

*Read also Isaiah 42:1-12*

Have you ever said or have you heard someone say, “I’m a spiritual person but I’m not religious.” I went shopping one day and the clerk, as she rang up my sale began talking about her interest in spirituality. She said, “I’m very spiritual but I don’t care too much for church.” Now that is not a pastor’s favorite thing to hear, but the conversation intrigued me.

What did she mean? What is the difference between religion and spirituality?

How can we get the “good” out of the one, and eliminate what is irritating about the other? Is there value in the church? If so, what is the value?

Naturally, I am a little biased. And, I am a spiritual person. In fact, I love being a spiritual person and my favorite part of being a pastor is seeing the Spirit in you. And I see it all the time. For we are all spiritual beings; just like the believers in the first century. That is actually the church. We express it when we get together.

Those first believers suffered a huge loss. They had followed Jesus, both men and women, and had so much hope in Him to be their leader, but then Jesus was crucified. It hurt. It was devastating. They did not understand it. It was an unexpected turn of events. So what did they do? They cut and ran; hid out in fear. But then after a couple of days something inside drove them to seek, to *do something*, so some of them went out to Jesus’ tomb.

You ever done that after someone you loved dies? You just can’t believe it happened so you go back – you need time to think it through. Well, one of the women who followed Jesus, Mary, did just that. She got up really early – probably couldn’t sleep, because the Bible says it was still dark. Jesus was strongly on her mind, so she got up and took off for the cemetery. READ Jn. 20:1-10

So one person went out seeking and notice that she “saw” something. The stone had been removed. And it was a huge stone. We are told in scripture that soldiers sealed the stone, which they did by extending a cord across the rock and sealing it at each end with clay. (Mt. 27:60, 65-66)

So Mary took off, thinking “they,” whoever had bad intentions toward Jesus, had stolen the body. She hurried to find two of the disciples and told them; they then had a footrace to the tomb.

See, those two guys were searching too, and they just needed a reason to go out there. Now, Jesus was dead, to their knowledge. Did you hear it – they did not yet understand that He had to rise from the dead.

So they looked and they saw stuff. Mary looked and she saw stuff, like the linens and head piece and the heavy stone moved, and no body. This was all spiritual, not natural; not what you expect. But they couldn’t really “see” it, so the two men returned to their homes.

But Mary stuck around. And she was covered up in the tragedy. She was overcome by the pain and the hurt. Have you ever had something hurt you so bad that you just can't get past it? Have you had a disappointment so great that it colors everything? That's where she was. So it sort of blinded her. Let's read it: READ Jn. 20:11-18

You know what tells us that she was stuck in her pain? She couldn't see Him, even though He was there. She couldn't see the angels either, who said, "why are you so grieved?" Her grief and disappointment colored everything. I sort of picture it like this.

Jesus rose sometime before they arrived. He's standing outside the tomb in the garden. The disciples and women are so focused on this tragedy that had hit them that they may have even passed Him running to the tomb. There He stood, watching them run back and forth, scared, crying, fearful of thieves and bad guys robbing the tomb, missing angels, and missing Him.

Now back to our question about spirituality – being spiritual is "seeing" Jesus. Being religious is expecting it to all be predictable and understandable. You follow the rules and everything will work out, right? But as in this case it hadn't. They had been disappointed. Things don't always work out that way.

Now if things are predictable, we miss the miraculous. Jesus said, "Hey, Mary!"

And the Spirit in her suddenly saw Him because He called her name. He knew her! *Her teacher!* And she must have grabbed Him so hard that He had to say, "Okay, okay, let go! I'm not going anywhere – I haven't ascended to my Father in heaven *yet* – for heaven sakes go tell the others!" (Ginger's paraphrase. ☺)

Now that is a spiritual experience. A spiritual experience is encountering Jesus one-on-one. It's when He speaks to you and you recognize it. It's crossing paths in such a way that your grief is broken; your sorrow is washed away; your tragedy no longer rules your life or your vision.

Have you encountered Jesus in that way? Church – the gathering here – is not a place of predictability and having it all together, or where everything works out. We have disappointments. But church is a place where we encounter the miraculous in the midst of pain; a place where Jesus is. And we worship Him.

Well, let's go on. READ Jn. 20:19-25

The disciples were hiding out. You ever hide out? Sure you do. I do. You hide out when you work too much. Some people hide out seeking satisfaction at the mall or in a bar. People hide out by overindulging in sports or other things. But at the bottom of all that hiding is some sort of discouragement or dissatisfaction or fear.

Now a pastor might say, seek Jesus. He is the answer. Come to church, seek Him. Gather together with others and seek Him. In fact, I believe I have said that to some of you. *Those irritating pastors.*

But the disciples weren't really in any condition to do that. So Jesus went to them, right where they were, locked in seclusion in gripping fear and discouragement. He appeared with them. He stood in the midst of them. He said,

PEACE.

Can you imagine the room at that moment? They REJOICED! What a GREAT day! He showed them Himself – Jesus is always willing for you to know Him, to come to you at anytime, when you need Him.

Now, Jesus is just as here in this room for us as we gather – whether things are good or bad.

And Jesus walks right into your life – wherever you are spending it. How does He do it? Often through a friend who talks about Him, and you knew Jesus years ago but gave it up but they reignite that spark in you. Or, through someone who introduces Jesus to you for the first time. Or, maybe even a pastor. Or, when you go to church where people look for the miraculous and aren't just satisfied with the predictable.

So the disciples did that for Thomas, but he was resistant. He'd been disappointed; you might even say he had become disillusioned.

But there's no disillusionment that Jesus can't overcome. He is just as here for us as He was for them and He would not leave Thomas in his despair. Listen to what Jesus did. READ Jn. 20:26-29

You may shut the doors against Jesus because of a tremendous disappointment in your life, but that will not stop Him because He loves you. He is devoted to your spirit. He says, "Hope is in believing; in being spiritual; in being with me."

Those same disciples lost their fear and left that room with great courage and joy, as they went everywhere to spread this good news. One of them wrote these words.

READ Jn 20:30-31.

Do you want life that is spiritual and fulfilling, even though a little unpredictable? SEEK JESUS. He is risen!

AMEN