

**Highland Presbyterian Church**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Easter – April 16, 2023**  
**A sermon by Megan McCarty**

John 20:19-31

John 21:1-19

This morning, we heard two different texts of Jesus appearing to his disciples after his resurrection. I think about what a wonderful relief it must have been to his disciples to see him again; the joy they must have felt of seeing their friend and teacher and getting to talk to him and feel at peace, even if just for a little bit. And after the week that we have all just had, I find myself wishing that we could all have that experience: our moment to be with the risen Christ, our moment to know that even just for a minute, everything is at peace and every little thing is right in the world.

I have to think that's why we gather here. God is here when we gather because we matter to one another. God is here when we gather because we thirst for the same things - the Kingdom where all are free to flourish. Here, where we keep showing up to the pain, the struggle, and the beauty - all at once.

This is where we find the disciples. Unsure of their next step, untrusting of the community around them and even a little of each other, but showing up to be together because they don't know what else to do. They are all feeling lost after the death of their leader not sure what they are supposed to be doing. Throughout John's gospel, it has been hinted that Peter would be the heir to Jesus' ministry, but then he denied Jesus three times. How could the disciples be expected to trust Peter to lead them, especially since Peter had pledged to follow Jesus to his death, even promising to die for Jesus' sake. At the end of chapter 20 we are left wondering if the disciples will trust Jesus enough to go out by the power of the Holy Spirit and stop locking themselves behind closed doors.

So, when we pick up at chapter 21 we see that it's Peter who does decide to venture out...to fish. Multiple sources have said that Peter's willingness to go out on the water that day is one of the ways that he is trying to win back favor in the eyes of the disciples. He's trying to prove that he can be trusted, that he's a capable leader, and that he has integrity and is benevolent. But instead of proving to the disciples that he is worthy, he ends up encountering Christ who provides a moment of reconciliation and commissioning. We know that Peter denied Christ three times and now, almost as way of allowing Peter to forgive himself, he is offered three times to affirm Jesus' life and call to ministry. This is an incredible moment of repentance and forgiveness, showing all of us that there is no sin too big, there is nothing in our lives that cannot be forgiven through grace. Through this story, Jesus shows us what it means to be reconciled to him. And there are so many reasons that we need reconciliation.

On Wednesday evening while some of us gathered for prayer, several news stations unexpectedly showed up to film our gathering. It was a little odd and I felt slightly awkward having them film us praying. Although, with covid, I recognize that I should be used to being filmed all the time. (Hi friends watching at home!) One of the news stations that interviewed me

asked me about the prayer vigil. I talked quite a bit about the idea that prayer cannot be the only thing that happens following this mass shooting. I talked about the need for reform and action in addition to prayer. None of that made it into the article, of course. But in response to that, the interviewer said, “but you’re a church. Isn’t that a political message?”

There is nothing political about wanting to live in a world where people are not killed by guns. There is nothing political about wanting to feel comfortable and safe in public spaces like schools, workplaces, and churches. There is nothing political about wanting this to not be “normal” for my children - for our children, for them to not be surprised or disturbed by another mass shooting. There’s nothing political about us recognizing that this is not the world as God intended it.

But this is the world that we have built. This is the country that we have created. We are called to consider the good of others over our own ideas of individual freedom or comfort. But somewhere along the way, we have bought the lie that I am the most important person on the planet. We have discarded any notion of solidarity and belonging to each other in favor of the idols of individualism and American Christian freedom. While Christian freedom once meant living in radical self-sacrificing obedience to Jesus, many American Christians have traded this notion in favor of a Christian freedom that allows them to act however they want because Jesus already paid the price. Pastor Raymond Chang, who is currently the college chaplain at Wheaton College said in his podcast *The Reclaim Podcast* that, “The idolatry of freedom fuels the idolatry of guns.” When money speaks louder than lives, we know that America as a nation has an idolatrous love affair with guns. And it’s our children, who journalists have dubbed as the “the school shooting generation,” are the ones paying the price. Not only our children, but anyone who steps into a school, or their workplace, or a house of worship, a movie theater, or a grocery store.

It is because of our failure to take the steps necessary to curtail gun violence that we need to be reconciled to God over and over again. God asks Peter three times, “do you love me?” If we answer yes, then the only answer to that reconciliation is the commissioning: “feed my sheep.” Despite not wanting us to live in violence and us choosing weapons over peace, God still loves us. God still loves this world, this country, and God is still caring for us. God weeps when we are weeping. And, God still expects us and calls us to serve one another.

There are lots of people who have worked tirelessly to come up with creative solutions to our idolatrous love of guns. One such organization is called Raw Tools. This group was frustrated that the conversation around guns often feels binary – that you are either in favor of more guns or more laws and that no action is coming out of that conversation. They took the “swords into plowshares” initiative seriously. So, they have churches and other organizations volunteer their parking lots to hosts days where you can invite people to donate their guns to be chopped up and turned into gardening tools. Crescent Hill Presbyterian Church and Grace Hope Presbyterian Church are going to host two days this summer. The guns are decommissioned by qualified employees of Raw Tools and cut up in front of the licensed owner

so that they can be certain that their gun will never be considered a firearm again. And, their gardening tools are beautiful!

God has given us the brains and all the tools necessary to creatively think our way out of this. If law makers are not going to take the action that is demanded of them, other solutions will have to bubble up from the masses, because we are tired of feeling unsafe, we are tired of inaction, we are tired of people thinking that weapons are the answer when we know as people of God that this is not the world as God intended. We know we are called to feed God's sheep. I wonder what that looks like for us if we are rightfully afraid to come out from behind our locked doors. "Do you love me?" Jesus asks, "then feed my sheep."

We don't know how to fix this problem or even how we can play our role when the actions we take seem to get us nowhere, but we do know this – God is here. God is with us. God will wipe the tears from our eyes and weep with the families who will never hug their loved ones again. God welcomes the lost, the broken, and hopeless into a loving embrace. God is with the broken hearted, the devastated families, and the grief-stricken communities. God is with the angry mobs, the impatient rioters, and the threatening masses who are still very much God's children. And so we ask God to help us to accept one another as Christ has accepted us. We ask God to remind us that there is nothing that we can do that renders us unforgiveable. We ask God to help us figure out the next steps as we gather to be together, not knowing what direction to go. We ask God to help us to be uncomfortable, to hear a hard truth, and to put our creed in Christ, not fear. In his resurrection, Christ conquered sin, death, fear, hate – and we know that because of Jesus Christ, we can too. We might stop talking, but we know that God won't stop listening. So we keep showing up - to the pain, the struggle, and the beauty - all at once. Amen.