

## **“The Indwelling Spirit”**

**May 16, 2004 – 6 Easter, Year C, Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close**

One of the most difficult concepts for many Episcopalians to embrace is the Holy Spirit. I remember a Gallup poll that asked Episcopalians how many believed in God. 95% answered yes. I’ve always wondered about those other 5%! When they were asked how many believed that Jesus was the Son of God, only 47% answered yes. But when it came to accepting the idea of the Holy Spirit, only a mere 14% said they did.

What is the problem with the Spirit? Are we afraid of it? Maybe we associate the Holy Spirit with those denominations that we call “Holy Rollers.” The Spirit gets associated with the emotional and the spontaneous. That might frighten us. We can’t intellectualize the Spirit.

Today’s Gospel has Jesus talking to his disciples. He tells that that he will be leaving soon. This and last Sunday form what we call the farewell discourse in the Gospel of John. It prepares for Ascension Day and Pentecost. Here Jesus is talking about his death, Resurrection and ascension ... he’s leaving! There is a significant shift-taking place. Jesus will be absent ... but his death releases the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus tells us that we are not to be afraid of his leaving. He will ever leave us alone. We always have the gift of his Spirit. The Spirit also comes with the gift of peace! The Spirit will teach us everything we need to know about Jesus. The Spirit also helps us remember. It’s not about receiving new revelations. The Spirit brings us new understanding of Jesus (Reggie Fuller).

The disciples were afraid of Jesus’ leaving. He told them the Spirit would be the presence that continues to be with them after he goes away. William Willimon, of Duke, says, “In our walk with God, we are not left to our own devices. It is through the Holy Spirit that insights needed are to us so that we can be disciples.”

The experience of the Holy Spirit is more common than we think. If we think of the Spirit as the presence of Jesus with us, it may be easier to recall a time when the Spirit was there. The problem may be that we don’t talk much about it. We are not use to sharing our encounters with the spirit. It’s here that we could learn much from each other! I would like to share with you a couple of times that I have sensed the Spirit. I am not unique by any stretch of the imagination.

My first experience occurred when I was eight years old. It was on a mountaintop in Mansfield, Pennsylvania. I remember it vividly. It was a Sunday, and my grandfather’s hay baler broke down. Now this was a time when stores weren’t open on Sundays. We used to bale hay whenever we could. Grandpa came in and said, “I guess you guys have the day off!” My uncles, cousins and I didn’t need to hear it twice ... we were out the door!

My favorite time to do when I had time was to go for walks up in the hills. I climbed up what I though was a mountain (you have to remember that I was young and everything looked bigger than it was!). The day stands out in my mind. It was early in the summer. The sky was that bright blue, without any haze. The clouds drifted along like big fluffy pillows. The grass was that new spring green ... do you know what I mean? It’s that light green with yellow in it. There were white wild strawberry blossoms peppered throughout the field along with yellow buttercups.

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I could look down the mountain and see the farmhouse and barns. Across the way was another farm. A soft breeze blew across my face. I never heard a voice, but a sense of presence came over me. The presence communicated to me, somehow, “You are not alone.” There was a tremendous sense of peace that came with this. This was my first encounter with the Spirit.

One thing I have learned is that we can’t capture or repeat these moments. I have been back up on that hill many times ... but it’s just not the same. The gift of the Spirit was a moment in my life that left a powerful imprint on me.

Another experience that comes to mind has to do when I have been singing or listening to music. I have talked to musicians who know what I am talking about. In the midst of the music, I sense this presence behind me. It comes up and over me, engulfing me in the moment. When I first experienced this, I would turn around to see what it was ... only to have the presence evaporate.

When I was in seminary, I read Samuel Terran’s book, “The Elusive Presence.” He talked about how the spirit of God cannot be captured or contained. Later, a spiritual director would encourage me to just let the experience happen. He said, don’t try to grab it ... let it happen. I learned to let the experience of the Spirit come, enfold me and bring me that sense of peace. The Spirit can’t be controlled or manipulated. It is an experience!

As a Church, we are called to follow Jesus Christ. We are to also be a school. If we want to know about the Spirit, we might start with a study of the Bible and religion. It might be confusing at first. Some people tell me they start reading the bible and can get through Genesis, maybe even Exodus, but what is this Leviticus stuff? Some tell me that religion is just a matter of the heart. No, it’s also about the mind as well. If we let it only be of the heart, we will surrender to emotion. This kind of Christianity is easily defeated by the challenges of life.

The Spirit reminds us that we don’t have to deal with life all by ourselves. We are never alone, because the Spirit of Jesus is with us! There is a comfort and centering that comes with the spirit. The other day I was reading about GPS systems that are becoming more popular as a car option. The global positioning system uses satellites high above us to pinpoint our location. It can tell us exactly where we are at any moment!

The Holy Spirit is like this. It tells us where we are and reminds us in life what Jesus said and did. The Spirit points us towards the essential Jesus. It’s not about rules or regulations. It’s not about what we think or desire. The Spirit says this is the way to go. It keeps us centered in Jesus.

It’s time for us to be more open to the Spirit. It will help us to be better Christians. It is the indwelling of Jesus in our lives. I remember one of the songs of the spirit that stirs me, “Come Holy Spirit, our souls inspire ...” May the Spirit help us to remember Jesus. May we experience the spirit and move deeper into our faith.