Sunday, April 30, 1978
HOW TO EXPERIENCE GOD'S POWER! (No. 3 in a Series: What Happened/Happens after Easter?)
I Acts 2:1-4,42-47

What happened after the first Easter almost 2000 years ago, and what still happens to those who follow Jesus Christ? That's the subject we have been considering in this sermon series.

Remember the impact of Jesus'crucifixion had been shattering. Some of the disciples fled the city of Jerusalem. Others huddled together behind locked doors because they were afraid they might be arrested and crucified also.

Then came that world-shaking experience that Jesus who had been dead was no longer dead. They knew that he was alive and with them. They could not always describe just how he appeared to them, and they didn't know what to make of it all. Sometimes in those first weeks following the resurrection they felt they must not touch Jesus, while at other times he was so earthy that they could offer him boiled fish. But that Jesus was alive and in their midst, they had no doubt!

Thus, in the first sermon in this series two weeks ago, we saw that immediately following the resurrection, the disciples and other followers of Jesus were initially excited, and happy, but confused and had no sense of direction. They were elated over the fact that Jesus was alive but didn't know what to do about it. Jesus told them to wait. "Wait and God's power will come among you in a fresh way and then you will know what to do." Sometimes we have to wait! That's good advice for all of us.

Then last week in the second sermon in this series, we noted that while the disciples waited, they discovered there were routine matters, administrative decisions that needed to be acted upon. They learned that life, even the Christian life, is often a strange mixture of rapture and routine and that we cannot have one without the other. Life can be filled with high inspirational moments and events, but at the same time there are still everyday problems that need attention.

The first detail the disciples took care of was to fill the vacancy left by the betrayal and death of Judas. Two men were nominated for the position and Matthias was elected. Other administrative matters had to be taken care of by the early church leaders. Disputes had to be settled, conflicts resolved. The early church learned what we all need to learn, that life is a mixture of rapture and routine.

But what else happened after Easter and still happens? Perhaps, the most significant thing that happened was that "The Followers of the Way," as they came to be known, experienced God's power in their lives in a new way just as Jesus had promised. A new dimension was added. They named this new experience of God's power — THE HOLY SPIRIT. It was the experience of God being present among them. Let's see how it happened and then see how it can happen to us.

First, listen again to the way the book of Acts describes the experience of God's power coming into their lives. "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place ... and they were filled with the Holy Spirit." The followers of Jesus were together in one room, waiting. They did not know what they were supposed to do. And then something happened. A

kind of energy was released among them. They felt the active presence of God in their midst. God's power, God's Holy Spirit was with them.

Note in particular one fact and remember it above all else. This happened when they were together in one place. God's Holy Spirit did not come to each follower of Jesus individually when he or she was alone. It happened when they were gathered together.

This means that God's Holy Spirit, God's presence which they had known so personally and intimately in Jesus Christ when he was present with them, was now given to the congregation or congregations, or the church, or the group of followers of the Way.

This is what Jesus had promised would happen. "Wait for the promise of the Father," he had told them. Even before his crucifixion and resurrection he had told them, "It is to your advantage that I go away," and he had gone on to say, "I will pray the Father and He will give you another Counselor to be with you forever. And you will be able with that power to do greater works than I do."

Again, like everything else that had happened to the disciples and other followers of Jesus, it took a while for the implications of this experience to sink in.

The church was now the "Body of Christ," Christ alive on earth. God's Spirit which had been present uniquely in Jesus was now present uniquely in the church. Throughout the rest of the New Testament, the church understands itself as being the "body of Christ." The Apostle Paul in particular uses this image repeatedly.

There is perhaps nothing more mysterious than God manifesting himself right here and now in people's lives as a kind of transforming power. And as we read the story of the early church after Easter, we find over and over again that these early Christians attributed their power and energy to this Holy Spirit.

They continued to talk about God, and they continued to talk about Jesus Christ, crucified, buried and risen from the dead; but now they also talked about the Holy Spirit actively present in their lives, giving them vitality and courage, putting words into their mouths, making it possible for them to cure the sick, heal the diseased and transform lives.

These early Christians following the resurrection, learned that their community called the church was not maintained by the works of lay persons or clergy. It was sustained and reformed by the power of God at work among them which they called the Holy Spirit. They also learned that this Spirit was most uniquely present among them, and they felt its power when they were gathered together as a community of Christians.

In other words, after Easter, the followers of Jesus Christ discovered that if they wanted to really experience the power of God, they did so primarily through God's spirit as it was present when they were gathered together in what today we call a congregation.

It needs to be emphasized over and over again that in the Bible and throughout church history, there is no way of separating Christ, or experiencing Christ as one's personal savior apart from the community of Christians called the church. Christ did not just leave changed or "born again" individuals, he left a community, and it is to this community that he gave and still gives the Holy Spirit.

Certainly, there are individuals in the Bible, some heroes, some villains, but what gives significance to the Biblical story is that it is the story of the people of God. It is the story of a community.

Just as in the Old Testament there is absolutely no possibility of being a Hebrew without belonging to the community of people called Israel; in the New Testament there is absolutely no possibility of being a Christian without belonging to the fellowship of other Christians, that which today we call the church. In the New Testament, a Christian is by definition a member of the "body of Christ." Individuals are baptized into the community.

Thus, it is clear from the Biblical story that from the very first Christian faith was community rather than just the faith of scattered individuals. For example, in almost every place that. the phrase "in Christ" occurs in Paul's letters, it means "in the Christian Community." It does not stand for a private kind of mysticism. To be "in Christ" is to be in the church. The term, "individual Christianity" cancels itself out. Anyone who wants to take the power of God seriously is forced to take the church seriously.

This of course does not mean that the church is perfect. In addition to being the body of Christ, it is also a human institution, filled with imperfections. "We have this treasure in earthen vessels." is the way St. Paul liked to describe it. Those who love the church do so not only despite its limitations, but also because the church has power in their lives.

Now what does all this have to say to us today? What clues does it give us in terms of how God's power, God's Holy Spirit, can be experiences in our own lives here and now?

1. First, what happened after that first Easter tells us that also today if a person truly wants to experience God's power, God's Spirit, one needs to be an active participant in a local congregation of God's people.

What constitutes a local congregation of God's people? It is any group of Christians who gather together regularly for worship and the sacraments. It could be a small group which meets regularly in someone's home or a large gathering like we have here. What I want to emphasize is if one wants to live "in Christ," it means one has to be a part of a local gathering of Christians.

The Christian experience of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit is never a purely individualistic matter, rather the Bible points out, the Spirit is most uniquely present when persons are gathered together in one place in the name of Christ.

This shouldn't surprise us. It's true of most of life. The greatest musical compositions are those which no artist, however fine, can play alone. No matter how well that first violinist can play, he cannot interpret them alone. It takes an orchestra — the oboes and the violas and violins, the flutes and drums and horns — to interpret such great compositions and really bring them to life.

Or take the spirit of big-red football. If you want to really experience that spirit, you don't feel it very much if you just sit in your backyard all alone and read a newspaper account of last week's game or the predictions of next week's game. You have to be present in the stadium or with a group of persons who are watching the game or listening to it on the radio. Then you can really feel the spirit.

So it is that God's power is experienced most uniquely when you are in the presence of others who are also gathered together in God's name. That's why the Book of Acts reports that the early church gathered together regularly and devoted themselves to the Apostle's teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

If you feel God's power or God's Spirit or however you want to define it is lacking in your life, then the only way to experience that power again or even for the first time is to be in company regularly with other Christians for worship and prayer. To remove yourself or absent yourself from the fellowship of other Christians is like removing one log from a burning fire and expect that log to keep burning all by itself. You know what happens to that log; it doesn't burn very long all by itself.

2. Secondly, we can learn from the early church that the experiencing of God's power often happens in surprising and unexpected ways. Although it is within a community or gathering of Christians that God's power and spirit are most uniquely present, the church does not control that presence. Each experience of God's power in one's life is not exactly the same. Sometimes too even though in the presence of other Christians in worship and prayer, God's power can seem far away or absent. Sometimes, when our awareness of God has become too shallow, or just routine, not warm and not cold; when God has become too familiar to be exciting, too near to be felt in His infinite distance — then he becomes for a time the Absent God. The Spirit has not ceased to be present. The Spiritual Presence can never end. But God's power can be hidden from our sight for a time. In these times if we are faithful and continue to gather for worship in the Christian community, then God's Spiritual Presence always breaks into our consciousness in a new way.

Just as the early church experienced God's power, so also can we. Amen.