficult it seems, to keep hope alive and radiate that hope in Jesus to the world. So many factors serve as threats to a movement that is the church of Jesus Christ in the world.

I was startled by a piece written by Ross Douthat in the New York Times last week that he titled, "An Age of Extinction is Coming. Here's How to Survive." It painted a bit of a grim picture about where we are as a culture. To give you a flavor of it, here was his introduction:

“Every great technological change has a destructive shadow, whose depths swallow ways of life the new order renders obsolete. But the age of digital revolution — the time of the internet and the smartphone and the incipient era of artificial intelligence — threatens an especially comprehensive cull. It’s forcing the human race into what evolutionary biologists call a “bottleneck” — a period of rapid pressure that threatens cultures, customs and peoples with extinction.

“When daily newspapers and mainline Protestant denominations and Elks Lodges fade into irrelevance, when [sit-down restaurants](#) and shopping malls and [colleges](#) begin to trace the same descending arc, that’s the bottleneck tightening around the old forms of suburban middle-class existence.

“Everything that we take for granted is entering into the bottleneck. And for anything that you care about — from your nation to your worldview to your favorite art form to your family — the key challenge of the 21st century is making sure that it’s still there on the other side.

“That challenge is made more complex by the fact that much of this extinction will seem voluntary. In a normal evolutionary bottleneck, the goal is surviving some immediate physical threat — a plague or famine, an earthquake, flood or meteor strike. The bottleneck of the digital age is different: The new era is killing us softly, by drawing people out of the real and into the virtual, distracting us from the activities that sustain ordinary life, and finally making existence at a human scale seem obsolete.

“In this environment, survival will depend on intentionality and intensity. Any aspect of human culture that people assume gets transmitted automatically, without too much conscious deliberation, is not going to make it.

“Languages will disappear, churches will perish, political ideas will evanesce, art forms will vanish, the capacity to read and write and figure mathematically will wither, and the reproduction of the species will fail — except among people who are deliberate and self-conscious and a little bit fanatical about ensuring that the things they love are carried forward.”

As I read Douthat’s piece more than once this week, I couldn’t help but think of the church and its gradual decline in our culture due to populations choosing to forgo faith in community. And I also thought of Jesus, here in John, who deliberately and self-consciously, and a little fanatically, went to the disciples more than once after his resurrection and made sure they knew that he was alive.

He was relentless in his pursuit of them.

We are God’s agents. The church is a community of believers charged with sharing good news that Christ is alive. And in today’s world, it demands a rather relentless commitment to telling others about Jesus and who he is. Not arrogantly, not boastfully, not selfishly, and not outside of our talents and skills. But instead, with humility and kindness and welcome and a deep sense of concern for our neighbors, we can be relentless in being the church God created us to be 40 years ago and still now in what is a much different landscape.

Last month, our Session endorsed an initiative called Horizon 2035, a process by which we move closer to the calling that God has for us over the course of the next decade.

You might recall the conversations that the Session commissioned our own John Sharp to have with all of us over the winter months, conversations that yielded tremendous insight from all of you but also included data that John provided us

about the state of the mainline church in the U.S., the PCUSA, and the demographics of our congregation.

John wrote a final report with a series of recommendations. The Session will hopefully tomorrow evening at its monthly meeting take some initial steps as part of its endorsement of the initiative.

As part of his report, John wrote this: “While in many respects [FPC] expresses its mission as well as it ever has, both the culture and the congregation itself have arrived at inflection points that must be faced. The data bear this out. Given long and clear trends, in another decade FPC will likely not have the range of options, vigor, membership and physical resources with which to catalyze a vision. Simply put, FPC will never be in a stronger position to discern and act upon God’s preferred future for the congregation and its mission. Our time is now.”

Our time is now to keep being relentless in our calling. The culture will tell us we don’t matter anymore, that there’s no use for us or that other communities of faith have it covered, that there’s not a need for a Presbyterian Church USA congregation in the heart of Farragut. That we can just pack things in and die a slow death.

We have the resources to defy what the culture is telling us. We can keep being intentional, in ways that bring out the best in us, in sharing resurrection hope within our community. But it’s going to take some changes. It’s going to require us changing course a bit in order to keep fulfilling the purpose God established for Farragut Presbyterian Church forty years ago.

In my eleven years here, I’ve never been more excited about the potential we have to live into our mission. That we can

relentlessly be the church by what we have to offer to our community.

Now is the time to act.

Look for more information about this Horizon 2035 initiative in the coming days and weeks.