‘Raising a Church’

Ephesians 1:15-23

May 17, 2020

North UMC

In 2018, the Evangelical Church in Central Germany took Jesus’ words literally when he said: ‘The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.’ That year, they converted their power system over to wind. Seven wind turbines proved all the energy for their parish—all 3,000 parishes. The wind turbines produce 33 million kilowatt hours annually. And that is not all. This 700,000 member denomination is in the process of expanding their use of renewable energy to encompass their diaconal institutions which will be powered by another 13 to 16 wind turbines. The entire denomination will be powered by wind. They began the conversion project in 2011, inspired by their own financial practices. For many years, the church has leased its large land holdings to wind farms which operate 130 wind turbines in the region.

Think of the risen Christ as a wind turbine that powers a church. His resurrection is the alternative energy source that animates the church. The presence of the Spirit of the risen Christ brings us together, inspires us with the hope of the resurrection, and animates us with the power of the resurrection.

Without the presence of the Spirit of the risen Christ, the church is just another human organization. Too often we see it and treat it like it is just another human organization fueled by our own power and desires. Without the presence of the risen Christ the Church is an empty shell, a dead institution, a dysfunctional family, a historic landmark—a building that got the power cut off. It is only the presence of the risen Christ that makes us the Church.

Ephesians describes the church as the resurrected body of Christ. The risen Jesus is ‘the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.’ We are very familiar with this metaphor but consider this: The Church is the *resurrected* body of Christ. We believe in the ‘resurrection of the body’, so says the creeds, and that line is in the third part of the creeds that deal with the Holy Spirit and the Church. When we talk about Jesus being raised from the dead, the embodied dimension of the risen Christ is the Church. His resurrection is embodied in us—in our relationships within the fellowship of the Church and in our witness to the world.

The risen Christ is the hope and power of the Church. Ephesians is a prayer for the Church to realize this resurrection hope and power: I pray that ‘you may know what is the hope to which God has called you….and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe.’ In these troubled times, my prayer is that this congregation will come to know the hope and power of the resurrection inside and out. The Spirit of the risen Christ is the turbine that generates our life and our work at God’s resurrection people. The Spirit of the risen Christ is blowing within the Church and through the Church.

The risen Christ is the hope and power of the Church’s fellowship. Like the wind turbines that provide electricity for the sanctuaries and buildings, the Holy Spirit energies the Church’s internal relationships.

The Spirit of the risen Christ animates our unity and care for one another so that the Church survives the pressures that come from outside. There are forces in our culture that attempt to pit us against one another from racial divisions to political disagreements. If we do not rely on the Spirit of the risen Christ to unite us, these ways of identifying ourselves will tear us apart. There are forces in our culture that attempt to isolate us from one another. Social media creates a false sense of community and the excessive individualism of our culture combine to create a loneliness that the Spirit of the risen Christ overcomes by drawing us together.

The risen Christ fuels the renewal of the Church. If there is any hope for the Church it is in the presence of the risen Christ. If any congregation can grow and thrive with integrity it is the result of the resurrection giving them new life. If there is any hope for our denomination it is that the Spirit of the risen Christ is using our current moment of crisis to lead us in new directions.

In other words, what sustains and renews the Church is not something we do. It is the resurrection work of the Spirit. The Church’s life does not come from our money or our hard work. The Church’s future does not come from preserving its institutions and polity. All those things are good and God uses them as channels for the Spirit to work, but let us not confuse the means with the source of life.

When we fixate on those things, when we worry and argue about those things, when we seek to protect those things, when we prioritize those things over the ministry—then we are treating the Church as if it was only a human organization. Ironically, our attempts to save the Church kill the Church. The Church becomes nothing more than a corpse.

When the building collapses and the institutions goes bankrupt, the Church goes on as long as there is a gathering of people who are united in their common faith in the risen Christ.

For over two hundred years, the Church in Japan survived in spite of being driven underground and cut off from the worldwide Church. Christianity was taken to Japan in the mid-1500s by Francis Xavier and grew under the leadership of Jesuit priest Alessandro Valignano. By the end of the century, there were over 300,000 believers, priests and a seminary. But beginning in the 17th century, persecution broke out. On one occasion at Yedo, 70 Japanese believers were crucified upside down at low tide and left to drown. By 1630, apostasies were widespread and those who continued to believe in Christ were driven into hiding.

Over 200 years later, a change in foreign affairs allows for missionaries to enter the country. These underground churches were discovered by accident in Nagasaki. One day, a missionary priest was approached by some women and began asking him questions that seem to relate to the Virgin Mary. What he discovered is that all those years they had maintained their faith in secrecy and isolation. Without Bibles or missals, without priests or communications with churches in other lands, they had continued to conduct worship services. A crucifix was often contained in a secret panel on the backside of a Buddhist statue and worship was usually led by two men, one who led prayers and the other who conducted baptisms.

The Church survived not because they had altars and cathedrals, bishops and Bibles, but because the Spirit of the risen Christ abided in them and among them.

The risen Christ is the hope and power of the Church’s witness to the world. Like the wind turbines that provide electricity for the entire community, the Holy Spirit’s hope blows through the Church to empower its external relationships.

Resurrection defines our mission. We are agents of God’s life-giving power. We are servants of God’s life-liberating power. Through our acts of mercy and our witness for justice, we are to be channels of resurrection to a world that is dominated by the forces of death. The Church is like a windmill. The Spirit moves through us so that we can bring the resurrection hope to the world.

The risen Christ works beyond the walls of the Church to bring this hope for the fullness of life. The role of the Church is to bear witness to this resurrection work. The Church proclaims resurrection and helps others see that these life-giving movements are the work of God in Christ. The Church comes along side these efforts, in whatever forms they present themselves and through whomever God chooses, and blesses them and partners with them in giving life to all. The Church is like a pennant blowing indicating which way the Spirit is blowing in the world.

This hope stands in opposition to the forces of death. Those forces are intimate, in our psyches and souls, and they are vast, in our economic systems and political polices. They are what Ephesians called ‘the rule and authority and power and dominion’. Interestingly, this phrase copies the style of speeches that praised the emperors. Yet, the letter reminds us that the risen Christ is greater than these forces and puts them to good use or puts them in their place when they are misused. The Church pledges its loyalty to this higher authority, this resurrected Lord. And in so doing, the Church refuses to participate in those forces of evil and injustice. The Church refuses to be silent in the face of oppression.

But when the Church makes a pact with unjust forces, when the Church is silent in the face of oppression, when the Church legitimizes violence and discrimination with its religious words and symbols—then the Church has been reduced to a human organization devoid of the Spirit of the risen Christ. The Church has become a zombie.

The Church is driven by an alternative power source, the risen Christ.

The presence of the risen Christ empowers us to do the long, hard work of offering this resurrection hope. These are weary days. The uncertainty of the future exhausts us. It remains to be seen what life in the Church and its witness will be like after this pandemic subsides. If we put our trust in the risen Christ, the Church will be alright. If we focus our sole attention on the risen Christ, then the Church will be renewed in its fellowship and its witness, refined for a greater work and restored with deeper integrity. Right now, there is a lot of planning and fretting about what congregations should do next in these shifting times. But the most important thing for us to focus on is the source of our life and witness: the risen Christ. When we focus on the risen Christ we can find our peace and renewal in the midst of these exhausting times.

Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church in Cincinnati was a windmill and a pennant of the risen Christ after the Civil War. The South was devastated and there were three million newly freed African Americans. In August 1866 the Freedman’s Aid and Southern Education Society was formed in that church on behalf of the northern denomination to send teams of teachers and missionaries to the South to aid the former slaves. Within two years, they had organized 59 schools across the South, most were met with fierce opposition. They expanded their work to sponsor orphan homes, boarding schools, and colleges and extended their work even further to include immigrants. Among those efforts came Central Tennessee College, Clark University and Claflin University. Their work was a witness to the hope and power of the resurrection.

We are called to do the same in our generation. Let us recenter the Church in the power and hope of the risen Christ. Let us remember that our fellowship is sustained by his presence and let us recommit to be an instrument and sign of the risen Christ.