

“Does God Still Send People?”
Acts 9:10-19a; John 20:19-23
2nd Sunday of Easter

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Westminster, Greenville
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We are beginning a new sermon series this month, one that we will continue throughout the season of Easter. The title of the series is “Then and Now: What Does the Early Church Have to Teach Us Today?”

In other words, we’re going to explore the ways that scripture describes the early church, what we can learn from the early church, about what it means to be God’s Church in the 21st century.

Our topic this morning is **being sent**.
Scripture describes the early church as a SENT community.
A people sent by God to spread the good news of Easter throughout God’s world.

All of which brings me to the title of this morning’s sermon:

“Does God Still Send People?”

It makes sense, right?
If the topic is sending, that’s an appropriate title.
But I would like you to do something for me as we start the sermon.

I’d like you to find a pencil or a pen, something you can write with...take your bulletin, take that pen, and scratch out the title.

New title.
You can write, or just remember it.
The title is now this:
“Will You Be Bored by This Sermon?”

Speaking of boredom, have you ever thought about the subtle role that boredom plays in our lives?

We'll get back to being sent in just a moment.

One of the most common refrains I have heard from people in the pews during the past 2 ½ decades is how BUSY our lives have become...how the speed of life just keeps increasing...has anybody in this room ever felt THAT before?

I sometimes wonder what that's all about.

Is it due to forces beyond our control?

Or are we perhaps, at some level, afraid of being...BORED?

Even in church?

Especially in church?

Or maybe the fear goes deeper than that.

Douglas John Hall is a Canadian theologian who suggests that the anxieties faced by Christians these days are not at all the same as they were 1000 or even 100 years ago.

“What most Westerners need to be saved from today isn't dread of death, and it isn't a crippling sense of guilt...It's the gnawing suspicion that humans may be purposeless things...

[an] accidental species...

random, arbitrary...”

Hall asserts that what we secretly fear when we walk into this sanctuary each Sunday...is NOT boredom.

It's not guilt.

It's not even death.
 It's...MEANINGLESSNESS.
 That our lives may not have purpose and meaning...

I think Hall may be on to something.

One of the worries that I sometimes hear from people when they retire...is not a fear of letting go of the familiar.

It's a fear of USELESSNESS.

Will retiring mean that they won't be needed anymore?
 Will their gifts not be valued anymore?
 Will growing older mean not being able to contribute anymore?

Over and against these fears comes the GOOD NEWS of Easter.

The good news of Easter is not only that God has saved us.
 The good news of Easter is that the risen Christ is SENDING us.

May I suggest that being sent by Christ is what gives our lives meaning and direction and hope?

We heard it in our first text for today.
 The risen Christ appears to his disciples on Easter evening.

He says to them:
 "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

What does it mean to be a sent person?
 What does it mean in your own life of discipleship?
 And what does it mean in the life of Westminster?

I've been thinking about that last question a lot throughout the past year or so...what it means for our congregation to be sent by God, at this time in our life together.

In other words...

**Who is God sending us to these days?
And who might God be sending OUR way?**

To help discern the answers to those questions, the Session has appointed what, in previous years, was called a long-range planning committee.

This time around, we're calling it the Connect, Serve, Grow Task Force. I'll be putting something in the e-newsletter very soon about this Task Force and who is serving on it.

Now one of the things I really admire about the history and past leadership of Westminster is that every 12 years or so, the Session appoints a group like this. And whenever there's a long-range planning committee like this, the report doesn't just go sit on a shelf somewhere collecting dust.

Back in the year 2000, there was a long-range planning committee. And that committee made some recommendations regarding the physical space in our church. Westminster was growing rapidly and needed to build.

You know what the result was?

The gym.

The fellowship hall.

The expansion of this sanctuary.

Then again in 2012, another long-range planning committee made some recommendations about staffing. One of those recommendations became a new Associate Pastor position. And you know what the result of that recommendation became?

Leigh's call to Westminster back in 2013.

So there's this remarkable track record at Westminster when it comes to thinking together about the future, discerning God's will and way for our congregation.

Why am I bringing this up?

Not only to let you know what's happening behind the scenes around here. But also to say that the discernment process about our future is in some way, at some point, going to involve each of you.

I don't yet know what shape that will take.

It could be a survey.

It could be listening groups, or a town-hall type meeting.

It could be some combination of all those.

I do know that the Task Force and the leadership of our church will be eager to hear from each of you.

All of which brings me back to our topic: being sent.

What does it mean to be sent by the risen Christ?

What does it mean in the life of our church?

What does it mean that God is sending you?

Three things, I'll keep them brief, don't want to BORE you after all...

1) When it comes to being sent, the WHO is important.

Do you remember the charge that I say at the end of worship?

How does it begin?

Say it with me.

Go out into God's world in peace, have courage, hold onto what's good...

Now who am I giving that charge to?

Is it only to a select few of you?

Or is it to all y'all?

That charge is a way of defining EACH of us...as a sent person.

And we have no idea who God will send to us on any given Sunday.

It could be a person who's looking for a Presbyterian church with traditional worship.

It could be a person who identifies as transgender, and they don't care about denomination, they just want to find a church where they can feel SAFE being who they are.

It could be a person who recently lost a spouse.

It could be a single mom, looking for a church where her child with developmental or learning differences or with disabilities will feel welcome and at home.

It could be someone who was just released from prison.

It could be someone who has just received a devastating diagnosis.

It could be someone who just learned where they're going to college this fall.

Jesus is not reviewing resumes when it comes to whom he sends to us! But everyone in this room, no matter who you are, receives the same charge.

Which means everyone in this room is a SENT person.

So #1...the WHO is important.
God can send whomever God wants.

And #2...the WHAT is important.

What God is sending us to do...is up to God.
We don't get to choose what the assignment will be.
The assignment, the destination, is God's idea, not ours.

Take our second scripture passage today.

God tells Ananias that God is sending him to Saul.
And how does Ananias respond?

“Oh yeah, Saul, that's a good candidate for God's church...”
No.

Ananias says: “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem...”

In other words, God SURPRISES Ananias with his assignment.

Getting back, for a moment, to the work that the Task Force will be doing...I'm reminded of a question that the previous Long Range Planning Committee from 2012 asked in their report.

The question was this:

What's the next great transformational project for Westminster?

In other words, in our church's past, we've been sent...

We've been sent to other countries:
to the Dominican Republic, to Malawi, to Cuba.

We've been sent to feed the hungry. As many of you know, in the 1960s, Meals on Wheels in Greenville was started right here in Westminster's kitchen.

We've been sent to build houses.

We've been sent to work with children who don't have stable homes.

We've been sent to expand our facilities, to create a welcoming home for anyone who walks through any door of our church.

There are plenty of other examples.

And no one who was on the ground floor of any of those ministries knew ahead of time what God was going to do...

So, the third thing I think it means to be sent by God is this:
WONDER....

Being sent just might fill you with wonder.

According to our text from Acts, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes. And even though the text doesn't tell us this, I suspect that after Ananias saw what God was up to, something like scales fell from his eyes too.

And the early church became something that Ananias never dreamed it would be.

Do you think that kind of thing happens now?

Do you think God's church in the 21st century could become something that you and I never dreamed it might be?

If—at some point in the future, God surprised us with the people God was sending us to serve, or God astonished us with whomever it is that God was sending to us...if something like scales fell from my eyes or your eyes, do you think it would feel...

Boring?
Useless?
What's the point?

Or do you think you might be filled with wonder at what God is up to?

Sometimes after a preacher has been preaching for 15 minutes, he she realizes that they could probably say what they wanted in 1 minute:

What's our vision?
Open minds open hearts.

Stay open.
Stay open to where God is sending you.
Stay open to what God might do next in this church.

(Amen.)