

I want to tell you about one of the most meaningful nights I’ve witnessed in the church. It happened a couple of years ago at my previous congregation. At that time, the economy was really bad. There were at least three dozen of our families that were really struggling financially or emotionally, and those were the ones we knew about. In the office we kept a running list of people who’d lost their jobs. There was so much heartache and pain. It felt like we should do something to reach out to those who were hurting. After discussing this at a staff meeting one day, we decided to invite them to dinner. It was to be a time where people could come together, be treated to a nice meal and some encouraging conversation. It seemed like the right thing to do. We sent out invitations to everyone we could think of. But as the night got closer I began to have lots of doubts. Would people even come? Would they feel judged, or like we felt sorry for them? Would they have anything in common besides an unemployment check? What could we possibly say that would help or give them hope?

As it turned out, we didn’t have to say anything. People came, more than 20 families total. We played a few games and served some really great food. But more than that, God came. God tends to show up at those kinds of things. I felt it when I heard laughter coming from folks who hadn’t had much of a reason to laugh lately. I sensed it when people sat up a little straighter as they named a dream they had for the future. I saw it when I looked across the room at a disabled veteran sitting next to a downsized accountant and saw tears in both of their eyes, but they weren’t tears of despair. They were tears of compassion. That night each of those men found someone to share their burdens with, and somehow both of them walked away feeling lighter.

In the months prior I had spent considerable time providing counseling and pastoral care for many of those families, but that night, being all together made all the difference. It said *you're not alone. We care, we're glad you're here, we want to walk with you.* But more than that, it said *God cares. God's glad you're here. God is walking with you.* It was an incredible testimony to the power of Christian community.

Our gospel story offers another such testimony, though you have to look a little harder to find it. We're used to hearing this story and thinking about 'doubting Thomas,' the poor skeptic who needed proof before he'd believe. But this story is also the community Jesus created after he appeared in the locked room that first Easter night. That community was affirmed a week later. It appeared in the fact that Thomas was there at all – he'd been on the outside; it would have been easy for him to feel excluded or judged or left behind. Yet there they are, all together, praying and telling stories and keeping hope alive. I've often wondered why Jesus waited that whole week to appear to Thomas – why he didn't just show up in a dream, or at the market, or along the road. Perhaps it's because some of the most faith-nurturing things happen when we're surrounded by other believers. It takes community.

Now, we can find community in all sorts of ways, from everything like Honors Choir to book club to yoga class to AI-Anon to a scout troop. But ultimately it takes more than being in the same place, at the same time to make a lasting difference. It takes relationship, the kind of relationship that comes when you peel back the layers and get below the surface with another person, and let them get to know you. You begin to care for each other in Christ-like ways. And when you gather with other believers, Jesus promises to be there too. Things happen when God's people come together.

This morning is Confirmation Sunday. 23 9th graders will make a promise to God that they'll continue the journey of faith their parents began for them in baptism. Back in the day when I was in confirmation, the church I attended used the 'independent study' method of teaching. Every Wednesday, I'd go to the church library. I'd put some headphones on, listen to an audiotape of a lecture and fill out some worksheets. When I'd worked through the unit, I'd meet one-on-one with the pastor so he could quiz me on what I'd learned. Believe me, it was almost as much fun as it sounds. I guess the theory went that we could each travel on that journey of faith at our own pace. But since I felt no connection to any of the other students in my class, or to the adults who supervised us, I learned that you can take a journey of faith alone, but you'll be mighty lonely.

Contrast that with today's confirmation program. Now, our students meet in mentor groups with couple of caring adults and other kids their own age. A couple of times a year they do a service project as a big group – one Wednesday evening in December our confirmation students rang bells at every Salvation Army red kettle in Rochester. It was a ton of fun. The fact that we were all out freezing that night made it feel like community. Our students also worshiped together here every Wednesday in Lent and Advent, praying and singing and lighting candles together. It created community. Every week they spent lots of time in their mentor groups talking about faith and life and the Bible and what God is up to in the world. Community. The hope is that along the way they get to know each other, care about each other, ask questions, grow. These kinds of relationships teach us patience, cooperation, compassion, forgiveness, love. They help us stay connected to Jesus, and to each other. For faith to become real it needs to have flesh and blood, to come alive in the form of another person. When you think about it, it's exactly what Thomas needed to

encounter Jesus while surrounded by other believers. *When you're a part of a Christian community, you know you have strength and companionship for the journey.*

Spending time with other Christians also helps enlarge our perspective. They can help us see where God is at times when we can't make it alone. A friend of mine credits her Bible study with helping her notice ways God has been present in hard times in her life. She says that before she started coming to church regularly, she would have written those things off as freaky coincidences. But now she names them as God at work – and she pays more attention because she doesn't want to miss a sign that God is with her. *When you're a part of a Christian community, you know Jesus is always with you.*

But most of all, when you're part of a Christian community, it helps you remember who and whose you are. It's no coincidence that Thomas' reaction to Jesus was not apology, or amazement, but a profession of faith. Thomas may have felt alone in his grief and fear, but as soon as he felt Jesus' presence he was reminded that he was a part of something bigger than himself. He was one of God's children. He was a follower of the Savior. Friends, so are we. Every time we gather at this table we hear Christ's words: this is for you. Every time we witness a baptism we remember: you have been marked with the cross of Christ forever. When we confess our sins God who is faithful will forgive us, give us a fresh start, and send us on our way anew. You may know this in the back of your head somewhere, but when you experience it surrounded by others who feel it to, it becomes real and it is powerful.

Friends, I don't know where you're finding community these days. But I hope you'll remember this: your life is so much richer when you are surrounded by God's people. Hurting people find hope. Young people find encouragement. Jesus shows up. And that lifelong faith journey you're on? Well, I can promise it's always better together. Amen.