ACTS 4:32-35 (p. 886) **APRIL 8, 2018**

JOHN 20:19-31 (p. 881) **BLAINE**

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Breathe on us Lord, just as you did on your Disciples when they met together, so that we too might recognize your Presence, receive your Spirit, and be filled with your Peace! Turn our doubts into belief, our fears into boldness, and our silence into a courageous witness to Jesus Himself! In His Name we ask this, Amen.

"NOW WHAT?"

Have you seen this week's Record Patriot? It appears like Easter has been hijacked! Front Page Headline, above the fold, "Easter Bunny visits Benzie County"! The article talks about candy-filled eggs and Easter Egg hunts, a great big Bunny, and the weather, of course. But there is no mention of Jesus what so-so-ever, or the Resurrection, or the Empty Tomb! There is no talk about sin, or salvation! Not a single blip! Oh, there is a "Religion" section a few more pages further in. But it's called "Religion and Family" now. And the articles are all about "a Charity Guild," "Benzie Senior Resources," "the Benzie Bus," "Grow Benzie," and "Habitat for Humanity"! No Jesus at all! No tomb! No Resurrection!

And it's not just Benzie County either. The national news this week was on a class on "Christian Privilege" at George Washington University, the health benefits of Chocolate Bunnies or not, and the annual Easter Egg Roll on the White House Lawn! Can you see why I think Easter has been hijacked.

And it shouldn't surprise us either. Not really. We pretty much lost Christmas a long time ago! Toys-R-Us stole it, right, and Mattel. Wrapping paper and Hallmark Cards are now the focus. Then there is the Mistletoe industry. And now the assault is on Easter! We have Spring Break instead, and Snow Birds Gone Wild. Cancun and Myrtle Beach! There is Honey Baked Ham, and Cadbury Eggs. Who needs anything else? And before long I'll bet we'll have little "Peep" bunny lights hanging from our houses and blow-up "Empty Tombs" sitting in our front yards! Which folks will say are really "Rabbit Holes"! Easter is almost gone.

I mean, how many conversations did you have, personally, this week, on Jesus being raised from the dead? Not butterflies talks, with cocoons and all. Not Spring temperature expectations, or daffodils, or Robins returning to nest. I'm talking about the majestic drama, the cosmic, death-defying truth of Easter Morning! Easter has been hijacked? We're still locked away, holed-up in our own little Upper Room!

"On the evening of the first day of the week", Sunday, "the Disciples are together, with the doors locked from fear"! "Jesus then comes and stands among them"! It's only been about twelve hours since Peter and John-Mark and Mary have witnessed the Empty Tomb. Maybe less, because Mary hung around the Garden for a while and talked with the Risen Lord. It's the same day, though, as the Greatest Miracle of all time! And what we see is, the would-be followers of Jesus, hiding out in fear! You have to give them some credit though, I guess. They are together, meeting for fellowshipping, and sharing a meal. But not much else is happening. Are you with me so far?

Did you know that the first Sunday after Easter is often called, “Low Sunday” in the modern church? It may be simply because attendance is usually way down, and things feel sort of anti-climactic! All the Easter Bonnets are gone, and most of the flowers. The Jelly Beans are missing, and the guests have left for home. There aren’t any “Hosanna’s” anymore. No cheering crowds waving Palm branches. The celebrations are clearly over! So, the mood, truly, feels kind of low.

Stop and think though. Does that make sense? What could be more irrational, more idiotic, more, silly really, than living a life in fear now that you know about the Empty Tomb? It seems foolish, doesn’t it? Which may be why today is also known as “The Feast of Fools”!

The Disciples do look foolish to the outside world, tucked away, just doing their own thing! I get their confusion. I do. Jesus talked about the coming Kingdom of God, and even rode into town in Glory! But then He was put on trial, mocked and beaten. They shoved a Crown of Twisted Thorns onto His head. And Crucified Him! I understand being in mourning too. There grief must have been huge in the face of loss. I get the darkness of Friday night as well. And the despair of Saturday. It must have enveloped them like a dark cloud! And just as they are about to start to put the pieces of their lives back together, along comes all this early morning drama! Mary, one of your own, has spoken with the Risen Lord!

I get it! I even get the doubts that would arise. Aside from the Angels, and the folded up burial clothes—the soldiers quaking in fear! Apart from all the talk beforehand by Jesus, that this is all exactly what would happen! Setting aside, for a moment, the personal encounter with Jesus that Mary had, and the one that Cleopas and his friend had on the road to Emmaus. There really isn't that much proof, is there? I understand the doubts, both the rational and irrational ones. I understand why Thomas wanted to see the proof! The future seems a little uncertain right now, maybe even in a downright swirl! Why would you share what you honestly believe with the outside world? They might think you are nuts!

So here they are, cuddled together, hiding away. They are on the inside looking out, if you will, quietly trying to not make waves. Can you relate? Have you ever been mired in doubt? Have you ever felt surrounded by an increasingly angry, and unbelieving world? Have you ever found yourself sequestered away, maybe with a fellowship meal in front of you, but not really doing much else? When what you should be doing is sharing what's on your mind with those out on street?

As you probably know, the term "disciple" means "one who follows". And the followers of Jesus have heard His teachings. They have listened to Him preach on many occasions, shared the Word! And they know about the Empty Tomb. Believe me! Some have even spoken with the Risen Lord, personally! While others have spoken with those who have! So, why continue to cower in fear? Why allow yourself to be paralyzed, stagnant actually, unable to even move?

“Now what?”, they must have thought. “Where do we go from here?” It’s far easier to stay in the comfortable, isn’t it, to sit with friends in the middle of a “familiar” Upper Room. And yet the single greatest event in the entire spectrum of Eternity just taken place! Satan been defeated. Death has been conquered for all time. There is now a way for our sins to be forgiven, a path to Eternal Life in the Presence of a Holy God! So yeah, it’s foolish to sit here, hiding away! Why aren’t we out dancing in the streets! It’s like Easter has been hijacked!

Remember talking last week, about how the “proof” of the Easter Miracle is not so much based on the Empty Tomb, as it is in the Presence of the Risen Christ? That’s true. Encountering Jesus moves frightened believers out of their sanctuary, out of themselves, and out into the streets! Less than two months later in fact, after Low Sunday, on Pentecost, we find Peter standing up on the packed streets of Jerusalem, boldly declaring the Good News!

This is the same Peter, by-the-way, the cowardly betrayer—the one who, when confronted by a servant girl in the courtyard, couldn’t even summon the strength to say a kind word about Jesus! This is the same Peter who denied even knowing Jesus, on three sperate occasions. This is the man who walked away from the Empty Tomb shaking his head in confusion, wondering what all of this could mean. But now, this same Peter is facing down a mocking mob! Raising his voice in public! Demanding that they listen to what he has to say! …And suddenly, Easter isn’t being hijacked anymore!

You remember what happened, right? You know that when the believers were together, overwhelmed with fear, with the doors locked to outsiders, Jesus came and stood among them. In their terror, gather together, Jesus appears in their midst. And the very first thing He does is greet them, and then offer them peace. I wonder if that's a key to helping people see Jesus? You know, welcome them, and offer them peace? Jesus then offers a few signs to help deepen their faith. That might be helpful too. In this case, He shows them His hands and His side. Then the Lord greets them a second time, welcomes them again! Maybe write that down! Only then does He commission them for service in His Name: "as the Father has sent me, now I am sending you."

Look at that again. Jesus comes to the gathered community. Shares His peace. Teaches us about things of faith. Gives us even more peace. And then, sends us forth to spread the Gospel! And in order for us to do this, He breaths on Believers. He invites those who wish to follow, "those of faith", to receive the Holy Spirit. He empowers us with His own Spirit! And that's the moment when Disciples are filled with true Easter Joy!

I like that! It speaks to me! Jesus comes to sinners and doubters, to deniers and betrayers—to those of us who are less-than-perfect! That's Good News, isn't it? He comes to us right where we are, right into the places where we are hiding, and invites us into His Presence, into a personal relationship with Almighty God! The Lord Jesus steps into a group of rag-tag, hard-headed cowards, those who have disappointed Him so, who have misunderstood Him time-and-again!

He comes to those who have forsaken Him, and abandoned Him, and fled from Him, into the darkness! He returns to His betrayers and forms them into the church! And then empowers them, empowers us, to be His Body, here on earth right now! …If you were wondering "what's next", this is it! At least for those who are willing to follow!

I love what the Risen Lord says to His Disciples, don't you? Twice in fact. He even repeats it again, a week later, so that Thomas, the "doubter" can hear too. He says, "Peace be with you"! Fear not! Do not let your hearts be troubled! He says, "I'm back, and I want you to be at peace. I've got work for you to do, places for you to go, things I need you to say! I have a particular way in which I want you to live! And the only way for that to happen, is for you to not be paralyzed!" I know you are scared. But I'm here with you. Get over the fear and the doubts! I am offering you something different, something better. I'm asking you to be my witnesses in the world!

I remember reading about Clarence Jordan, a great preacher and man of faith. He started the Koinonia Farms in rural Georgia, back in the heat of the Civil Rights movement. Reverend Jordan invited both blacks and whites to join him in his communal Christian venture. And as you can imagine, was frequently harassed by the Klan for his efforts.

Jordan knew that it was one thing for him to endure the threats, but quite another to ask his young family to do so. And one day, when his little daughter came home from school, she was crying.

“What’s wrong,” he asked. “Daddy, some of the kids are mean. Bob Speck, when he sees me coming down the hall, comes up and knocks me down. He says ugly words to me too.” Jordan’s heart went out to his daughter. He said, “Honey, you’ve got long fingernails. Why don’t you scratch his eyes out?” She answered, “Well, I thought about that, but I heard you say in your sermon that Jesus said we’re supposed to love our enemy, so I thought I shouldn’t scratch his eyes out.” Jordan said, “Well, I’ll tell you what I’m going to do. Tomorrow, I’ll go to the school, and I’m going to ask Jesus to excuse me from being a Christian for about 15 minutes while I beat the daylights out of that Bob Speck.” “Daddy,” she said with her lip quivering, “You can’t do that.” “Why not,” he asked. “You can’t be excused from being a Christian, even for 15 minutes”!

Loose the Fear, says Jesus! Toss away the doubts and believe! Unlocked the doors! Step out into the world! Easter is over! Or should I say, Easter continues! And you have been chosen to witness to that, to teach, and pray, and preach—to minister to others in my Name! It might seem funny to you. And you may look foolish to the world! But the only thing that really matters, in the big picture of Eternity, is that you pick up your torch and carry my flame out into the darkness! And all of God’s people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Lord, it's true, we often sin against the Easter miracle! Your Glorious Resurrection was only a week ago, and yet, already, we find ourselves settling back into old routines, accommodating ourselves to the predictable, becoming slaves to habit. Please Resurrect us, Lord! Move us into New Life with you. Shake us up Lord. Change us. Transform us into who we need to be. Welcome us. Dash our doubts. Pour out upon us your peace. And then rebirth us into the new creations that you intend for us to be! Put us in places Lord, where we cannot get out of your way. Turn us into Post-Easter People, Post-Resurrection witnesses, people who glorify you in all that we say and do!

Lord, your followers are each so different. And yet, you have called us together as a single Body, in Jesus' Name—called us to be His hands and His feet and His heart in the world today. Some of us are like Thomas, Father, assailed with doubt. And some us are like Mary and Peter and John, who have times of fear, and even confusion. We tend to hide Lord. So please, Holy Spirit, come upon us! Stand in our midst, Jesus, and reveal yourself. Give us your Peace, Lord. Breathe on us your Breath of Life. Calm us, if that's what's needed. Or rattle our cage, if that's what's called for. But send us forth, out into the streets, as your witnesses to the Good News. But bless us Father. And bless our loved ones, particularly……..Raise us up, together, to life in your Name. Motivate us to boldly step outside of our churches, outside of our homes, and especially outside of ourselves, to help others journey towards you. Walk with us Lord, and cause us to walk with others, not at our pace but at theirs, glorify you with every single step we take! We ask these things in the Name of our Risen Savior, as we pray together now the very prayer that He has taught us saying, Our Father…