“After Easter, Now What?”

Last week, the consultant we’ve hired to help us with our Dare to Dream for Tomorrow campaign asked me why I came to Faith Des Peres. It had been a long time since I’d told my story, about why I believed God was calling me to serve here, to serve all of you. It had been a long time since I’d thought about those early days. We’ve covered a lot of terrain in 14 years, my friends. Those of you who were here know that. For those of you who weren’t, it’s hard to imagine.

I usually sum up it for people by saying, “Well, let me put it this way. When I came to Faith Des Peres, Terry and I doubled the size of the Sunday School . . . and we only had 2 kids back then.” Now, one of the biggest challenges I’m facing is finding a nursery worker because not having one is just not an option. The nursery is a busy place.

When I told the consultant that he asked, “Why did you come?” “I was 29 years old.” “So you didn’t know any better?” “I had spent my first call building something from scratch,” I told him. “And I figured if I could do that, I could rebuild something. Except no one told me that rebuilding is much harder work.”

Just the other day, Terry and I were talking about a couple other churches in the presbytery – similar to FDP – that were looking for pastors at the same time you were. One of them, Tyler Place, closed a year ago. The other one, Gibson Heights, has about 4-5 people in worship. And we wondered, what makes FDP the exception. Why have we survived when others have not? And not only survived, but flourished! Because let’s be honest, there’s life here. There’s faithful life here. There are people living the Easter story. There are people practicing resurrection.

So what made FDP the exception? In the face of a pretty dark situation, how did you dare to dream of hope?
Two men were walking the road to Emmaus. In some moments they may have spoken; in others they shared silence. They whispered the mourning of dreams lost. Jesus of Nazareth, whose wonders and works they had witnessed, was dead. He was the very embodiment of their hope, the center of their dreams, and it was all gone now.

A man joined them on their journey aware of their deep sadness. "What are you discussing as you walk along?" he questions them. Are you mad? Have you not heard what has occurred in Jerusalem? The men proceeded to pour out the grief of their hearts and reminisce of miracles once wrought. Healings and renewal, hope born again in people's lives that have now come to naught. The miracle worker, the messiah is dead. And on top of that, his body is missing from his tomb! What good was it for them to dream again? What good was it for them to hope? Who would redeem Israel? Where is their future?!

“We had hoped that he would be the one to save Israel,” Cleopas said. *We had hoped.*

So much is said in those three words, because they speak of a future that is not to be, a dream that created energy and enthusiasm but did not materialize. Those three words speak of a future that is closed off, now irrelevant, dead. And there are few things more tragic than a dead future. Once challenged to write a short-story in six words, Ernest Hemingway supposedly replied by penning on a napkin: “For Sale: Baby shoes, never used.”

“But we had hoped ...”

When Cleopas and his companion were that far along the Emmaus road of shattered dreams, “their eyes were kept from recognizing” the presence of God in their midst. They had lost sight of faith and hope. They were disabled; spiritually disabled; and that disability kept them from seeing the awesome possibilities that were standing right in front of them.

They’d heard the women’s tale; they’d gone to the tomb themselves; they saw it was empty; they’d heard Jesus tell them what would happen to him; but they still didn’t believe the resurrection.

When Terry became the Stated Clerk of the Presbytery, there were 24,000 plus Presbyterians in Giddings-Lovejoy Presbytery, there are now just over 15,000.
There were 104 churches in 2001. There are now 82. I’ve sat at some of those tables when churches are facing closure. They are stressful and heart breaking. No one wants to close. No one wants to die.

But sometimes I can’t help but think to myself, “Are we people of the resurrection or not?” I’ve seen too many churches cling to long dead ideas and ideals instead of embracing new ones. I’ve seen too many churches decide their mission is to play it safe rather than take some risks; and I’ve seen too many churches choose to stay with what they know in their hearts is dead, rather than venturing out on a new path.

They live as though Good Friday was the last word. Not all of them; but many of them.

After Jesus calls Cleopas and his companion foolish for being slow of heart to believe, Jesus eventually opened Cleopas’ eyes, and in doing so Cleopas was shown a new way to walk an old path. Instead of disappointment and anger, Cleopas and his travel companion embraced the awesome new life that was awaiting them. Through it all, the two on the Road to Emmaus were shown how God was at work in the complexity of their daily lives — and no matter what the circumstances, they had nothing to fear and everything to embrace.

Friends, at a certain point in time, a church is either willing to walk a new path, take that leap of faith, and embrace the new life that awaits them, or they aren’t. At a certain point in time the congregation that survives catches that glimmer of God in their midst, and slowly begins to open their eyes to the possibilities that are in front of them. At a certain point in time, the congregation that survives starts to believe that maybe the resurrection really is real, and it’s time to stop clinging to long dead ideas and ideals and embrace something new; it’s time to start dreaming rather than playing it safe; and it’s time to stop being afraid of death.

I remember interviewing for this call, and after some nice pleasantries and exchanges, the interview took a turn and the conversation got real. I don’t know how it happened, I can’t remember the specifics, but I’ll never forget Jim Case saying, “If we don’t do something, we’ll close our doors in 10 years.” That simple statement spoke volumes to me. Because it told me that while the church didn’t
want to die, it sure wasn’t going to cling to those things that prevented it from living.

And that, my friends, is what makes you the exception.

What saves a church is what saves us – good old fashioned faith – believing the Easter story – acting like it’s true -- recognizing the presence of God in our midst – and then turning around and running toward Jerusalem instead of away from it.

I’ve had so many opportunities in the past month or so to reflect on how much you have dared to dream over the years. There have been so many celebrations, so many examples of you being Easter people.

Some of them are obvious, like a successful Go Sunday and a beautiful Easter service.

But some of them are smaller, less obvious. A couple weeks ago Mathew Willock came up to after church while everyone was eating and drinking in the Gathering Space, and asked me, “Pastor Annie, will you ask Tommy and Henry if they’ll have a paper airplane contest off the balcony with me?” I thought that was so cute, and just so symbolic of the relationships that are formed here across ages and generations.

When I saw Charlotte’s shoes left in the sanctuary on Maundy Thursday, casually tossed aside . . . I thought about how at home she feels here – and she’s not the only little one who feels that way.

When I accepted the Champions for Children award from SSDN on your behalf; looked out at the 450 people gathered here for Ellen Marting Moore’s memorial service; listened to the storytellers last Thursday night; and welcomed the ladies into my home yesterday for tea; it is obvious to me why you are the exception – because in some of your darker days you had faith and dared to dream if hope.

I am now asking you to dream again. I’m asking you to join Terry and I, and to join the Session and Dare to Dream for today and tomorrow campaign committees to make a pledge to support the vital, important ministry God has called this church to do. And I’m asking you to stretch with that pledge, as Terry and I have done and many of the Session members and Dare to Dream for Today and Tomorrow
campaign committee members have done, to live as Easter people with a mindset of abundance, not scarcity, because with God all things are possible.

As we collectively look to the future and wonder what it all may bring, we can listen to the story of Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus. Because just as God made their hearts burn within them back then, God continues to do the same for us here and now.

Amen.

Sources:

http://day1.org/5727-brandon_harris_new_pathways_fte_series_1

www.workingpreacher.org