

2nd Easter - A - 3/30/08 – Acts 2:14a, 22-32; Ps. 16; 1 Peter 1:3-9 Jn 20:19-31 – SOS - Pastor Charlie

C – Christ is risen! (Response: Christ is risen indeed!) But what does that mean for you and me; what does it mean to say that Christ is risen in us? Throughout the next 7 weeks, we'll take a look at what it means to be the Church and to carry on the mission of Jesus as we work together to bring in God's Kingdom of grace, mercy and justice.

E – For me it means change. Since Jesus is risen, I can no longer be the same person. My whole focus in life has changed. It's no longer about me; it's about serving my Savior.

C – You're right, Ellenor, it is about change, transformation and service. Look at what happened in the lives of those first disciples. In today's lesson, we find them gathered in the Upper Room in fear. Then Jesus appears to them and something happens. The Book of Acts tells us that the Holy Spirit turned their lives inside out and upside down. They tried going back to Galilee and taking up where they left off. But the risen Jesus told them to "no go"! Rather, they were to continue his mission of bringing in the Kingdom of God.

E – Sounds to me like they had to stretch a bit; to go beyond what they thought they could do; they had to refocus their lives.

C – Is that what this rubber band is all about?

E – Yes! Hopefully all of you received a rubber band as you entered. There are different colors and sizes; some stretch a little and some a lot. How many of you do stretching exercises? Why do we do them? (To remain flexible; to keep limber; so we'll be able to accomplish what we set out to do.) What effort do you put into stretching? (Engage assembly in exercises: finger movement; arms overhead; perhaps extending arms and turning)

C – I think I see where this is headed. In our lives, we all stretch or push ourselves in order to grow and accomplish something important to us. Sometimes buying a car or house is a stretch of our finances; sometimes a class we take can challenge or stretch our thinking; or a home repair can sometimes stretch our abilities.

E – Right. The question is what do you stretch for and whether we stretch for God? Are we "finger" stretchers or "servant" stretchers for Christ? Do we take the path of least resistance or the easy way out? I'm sure you've said or heard these words: "I've already done my part; let someone else do it; or, I'm not sure if I have the gifts; I'm too old or I'm too young or I've never done that before?"

C – Obviously you have a lot of passion around this. How did this idea take hold? And what does SOS stand for?

E – Not long ago a group I'm in declined to prepare a group meal by saying, "We're too old!" I was stunned, and the more I thought about it the more concerned I became. So I asked them, "Where in the Bible does God decline to ask someone to do something because they're too old (or too young)?" On the contrary, there are stories – like Abraham and Sarah, Zechariah and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna – where God calls older people to vital ministries, or, younger people like Jonathan, David and Mary.

C – Okay, so what does God call us to do? Why are we here? What does this have to do with being the Church?

E – In Genesis 12:1-2, God blesses Abraham in order that through Abraham God might bless others. Jesus sends the Holy Spirit into the lives of his followers so that they can continue the mission of Jesus and share God's love with a hurting and broken world.

C – Yes, that is a matter of faith; that we trust God’s promise in Jesus that we will find the deep meaning and purpose in life when we give ourselves in service to others. But that’s easier said than done.

E – Yes, there are barriers. (Turning to the assembly) Can you help me name some barriers? (1. Not a top priority. 2. Risk/vulnerability 3. Don’t want to give up something else. 4. Don’t have time, interest, ability.) But have we given ourselves completely to God? We don’t ever hesitate to ask God for what we want and need, and God, out of his great love for us, gives us what is needed. One of my favorite spiritual writers, Henri Nouwen, writes: “A happy life is a life for others. True joy, happiness, and inner peace come from the giving of ourselves to others.” (Repeat the last line for emphasis.)

C – Tell us a little about this tri-fold handout and what prompted this message.

E – What prompted my message was an article in Lutheran Women about a circle of 20 women and their incredible “stretching to serve” story. A group of 20 volunteers created 200-300 quilts, pillows, scarves, hats, slippers, and personal-care kits for low-income families, homeless people, nursing home patients, and hospitals in the area.

C – That’s amazing! I know that our prayer shawl ministry and quilting group have done similar things.

E – Right! There are amazing things that are going on in our congregation. But we need to share these and invite others to join with us so that God can do amazing things through us. The story resonated with the Mary Martha Circle and as a result this SOS ministry – Stretching to Serve the Savior (**Banner we can stretch out and hold for people to see**) was born. We want everyone at First to stretch not only during the Easter season to serve our Savior, but each day. In the tri-fold handout, we list just a few of the ministries and mission activities people may want to consider. I’d like to suggest that as you rise in the morning that you use this prayer as a starter: “God, what would you have me do today? Help me be a blessing to others.” You might even want to use this breath prayer: (Breathing in, say) “I am a blessed child of God.” (Exhaling, say) “Help me be a blessing to others.”

The unique thing about this SOS ministry is that we will not know what you are doing; you do not have to sign up for a particular task; you will not be called; you will not be checked on. There will be a web link so you can share your ideas on how to stretch and serve. Signing is optional. We encourage you to share your stories about what you’ve tried and how both you and the other person were blessed.

C – Being disciples of Jesus means continuing the mission of Jesus in and through our individual and communal lives; it means stretching to serve our Savior; letting the Holy Spirit move us beyond our fear and comfort levels to find new ways to share our gifts and the good news of his love.

E – Yes, and we are accountable only to God and yourself. God is not concerned about how many times you might have served or blessed someone. God is interested in what the need is right now and whether we’re available and willing to do something about it. There are ladies outside the worship area waiting to have you sign your name for no other reason than to show that you are an SOS participant.

C – Ellenor, let me interrupt here. How many of you have been blessed by God? How many of you have been claimed by Christ? How many of you have God-given gifts? Now, how many of you are willing to stretch to serve our Savior?

E - My prayer and the prayer of the Mary Martha Circle is that you catch the joy and passion of being a blessing to others. You will not be asked to do a particular task; you will not be checked on; you will not be called. You are accountable only to God and yourselves. Go and Stretch to Serve our Savior.