

**Sermon: “Staying Anchored When Life Overwhelms” by Pastor Jay Hilbinger**  
**Sunday, May 16, 2010 – John 20:19-22**

Our Bible Story today, John 20:19-22, is part of John's version of The First Easter. Picture this: the disciples are huddled together in a room, very afraid of the Jewish Leaders, and uncertain what each moment of the future might hold... even fearful about the very next second! WHY? Jesus, their leader and teacher, had been killed, and now, what might happen to them? Everyone in authority knew he was their leader and THEY were his companions! Three years of momentum and transformation – a revolutionary movement – all came to a grinding halt, and their leader was dead... gone... life as they had come to know it and celebrate it was OVER! They were scared, confused, grieving. Fear overwhelmed them, and they felt stuck in desperation because of circumstances they felt were completely beyond and out of their control.

Think of a time you've been in similar circumstances. What does that feel like? Sit with that for a moment, and let that feeling of despair and helplessness settle in for a few moments. It can seem absolutely paralyzing!

*Here at First Lutheran, we find ourselves in a very confusing and scary situation... it is unlike anything we've ever faced before in our recent history, and because of that, our President, Madeleine Dassow, and Vice President, Ron Swanson are speaking with everyone who comes to worship today as your leaders seek to inform you, and ask for your participation in finding our way forward in the months ahead. (Ron speaks on the budget deficit and proposed mission plan response.)*

Like those very first disciples of Jesus, huddled together in that room after Jesus had died, we find ourselves up against what seem like insurmountable circumstances. We are in completely new and uncharted waters. The disciples were so overwhelmed by the circumstances that they forgot who they were and what they were supposed to be about. Their identity was lost, and their purpose was no longer their main focus. And I think that possibility exists for us, our congregation, too.

Because of the grief and confusion and fear, the huddled disciples forgot that Jesus had made some promises to them... That he would never leave them alone, and... That God's Spirit would accompany them and empower them to keep doing the work Jesus had entrusted to them, and... That no matter how bad things get, God always brings hope from despair, new life from death. They were so focused on the present circumstances – they forgot who they were. They lost sight of their purpose. They had forgotten Jesus' promises.

Their story is our story too. Whatever comes of our current financial picture, whatever comes of the Great Recession our nation and world is experiencing, whatever comes of the completion of our building project, and whatever comes of how we are able to spend and invest in the short and long-term future of FLC and this difficult journey we find ourselves in right now... IT DOES NOT HAVE TO DEFINE US, OR DETERMINE WHO WE ARE! Now is a time to come together, lean on God's presence in and through each other, and not allow any of it to cause us to forget who we are. Let's not let any of this present confusion and struggle cause us to lose sight of our purpose.

Last Friday I was on retreat at St. Francis Springs Prayer Center in Stoneville, North Carolina. During some of the quiet free time, I was walking on one of the many trails in the woods, along a steadily flowing stream. There was one tree on that stream bank that was taller and wider than any other tree around. It had obviously been there a long time. It had these huge roots, three of them, that were each about as wide as the tree itself, all stretching down into, and then across, the stream. That tree knew exactly how to thrive in difficult circumstances. It's why it was still there, still precariously perched on the stream bank, and yet was tall and strong. This tree sent out its roots in one particular direction, further and deeper into its source of life and nourishment. For decades, this tree had been constantly stretching and growing toward the stream, reaching deeper and deeper into its source. No matter how dry the weather became, and no matter how swiftly the flood waters might gush, this tree was so strongly rooted and anchored that its purpose would be fulfilled and it would remain purposeful and vibrantly alive.

For the most part, that's what our Natural Church Development (NCD) Journey is about, and I hope you will participate in this journey as it unfolds. Like the disciples huddled in that room, they needed a reminder of who they were and the purpose for which they existed. NCD -- and our life together in these present circumstances -- is how God will remind us, and sustain us in this time of uncertainty.

It's as if Jesus himself were standing among us and reminding us... Don't forget that you are Children of Light. YOU ARE my People of Hope... YOU ARE God's Good News Ambassadors. YOU ARE an ever-flowing stream of resurrection life and promise. Jesus comes into our midst and says to us, in the midst of the chaos and uncertainty... "PEACE... don't be afraid. I'm with you, and whatever happens, no matter how things appear, just remember who you are. Let my life, my promises and my presence sustain you in this difficult journey." IN JESUS' NAME... AMEN