

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“A Turn of Events”
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Luke 24
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In May another one of those reports came out. I’m sure you’ve heard a number of them by now. The headlines catch my attention every time. **“Nones on the Rise.”**

I don’t know about you, but every time I hear that headline I can’t help but picture a large crowd of women in black and white habits marching angrily on some righteous crusade. It’s not that I went to Catholic schools. I didn’t, but I’ve heard the old stories and this sounds like a group you don’t want to mess with.

Of course, that’s not what this headline means. It’s referring to that little box on a survey next to “NONE,” as in what religion do you affiliate with? None.

“None’s on the Rise.” The other headline that always goes with it is, **“Millennials Leaving the Church in Drove.”** That’s the gist of the latest Pew Research Center’s study that came out last spring. It’s disheartening to say the least.¹

Of course, we all know stories of people leaving the church in young adulthood, but finding their way back later on. For some of you, that’s your story. And thanks be to God, you found your way back. But the Pew Research Center is now telling us that, that is the exception to the rule. Most generations become less religiously affiliated as time goes on.

In fact, here’s a few of the numbers just incase you missed it:

35% of Adult millennials, 35% those between the ages of 19-34... that Jessi’s age, Hannah’s age... and almost Rachel Missey on one end and me on the other... 35 % of millennials are no longer religiously affiliated in any way.... and the number is growing. In the US 59%, of young people ages 18-29 with a Christian background have dropped out of church. That’s almost 3 out of every 5 kids that grow up in the church.

They are now more disconnected from faith than members of Generation X was at the same point in their lives, and twice as disconnected as baby boomers were as young adults. In fact it’s estimated that 8 million young adults ***will leave the church*** before their 30th birthday.² These are the trends, and they’re not new. They are just growing.

By now you’re probably thinking, “Well, this is the feel good sermon of the year, isn’t it?” Maybe not, but it’s something we need to pay attention to.

¹ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/12/millennials-increasingly-are-driving-growth-of-nones/>

² Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, xii.

It is the reason the vast majority of churches are anxious, struggling, and in decline. They say that if you're just maintaining your numbers, you're significantly beating the odds. It's the reason clergy are stressed out and burned out. They're supposed to come up with the answers, right?

But we're all fighting an uphill battle, swimming against a seemingly unstoppable tsunami. And after awhile you just might start to feel like throwing in the towel. The gig is up with this whole church thing. Maybe it's time to go home.

We are not the first to feel that way or to go down this road. It's the same road that Cleopas and unnamed disciple #2 walked late that Passover Weekend.

You and I know how the story goes, but just imagine being in their shoes in that moment.³ For centuries God's people had been waiting for a Messiah to come and provide them a new hope and a future. And in the last few years, they were among the folks that started to believe that it was finally happening. The messiah had come. And then just a week earlier they welcomed Jesus with palm branches into the ancient city of David. Hopes and expectations were high.

But then as the week went on, there was a dark turn of events. They watched as their promised future was nailed to the cross. It was over. They knew what they hoped would happen when they believed in Jesus. And then they saw what actually happened just three days earlier

Well, if that wasn't confusing enough, now some rumors have started to spread that a few women went to the tomb and encountered angels and were saying that Jesus' isn't dead.

So now they're on their way home, walking this road with a strange mixture of fear and uncertainty... confusion and possibility. They were struggling to understand what was going on and how to respond.

It's the same road the church is on these days. Historians and sociologists have been trying to make sense of what's happening. No one has the answers or fully understands where we're going. But one thing they do all agree on: We find ourselves among massive shifts and change in our religious landscapes.

The church no longer controls the culture and calendar.
We are no longer the dominant voice in public policy.

The rules have changed in the American religious landscape, and all of us in it... Protestant, Catholic, Mainline, Evangelical... all of us are traveling blind.

³ Inspired by Matt Cook's address at the CBF General Assembly, June 2015.
<http://www.cbf.net/dallas2015/>

But, that seems to be par for the course on this road. For some mystical reason, the disciples on the road don't recognize Jesus when he walks up to them. Even when Jesus spends all afternoon talking to them about himself.

The scriptures don't really explain why this is, They just tell us that this is what happens. We tend to walk this road blind. Maybe it's their rationalism that blinds them. Maybe it's their fear. Maybe it's anxiety.

I have a hunch it had to do with a lack of sacred imagination. They had been looking for an ordinary leader, *but what God was offering them was the resurrected Christ*. No wonder they couldn't spot him.

They don't realize who they have encountered on this road, but Jesus stays with them anyway. That's just like him, isn't it?

He listens to their questions... and he shares his thoughts with them.

He opens up the scripture to them and stays with them down the road of their uncertainty... until finally they open their home to him, and break bread with him... and there is another shocking turn of events.

It's amazing the surprises you'll find when you practice hospitality to strangers... and break bread with them. The road that felt like a dead end, might just be the road to resurrection.

There's been so much fear... and so much talk about the death of the church you'd almost think we'd never heard what Jesus taught. **"Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it can only be a single seed. But if it dies, it bears much fruit."** (John 12:24).

Death and resurrection, that's always been Jesus' way. That's the pattern to deeper fuller life. As one writer puts it, **"Death is something empires worry about, not something gardeners worry about. It's certainly not something resurrection people worry about."**⁴

G K Chesterton once said, **"Christendom has had a series of revolutions, and in each one them Christianity has died. Christianity has died many times and risen again; for it had a God who knew the way out of the grave."**⁵

So please hear this:

Jesus is no less present on this road of fear and uncertainty,
confusion and possibility than he was 2,000 years ago.

Jesus is no less present in our lives and in our church
than he was a generation ago...

⁴ Evans, *Searching For Sunday*, 225.

⁵ Quoted in Evans, 225.

The end of Christendom in America is not the end of the Kingdom of God.

Yes, some things in the church are going through a death. But that's a good thing. Some things need to die, in order for new things to be born.

The church isn't going to be what it has been. What it is becoming over the next 50-100 years, no one yet knows. But here is what we do know: The church isn't disappearing now or in the future because *it is one of the primary ways God has chosen to be present in our world...*

Which is to say, then, that despite the headlines and despite our uncertainty about what is around the bend: ***The church desperately matters in each new generation.***

So, for the next month we're going to be exploring why that is. Why does the church matter so much? And we're going to be asking why we do some of what we do... as a way of igniting our sacred imaginations

Rather than be anxious about the death of the church, I want to invite us to rediscover why the church rises again and again in every generation, and in every part of the world. What is there in the church, in this body that we are part of, that matters so much?

But in order to do that, I think it's important to begin from a posture of humility... a posture the church historically hasn't taken to too well. We need to begin by being honest about the fact that there is a reason we are going through a death. So much of what we've done in the name of Jesus would make him turn over in the grave... which might be why he didn't stay in one.

Not only have we been blind to Jesus with us on the road, we've beat him up and left him for dead more than once in our history. The church universal has lied, damaged, excluded, and been more like the gates of hell than the gates to the Kingdom along the way and we need to be honest about that.

I know some of you have been hurt by churches along the way.

I have too.

Certainly our world has.

So, if we're going to talk about why the church matters, then we also have to be honest about our history. In order to do that, we're going to prepare for communion in a little different way. I'm going to borrow a litany of repentance and gratitude from Rachel Held Evens' book Searching for Sunday.

Whenever you hear me say, "*We confess these sins and pray*" I want to invite you to respond, "**Lord Have Mercy. Christ have mercy.**" Will you try that with me?

"We confess these sins and pray: Lord have mercy. Christ, have mercy."

Three hundred years after Jesus died on the cross, the emperor Theodosius made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. The Church began grabbing for political and social power. Christians who had once been persecuted by the empire, *became* the empire, those who had once denied the sword, took up the sword against their neighbors. Pagan temples were destroyed, their patrons forced to convert to Christianity or die. Christians whose ancestors had been martyred in gladiatorial combat now attended the games, cheering on the bloodshed.

We confess these sins and pray:

Lord have mercy. Christ, have mercy.”

On July 15, 1099, Christian crusaders lay siege to Jerusalem, then occupied by Fatimite Arabs. They found a breach in the wall and took the city. Declaring “God wills it!” they killed every defender in their path and dashed the bodies of helpless babies against rocks. When they came upon a synagogue where many of the city’s Jews had taken refuge, they set fire to the building and burned the people inside alive.

We confess these sins and pray:

Lord have mercy. Christ, have mercy.”

Through a series of centuries-long inquisitions that swept across Europe, hundreds of thousands of people, many of them women accused of witchcraft, were tortured by religious leaders with instruments designed to slowly inflict pain by dismembering and dislocating the body... all in the name of protecting the church from heresy.

We confess these sins and pray:

Lord have mercy. Christ, have mercy.”

In a book entitled *On Jews and Their Lies*, reformer Martin Luther encouraged civic leaders to burn down Jewish synagogues, and murder those who continued to practice their faith within Christian territory. **“The rulers must act like a good physician, who when gangrene has set in proceeds without mercy to cut, saw, and burn flesh, veins, bone, and marrow,”** he wrote. Luther’s writings were later used by German officials as religious justification of the Holocaust.

We confess these sins and pray:

Lord have mercy. Christ, have mercy.”

Likening their conquests to Joshua’s defeat of Canaan, European Christian brought rape, violence, plunder, and enslavement to the New World, where hundreds of thousands of Native American people were enslaved or killed.

We confess these sins and pray:

Lord have mercy. Christ, have mercy.”

In the years preceding the Civil War in America, Christian ministers wrote nearly half of all defenses of slavery. Methodist pastor J. W. Ticker told a Confederate audience in 1862, **“Your cause is the cause of God, the cause of Christ, of humanity. It is a conflict of truth with error—of the Bible with Northern infidelity—of pure**

Christianity with Northern fanaticism.” Divisions over the morality of slavery split Baptist and Methodist denominations in America in two.

We confess these sins and pray:

Lord have mercy. Christ, have mercy.”

On the second day of Martin Luther King Jr.’s imprisonment in a Birmingham jail, a guard slipped him a copy of the morning paper. By the dim light of his cell, King read the tall black letters that headlined the second page: WHITE CLERGYMEN URGE LOCAL NEGROES TO WITHDRAW FROM DEMONSTRATIONS.

It was the Saturday before Easter, the same day Jesus lay buried in the grave.

We confess these sins and pray:

Lord have mercy. Christ, have mercy.”

In 2013, Uganda’s parliament passed a bill criminalizing homosexuality with the sentence of life imprisonment. The lawmaker behind the bill, David Bahati, told media, **“Because we are a God-fearing nation, we value life in a holistic way. It is because of those values that members of parliament passed this bill...”** The legislation is said to have been influenced by evangelical Christian missionaries to Africa.

We confess these sins and so many more...

and pray:

Lord have mercy. Christ, have mercy.”

But that is not the whole picture. Amidst all the darkness, the church has also been the place where so many have been changed, and have been given the courage to change the evil in our world...

There is much to give thanks for. So, when you hear, “*we say...*,” I want to invite you to respond, **“Thanks be to God.”** Let’s try that, “We say “Thanks be to God.”

For Ambrose, who defied the Roman Empire by blocking the door of his church until Emperor Theodosius had repented of his violence,

We say, “Thanks be to God.”

For the desert fathers and mothers who fled the violence and excess of the empire to inspire generations to live more simply and faithfully,

We say, “Thanks be to God.”

For John Huss, who spoke out against the church’s sale of indulgences, protested the Crusades, and was burned at the stake for obeying his conscience,

We say, “Thanks be to God.”

For Teresa of Avila, who overcame opposition from the aristocracy in the church to advance sweeping monastic reforms,

We say, “Thanks be to God.”

For Anne Hutchinson, who knew it was illegal for women to teach from the Bible in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, but did it anyway,

We say, “Thanks be to God.”

For Thomas Helwys and other early Baptists who stood up to the King of England, demanding religious freedom for all people,

We say, “Thanks be to God.”

For William Wilberforce, who channeled his evangelical fervor into abolishing slavery in the British Empire, vowing “**never, never will we desist till we have wiped away this scandal from the Christian name,**”

We say, “Thanks be to God.”

For Sojourner Truth, who proclaimed her own humanity in a culture that did not recognize it,

We say, “Thanks be to God.”

For Maximilian Kolb, the Franciscan friar who volunteered to die in the place of a Jewish stranger at Auschwitz,

We say, “Thanks be to God.”

For the pastors, black and white, who linked arms with Martin Luther King Jr. and marched on Washington

We say, “Thanks be to God.”

For all those who did the right thing even when it was hard,
For every time the church has been salt and light,
For the countless unremembered saints who have been Christ’s hands and feet,
for grace and healing,
for resurrection and new life.

We say, “Thanks be to God.”

And we ask you now: O Resurrected Christ, walk with us, your church, in this day and hour. Open up the truth of the scripture to us. Come and burn in our hearts. Meet us here at this table, at the breaking of bread today.

We ask these things in the name of the One who taught us to pray, saing, “Our Father....”

Amen.