We Can Make A Difference

We have spent that last six Sundays during this season of Easter exploring the creation care themes of Christian simplicity, food, water, energy, transportation, and we conclude this week with Gratitude and Generosity. I know that some of you have appreciated our discussions here, others not so much. The state to the earth’s health has been discussed and debated for years. I would like to say that we cannot deny the facts but some certainly find all those climate change discussion a big hoax. Yet we cannot deny that God has blessed us with this wonderful earth and placed us in charge of taking care of it.

There is a true story of a man named Larry Walker of Los Angeles who had always wanted to fly. He joined the air force in hopes of becoming a pilot, but poor eyesight kept him from fulfilling his dream. So one day he got a bright idea. He rounded up forty-five weather balloons and began filling them with helium. He tied then to a lawn chair, which in turn was anchored to his Jeep. With the balloons in place, Larry strapped himself into the chair, along with some sandwiches, a six-pack of beer, and a pellet gun. The goal was to ascend to a certain height--say 30 feet--and then hover in place while he enjoyed happy hour. When he was ready to come down, he would use the pellet gun to pop the balloons.

Things didn't go exactly as planned. After his friends cut the rope, Larry took off as if he'd been shot out of a canon. He didn't stop at 30 feet, or 100 feet, or even 1000 feet. He leveled off at 16,000 feet, somewhere over the air space of the Los Angeles International Airport. He drifted along for fourteen
nerve-wracking hours. Finally he gathered up the courage to shoot a few
balloons and he slowly began to descend. When he hit the ground, the LAPD
were waiting for him. They led him away in handcuffs. A reporter asked him
why he had done it. Larry shrugged and said, "A man can't just sit around."

Nobody is going to give Larry Walker an award for common sense. But
he did receive an honorable mention in the Darwin Awards for doing something
so incredibly stupid that he almost got himself killed. Still, I think Larry Walker
is right about one thing: a person can't just sit around. We're made for more than
that. We're made for adventure, for challenge, even for a certain amount of risk-
-just stay away from the helium.

After the resurrection the disciples are just sitting around. They don't
necessarily want to be, but their world has collapsed. It's the evening of Easter
Sunday. The doors of the Upper Room are locked tight. The disciples are
huddling in fear. Simon Peter is over in the corner with his head hanging
low. Just a few days before on Thursday night he didn't have the guts to stand up
for Jesus. And now his friend is dead, and there's nothing he can do about it.

Suddenly the unthinkable happens: Jesus appears. The disciples think it's
a ghost. Jesus reassures them by showing them the scars in his hands and his
side. "Don't be afraid," he says, "I come bringing peace." And then he shares
some words they desperately need to hear: "If you forgive the sins of anyone,
they're gone for good." Jesus might as well have been looking straight at Peter
when he said that. "It's okay, Peter. Sometimes bad things happen. I'm not
going to let you sit around feeling sorry for yourself. You can't lead with your
head hanging down. You're my disciple. I want you to be the best disciple you
can be."
Fast forward 50 days. It's the Feast of Pentecost. On Pentecost in the Jewish calendar it is also known as the feast of weeks, when God gave the law to Moses on Mt Sinai. We will celebrate this feast this coming Sunday. Jews from all over the world are in Jerusalem. It's a little like July 4 and Thanksgiving rolled into one. Without warning, there's a sound like a gale-force wind. And then, like wildfire, the Holy Spirit spreads throughout the people. Somebody grabs a soapbox and stands above the crowd. It turns out to be none other than Simon Peter. He's left the Upper Room. He's holding his head high. And he's about to deliver the Pentecost sermon.

Right here Peter finds his mission in life. He's going to team up with God to change the world. And he's inviting others to join him. Peter proclaims: This is what the prophet Joel was talking about centuries ago. The Spirit of God is being poured out on some of the most unlikely folks: a Mesopotamian mill worker, a Phrygian fisherman, an Egyptian engraver. Everyone--young and old, men and women, butchers and bankers--everyone gets a little taste of the Spirit. Everyone is made for adventure and challenge and risk. Peter says the people “To quote an old friend of mine, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” And sure enough, that's exactly what happens. As soon as Pentecost is over, the crowds pack up and go home. And get this: they take the Holy Spirit with them. The good news of Jesus and his love spreads like wildfire all over the world.

That's the purpose of mission, after all, to spread the good news of Jesus as far as possible. That sounds like Pentecost to me. Sounds like adventure. We're made for a mission. We're made to team up with the Spirit of God to change the world. Rarely in the Bible does God interrupt someone's life
and ask him or her to do something easy. God doesn't ask Moses to take on a few more sheep, but to stand up to Pharaoh. God doesn't ask Sarah to go to an old-folks home, but to start getting a nursery ready and planning for a child. God is constantly giving people challenging assignments: to spend a night in a lion's den, to take a walk in a fiery furnace, to marry a pregnant girl who claims she's still a virgin.

You can guess people's initial response: fear. I can't do that. I can't go there. I can't say those things. I suspect that a lot of people in Bible-times simply said no to God. They think, God wouldn't ask me to do something that makes me uncomfortable, right? Think again. God is in the adventure business. So, here's the question: when was the last time God asked you to do something adventuresome and risky? Did you do it? Scientists have done studies showing that some people are genetically predisposed to be risk takers. No kidding. They have an abundance of a certain chemical in their brains. They require vast amounts of risk to keep from getting bored, things like bungee jumping and sky diving and karaoke singing. People on the opposite end of the spectrum are risk avoiders. They have low levels of this chemical. They break out in a cold sweat at the very thought of taking a risk. Now, of course, you can't control the amount of chemicals in brain. That's a matter of genetics. The goal is that, when God comes along and taps you on the shoulder, you might need to take a risk and go out of your comfort zone. For you that could mean just about anything: inviting a friend to church even though you're shy; going on a mission trip to El Salvador; finding a more meaningful job; dealing with a messy family addiction; speaking the truth in love to a friend who really needs to hear it; making a pledge to a capital campaign; blowing the whistle on
wrongdoing at work, and working to clean up the environment. And why would you do it--why would you take the risk? Because a person can't just sit around. You're made for a mission.

This past Thursday we celebrated Ascension Day. The day that Jesus left the disciples and went back to God. In this reading from John Chapter 17 we are reminded that Jesus does not leave his disciples nor us alone. He prays that God will bless them and that they will continue to do that work that Jesus was doing while he was here. He emphasizes that we are all in this together. That we are all one. Imagine someday being gathered around the great throne of God. You're called to give an account of your life and you're standing before the God Almighty. As you rehearse the stewardship of your life, you're anxious because you know that you could have done more. God looks at you and says, "Don't be anxious. You're not going to get into heaven because of what you've done, but because of what I've done for you. I'd just like to hear what you've been up to." And then he adds, "You were one of my Pentecost people. You lived with a spirit of adventure and challenge and risk. You stretched yourself with a sense of mission. You made the most of all you were given. And you changed the world." Amen