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Epiphany 6 – February 13, 2022

“The Risen Church”

Read: 1 Cor. 15: 12; 16 - 22/ Memorize 1 Cor. 15: 20

Adapted from a sermon by John Sumwalt

It was a little past 10 AM on a Sunday morning in June. A young couple, a reporter from the Gazette and his wife, had stopped at an old country church. The church appeared to be abandoned. A single car, a 1969 sedan was parked off to the side of the lane, under an oak tree, next to the cemetery

The couple got out of their car. She had come to do some tombstone rubbings and photograph the church. He had trailed along for the ride. Sunday was his day off, a respite from telephones, computers and deadlines, and a splendid day to spend with his beautiful wife.

They wandered leisurely around the cemetery, soaking up the sun; enjoying the summery sights and sounds of the woods around the churchyard. They had stopped to examine an old Civil War stone. They were suddenly startled by a booming voice that seemed to be coming from inside the church. It proclaimed boldly: “This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

There was a brief pause and the voice broke into song: “Oh for a thousand tongues to sing my great redeemer’s praise, the glories of my God and King, the triumphs of His grace.”

He was just beginning the last of several verses as the reporter and his wife entered the church and took a seat in a rickety pew in the back. He was standing behind the pulpit, a white haired, thin-faced old man.

His eyes were fixed on a tattered hymnal which he held up near his nose with both hands and from which he was singing with all of his might. The aged pew creaked; then cracked as they sat down. The old man stopped singing in mid verse, looked out

over the top of his hymnal, smiled a warm, welcoming smile, and invited them to turn to hymn number one, verse five.

He had caught them off guard. After they reached for the hymnal, there was no turning back. They stood up and joined him in singing the rest of the hymn. The familiar tune and words took them back to the days of their youth. They remembered sitting in church with their families on warm summer mornings, just like this one.

When the hymn ended, they heard the man intone, "Please be seated." They sat transfixed as he led them through the rest of the service: the prayers, scripture readings, sermon, offering, closing hymn and benediction. There were moments in the service when they forgot there were just the three of them alone in an abandoned shell of a church building. It had cracked windows and watermarks on the walls, where the rain had run down from the holes in the roof, but still they were worshipping.

The soaring voice of the preacher lifted them out of themselves as it rose and fell from shout to whisper. It seemed at times, that every pew was actually full as they must have been on Sundays in the past, when the little church was filled with a living congregation from the surrounding the area.

After the benediction the old preacher came down the aisle and waited by the door, as if he were going to greet a long line of people. He asked their names as he shook their hands. They could tell he was excited about their being there. He talked to them for a long time, holding them longer than they wanted to stay.

They finally managed to break away, thanked him for the service. They were turning to go to their car when it occurred to the reporter that this would make a marvelous human interest story for his paper. He turned back, told the old preacher that he was a reporter for the County Gazette, and asked if he would be willing to tell him something about his work for the church. The preacher said he would be glad to talk to him sometime, but not on Sunday. "Sunday is set aside for God," he said, "could you come back tomorrow?" They agreed upon a time.

The next day, the reporter at the appointed hour, the '69 Ford and the preacher were nowhere to be seen. The reporter waited for over half an hour, and when he still didn't come, he drove into the village to inquire about him. He was told at the gas station that the old preacher had become ill during the night and had been taken by ambulance to the hospital in the city.

When the reporter described the strange service he and his wife had attended the day before, the gas station attendant laughed and said, “Reverend Firby’s been doing that for years. Once in a while, one or two of the old widows will make it out for a service, but mostly, he just preaches to empty pews.”

The reporter drove back and went straight to the hospital. When he asked for Reverend Firby at the front desk, he was asked to wait in the lobby. Someone would come out to talk to him. In about ten minutes, a man wearing a clerical collar came out and introduced himself as the hospital chaplain. He asked the young man if he was related to Rev. Firby? The reporter explained about their encounter and the appointment to meet so that he could write a news article about the pastor and his ministry.

The chaplain explained that this was a bit delicate. Because the reporter was not a relative, he was not entitled to any information about Rev. Firby. However, understanding the circumstances, he explained that the Reverend had died early that morning.

He went on to explain that he didn’t really know much about him, but gave him the number of the funeral home that was handling the arrangements. The reporter contacted the funeral home and found out when the service for Rev. Firby would be and made it a point to attend.

When he arrived for the service he was surprised that there weren’t more people at the old preacher’s funeral. The big church on the square was nearly empty, except for a few relatives from out of town and the two old widows from the village. Those who were there were glad to talk to him about Rev. Firby’s life, about all the people who had once worshiped in the old country church.

When he asked them why Rev. Firby held services there long after people stopped coming, one of the old widows said, “Rev. Firby used to say ‘If no one else is here, God is here, and God hears my prayers for all of God’s people.’” “And then,” she said, “Rev. Firby would always add ‘I felt I heard God say to stay, so I stayed.’”

The next day the reporter’s story about the old preacher who preached to empty pews appeared on the front page of the County Gazette. On the back page of that same edition, in the classified column, there was a brief notice:

“Worship services will be held as usual at 10:30AM at Zion Community Church on Sunday. Everyone is welcome.”

It was a small county and everyone got the Gazette so they had the opportunity to read the story and found the notice on the back page. They liked the story, but they were intrigued by the notice. That was news. Who was going to lead that service now that the old preacher was dead?

It stirred up a lot of conversation about who it might be, but everybody who was asked said, “No, it wasn’t them.” The odds on favorite for who was going to lead the service was one of the widows, but that didn’t seem likely. In fact, they both denied knowing anything about it at all.

Come Sunday at 10:15 the old church building was full. Every spot, in every pew, was taken. Most everyone from the village and the countryside for several miles around was there. A couple of carloads of former residents had even come in from the city because they wondered what was happening at their church.

At precisely 10:30, the side door opened, and the reporter stepped up onto the platform and stood behind the pulpit. He opened the Bible to Psalm 118 and read: “This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.” Then he looked out over the congregation and said, “Let the church say, ‘Amen!’”

They all said it, and then he invited them to turn to hymn number one, “Oh For a Thousand Tongues to Sing.” One of the women went to the piano and began to play. It was badly out of tune from years of disuse, but no one seemed to mind.

They rose as one and sang at the tops of their voices, and as they sang it seemed to the reporter that he had never felt more alive in all of his life. He smiled to himself and thought about the old preacher who stood where he now stood and prayed for this, Sunday after Sunday – and then he joined with the congregation in singing the final verse:

“He speaks and listening to His voice, new life the dead receive; the mournful broken hearts rejoice, the humble poor believe.”

And the Risen church joined in worship, once again.

Here’s your question: How is God calling you to bring life to others?