

WGUMC April 7, 2013 Easter 2 "Ready or Not"
John 20:19-23

On the evening of the first Easter, the disciples are locked in a room because they're afraid, because they aren't prepared for Easter and all that it will require of them. You see, up to this point, they've been the understudies who figured that Jesus Christ the Superstar would do all the live performances. So they never memorized their lines. They didn't practice their entrances. There's no way that they're going out on that stage with the whole world watching them. So they hide out in the dressing room. Maybe he'll come back and the show will go on.

In this one brief moment in the Gospel of John, we get a sneak preview of the disciples not knowing who they are or what they are supposed to do. When you think about it, it's an amazing scene. We're here at the debut of one the longest running shows on earth, the Christian Church. We're backstage with the boys. It's Opening Night and they've got a casting crisis.

From all that we know about live theater, you can bet that the Apostles made their share of bloopers back there at the beginning. But the Acts of the Apostles doesn't tell us about them. YouTube doesn't even have them. So you never hear about the time Peter, trying to drive an evil spirit out of a young boy, drove it by mistake into his mother-in-law! Of course not! Somehow, they conveniently forgot to mention all the mess-ups in those Off-Off Broadway days.

I wish they had. It would've been a little easier for me as I was making my debut in the ministry. I was even less prepared than the Apostles were to go make disciples of all nations. Even though I'd been in college for seven years. Maybe because I'd been in college for seven years! There are so many things they don't teach you in seminary.

My first summer, I did an internship on Ocracoke Island, off the coast of North Carolina. One afternoon I was riding my bike to visit an elderly gentleman. As I got close to the house, I

thought I heard a gunshot, then silence. What should I do? Being young and stupid, I went up to the door. I knocked. The old man opened. He had a shotgun in his hand and a sheepish look on his face. There was a dead chicken in the driveway. It had been disturbing his nap. None of my classes at Duke taught me what to say to a chicken slayer!

It got even more challenging once I graduated. I had only attended two weddings in my entire life before I had to perform one. I landed in my first appointment in Filer, Idaho early in the week. That Saturday, before my first Sunday, I had to do my first wedding. Wouldn't you know it? I had a complex partial seizure in the middle of it. The Maid of Honor was a nurse. I had clued her in beforehand. Somehow we got through it. And at the wedding reception/barbecue held at the family dairy farm that afternoon, the bride and groom toasted me. Yes, God is good. All the time.

Two weeks later, I had another wedding. No seizure this time, but no one had told me what to do if the father of the bride makes a pass at the pastor during the rehearsal. I opted for a cold stare rather than a hard slap.

But I was really put to the test one communion Sunday. I started the Eucharistic prayer and then looked down into the chalice. As I was saying, "This is the blood of the new covenant," I was wondering why the liquid in the cup was dark brown. Now, if there were ever a time I wished I were a Catholic and believed in transubstantiation, this was the time.

What do I do? I was thinking, but not fast enough. I knew that the grape juice was taken from the freezer. These farmers don't waste anything. When the communion steward opened a jug of grape juice one month, she would freeze the rest for the next month and the month after that and the month after that. Can grape juice get rancid in the freezer?

Meanwhile, I was going through the motions, and before I knew it, there were people standing in line waiting to receive. As they dipped their bread into the cup, I was praying it wouldn't kill them. But farmers are a sturdy bunch. By the time they made it down the side aisles and back to their pew, their faces were expressionless. I had no idea what they were thinking.

At last, I dipped my bread into the cup and put it into my mouth. It wasn't rancid grape juice. It was cold coffee! Old-timers in Idaho also freeze their leftover coffee.

Now the efficacy of a coffee communion was never discussed in all my years of study. It is learn by doing when it comes to pastoral ministry.

That was certainly true the time I was visiting a man with a brain tumor. Since I couldn't drive in those years, Ann and her little Yorkshire terrier chauffeured me out to the farmhouse. As we visited with the man's wife in the living room, Ann's dog

was jumping on the furniture and running around the house. By and by, I noticed that there was something suspicious dangling from the dog's back end.

Now Ann was an older lady. She didn't have the best eyesight. She was getting forgetful. I thought, "Oh no" and tried my best to keep the hairball off the couch. In a little while, we got up to go, and I headed for the kitchen door. That's when I saw it: the pile. What do I do? I didn't want to embarrass Ann. I didn't want to leave a mess for anyone else. So I reached into my purse, grabbed a handful of Kleenex and scooped it up quick. Now what do I do with it? I couldn't put it in the kitchen garbage. It would smell. I figured that maybe there was a can outside, so I stuck it in my purse until I got there. Of course, by this time, Ann and the farmwife had caught up with me. In an instant, they surmised the whole story and started to laugh at me. Here's our new pastor with a pile of poop in her purse!

Moral of these stories: we are never ready for the Resurrection and all of its challenging implications. We are never ready when the call of God comes to us and the task of making disciples is looming before us. But that is no excuse. In fact, I suspect that God plans it that way. Look at the first disciples. They didn't have the skills. They didn't have the tools. They didn't have anything they would have wanted. But they got everything they needed.

Only in John's Gospel does the Holy Spirit arrive on Easter Day. Jesus appears out of nowhere and says, "Peace be with you. As my Abba has sent me, so I send you." And then he breathes on them. The same breath that God breathed into Adam to make him a living soul, Jesus breathed into the disciples to empower them to save souls.

The disciples had no power of their own. None of us do. I certainly didn't when I started out as pastor of my first church at 24 years of age. Most of my parishioners were old enough to

be my grandparents. I was shy. I lacked self-confidence. I had no life experience and no inborn talents for this type of work. I was in rural Idaho and had no car. I'm grateful that God and the Bishop did have a sense of humor! Ministry got real for me real fast.

When he was preaching here in February, Rev. Schuyler Rhodes challenged us all to get real real fast. Because we have a real job to do— making disciples—and only those of us who can get real can do it. So we've spent the season of Lent getting real, sharing with each other about God in our life. Now we'll spend the Easter season preparing to share with others about life in God.

Schuyler started a program in his church called "Each one bring one." His challenge to us is for each one person in the pew (pastors, too) to bring one person not only to church, but to a new or renewed relationship with Jesus Christ in the next year. Accepting the challenge and learning how to do this will

be our worship focus for the next several weeks, and I'll be passing out a devotional guide next Sunday. Because there is no way around the need for each one to bring one. Unless you're planning on having lots of babies, this is the only way the church can grow. And this church has too much going for it not to grow. I recently told someone that this church needs two hundred more members to fully realize its potential. And so your faithfulness is crucial.

I know what you're thinking: Let's go lock ourselves in a room! Because when it comes to doing God's work, we often behave like the disciples in that dressing room. It doesn't matter our age. We're all afraid to go out on that stage. But ready or not, the lights are going down, and the curtain is going up. The "Each One Bring One" show is about to begin. Don't worry about your lines. Don't be anxious about your entrances. This is the Willow Glen Improv. We'll make it up as

we go along. And even if we fall on our face out there, God will be there, cheering us on.