

**New Life - New Beginnings**  
**Sermon by Kathy Hartzell**  
**Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio**  
**Second Sunday of Easter Season, April 11, 2021**

As I mentioned a few minutes ago, I have been given this opportunity to share with you a brief look into the ministry which I am currently working. Through the field education course at the seminary, I was placed as a chaplain intern at the Allegheny county jail in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The chaplaincy program is run by the Foundation of Hope, an inter-faith non-profit organization with the mission “to empower incarcerated and released individuals to restore their relationship with their God, rebuild their lives, and reconcile with their communities.”<sup>1</sup> I have been in this position since September of 2020. Yes, all through the pandemic. Full disclosure, for this sermon, some church members will be offering feedback and a few weeks from now my field education class will watch this recording and provide feedback, as well.

Now, there is so much to tell you about the work at the jail but time is limited so I think it will help you understand my experiences as I consider them through the lens of the readings for today. Today is the second Sunday of the Easter season. Easter Sunday has now passed and we wait in the season, fifty

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.foundationofhope.org/about/>

days, waiting for the Holy Spirit to empower us on Pentecost Sunday. But Resurrection Sunday isn't just a day, Easter isn't just a season. In the fullest sense, Easter is a new way of life. Paul tells us in Romans 6:4 that "Just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life."<sup>2</sup>

As a chaplain at the jail, my interactions with incarcerated individuals have led me to believe that "a new life" is much more than a concept. A new life, a new beginning, another chance is something hoped for and needed by many. Like the disciples in the Gospel reading, incarcerated people are plagued by fear and doubt. They are behind locked doors, waiting for something to happen and knowing whatever will happen, they are not, at this time, in control. They must put their faith in others. Unfortunately, they know all too well that humans are flawed, selfish, and untrustworthy. Just as the author of 1John tells us, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps to better understand their vulnerability, we can look at the same vulnerability and imperfection of the disciples. Consider looking back a few days before they are gathered in the room behind locked doors. They were with Jesus

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<sup>2</sup> The Christian Year, Season of Easter,  
<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/worship/christianyear/season-easter/>

<sup>3</sup> 1John 1:8 NRSV

when he was arrested but they choose to run away, to deny knowing him. Just hours before, this moment, Mary Magdalene had proclaimed, "I have seen the Lord,"<sup>4</sup> and she told them what he had said to her. But here they were hiding behind locked doors; afraid of being the next to be arrested, executed.

I know that this comparison is not necessarily equal but I learned something about the jail that I never considered and now see as very important to better understand and work with this group of people. The jail is different from prison in that many people incarcerated in the jail have not yet been convicted of a crime. They can be there for months after being arrested, waiting for a hearing. They live, day to day, with great uncertainty and often no communication. The pandemic has only exasperated the situation. It has caused the system to slow down to a snail's pace, and because there are many people in close living quarters, they have been kept on a twenty-three-hour lock down, quarantined for over a year. They have very limited interaction with others. The frustration, tension, and desperation are high. These feelings lead to depression and despair. Many look to the chaplain for help in coping.

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<sup>4</sup> John 20:18 NRSV

The chaplain role is to provide spiritual and emotional support and practical help to inmates of all faiths. One primary responsibility is to respond to requests to visit individuals. The request may come directly from the incarcerated person or it may come from a staff member of the jail, or a family member. I go out on these visits very much empowered by the same breath of Jesus, the power of the Holy Spirit, as described in John 20:22. I am a disciple, representing the presence of God, seeking to bring the peace which Jesus offers the disciples when he first enters the room.

Some of you may be thinking this sounds difficult, a little scary, and the truth is from time to time it can be scary, it can be very difficult. I find myself getting on the elevator and praying for strength, courage, patience and wisdom. There are moments, when I realize I am praying or talking out loud. Knowing there are cameras everywhere you go, wearing a mask has saved me from the embarrassment of being caught talking to myself but really, I am talking with God. I remind myself to make sure I know God is always present. I believe God is powerfully present in the jail and I hear the words that the author of the first letter of John so firmly proclaim. I believe what he has heard, what he has seen, what he has touched concerning the word of life. I want to share the promise of forgiveness, the wholeness of a "new life."

When I meet with an individual, I try to be completely in that moment, listening closely to what they are saying, letting them tell their story, their concerns, I am amazed when I sense an opening, a prompt by the Holy Spirit, to bring their attention to God. I wish I could tell you it happens more often than not, but I have witnessed the presence and seen a change of behavior, a calming, happen. I have seen God lift their spirit and give them comfort. I have faith that God continues to work on those that are seeking him long after I have left them.

There is another similarity of my work with the scripture to consider; the need for evidence. The disciples did not fully believe Mary Magdalene. They did not come around until they had seen Jesus, seen his wounds. Thomas not only needed to see this but needed to touch the wounds, put his finger in Jesus' side. So too, evidence or lack of is pertinent to the outcome of an inmate's incarceration. So many things in our lives depend upon physical evidence and how we interpret the evidence often dictates how we respond to each other. As a chaplain intern, I am learning to hold back any judgement, learning to look beyond the circumstance and see the person before me as a valued child of God and I am grateful for the words of Christ that reassure me "I am blessed though I have not seen and still come to believe." On the days when the presence of God has been so strong and I see the light of Christ in the face of another, even when

the conversations have been hard and the pain and suffering is very real; at the end of the day, I find myself walking to my car and saying to myself, what someone might consider very strange or insincere, "Thank you God, it was a good day to be in the jail."

This work creates a sense of unity with people of different faiths, different backgrounds. They are as psalm 133 describes, kindred living in unity. For the incarcerated and those released, this is their hope, to find unity and peace in their life, community, in society. This is the work of the chaplain at the jail to help them in this effort, let them know they have value, support them, encourage them to preserve in their faith so they will know life forevermore. If we take seriously the gift of the power of the Holy Spirit, like the disciples, we too are in the business of forgiveness, of reconciling humanity with God and each other. Letting God work through us, we can set people free from fear and bring joy, a new beginning, a refreshed and new life in Christ. Amen.