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The National Presbyterian Church

*Holy Spirit: Energy Resources: **The Force Within You***

John 16:4b-15, John 14:25-26; Romans 8:9-11

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In our sermons since Easter we've been thinking about Christian experience: in particular the experience of the living Lord Jesus Christ, the resurrected Jesus. We've been thinking about the resurrection not just as a doctrine, nor even just as an event that occurred on Easter Sunday, that first Easter Sunday – something that happened “back then” that we say we believe. Rather, we've been focusing on our present experience of Jesus as the one who rose (back then) from the dead, but who still lives to this day (as he did back then), and who longs to live within our lives and community, within our very being as individuals and as a church.

So we're thinking of Christian experience, the experience of the Risen Jesus Christ, and we've been doing so primarily with the teaching that we find in the Gospel according to John. In fact we've read repeatedly from the 15th Chapter of John's Gospel in which Jesus describes himself as a vine. He says there that “I am the vine and you are the branches”. And he promises that if we stay connected to him, like branches to a vine, his life, his resurrection life, that has the power to overcome death, will flow through us and make our lives fruitful – which is surely what we all want in life: Effective lives, fruitful lives, flourishing lives, not only for our benefit but for the benefit of others – the kind of life that is not possible without “inside help”! Jesus adds on a more somber note that if we disconnect our lives from his then this will not happen: “Apart from me you can do nothing.” And then, again, more positively: “Abide in me as I abide in you and your life will bear much fruit.” Never forget I'm alive. I want to live in you. Stay connected!

So we've been looking at this relationship with Christ primarily through the eyes of John Chapter 15, but last Sunday we moved on to think about the teaching and experience of the Apostle Paul, and his similar passion – to experience the Resurrection of Jesus Christ not just as a doctrine from the past but as an experience of Christ's life flowing into and through his life into the world.

To be sure, Paul knew that at the end of his physical life, when he died, then quite literally he would live again, rising to life again just as Christ rose in the resurrection. He would experience this physically after literal death.

But he wasn't willing to wait for literal death to experience the power of Christ's resurrection. What he came to believe was this: that as we die to ourselves spiritually right now, as we experience (as it were) being crucified with Christ right now, then the resurrection life of Christ will flow into our lives just as surely as Easter followed Good Friday.

- As he writes to the Galatians (2:19-21) he declares that “It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me.”
- And to the Philippians (3:10) he says that he wants to share in what he calls “the fellowship of Christ’s sufferings” so that he may also experience his Resurrection.
- He describes this passion in yet a different way in the 12th Chapter of Romans, where he says that we are to “*not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds.*” Indeed, we are to “*present our bodies as a living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God, as an act of spiritual worship.*” In this command Paul is surely picking up on Jesus’ words in Luke 9:23, where Jesus says “Unless you take up your cross daily and follow me you cannot be my disciple.”

Be transformed, Paul says by the renewing of your mind, by a new way of thinking. And what is this “new way of thinking?” It’s a way of thinking that says “I don’t belong to myself. My life, if I live it in my own power and for myself, will fade away and end. But if in fact I “die to myself,” handing over my life Christ, as if it were not mine at all, then something miraculous and eternal will happen: Christ’s resurrection life will flow into me and through me into the world. It will no longer just be me living, but Christ in me.

This is what I have in mind by saying that we are thinking of the resurrection not just as a doctrine but as an experience of Jesus the living one right here and now. So this is what we’ve been focusing on in recent weeks, and the next few weeks to come, we’re still going to be focusing on this theme – but we’re going to do so with a small change in terminology!

That is, in the past few weeks, I have been repeatedly using the phrase “the resurrected life of Christ” when I could have also been speaking about God’s work in the world and in our lives through “the Holy Spirit.” What I want to say today is that “The resurrected life of Christ at work in your life and my life” is nothing other than “the work of the Holy Spirit within our lives” – though my initial focus on terms such as “the resurrected life of Christ, or “the life of the risen Christ” rather than the “Holy Spirit” has in fact been quite deliberate.

Let me put it this way: so many people have preconceptions about the work of the Holy Spirit which clouds their understanding that the simple but repeated replacement of the title ‘Holy Spirit’ by “Christ’s life’ is the best way I know to begin a corrective, and to rehabilitate the term! Ultimately though, the phrases are interchangeable: the resurrected life of Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

We see this most clearly in Paul’s writing to the Romans, especially 1:1-4 and 8:9-11 (see appendix below). Paul writes interchangeably about the “Spirit of Holiness” and the “Spirit of God” and the “Spirit of Christ” and the “Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead.” All of expressions are together in one passage, as if Paul floats back and forth between them speaking about the same thing.

So we’re going to continue to think as we have done recently about the resurrected life of Christ, but now we also incorporate into our thinking what the scripture says about the Holy

Spirit. Or, to put it in terms of John's Gospel: the chapter we have been focusing on, John 15 flows seamlessly into John 16 and the image changes: In John 15 Jesus speaks of himself as the true vine – his life being the source of our life; whereas in John 16 Jesus speaks explicitly about the Holy Spirit. Same topic, but from a broader, different angle!

In fact, in John 16, Jesus speaks about three aspects or characteristics of the Holy Spirit that I'd like us to think about, to remember and to apply to our lives today.

- He says (1) that the Spirit is strong. In the face of our weakness the Spirit is strong, our helper in the face of weakness.
- He says (2) that the Spirit is sharp, convicting us, convincing us of our sin and of our need for grace every day of our lives. In the face of a world in which there is much evil and struggle the Holy Spirit comes to us as one who cuts through the hardness of our life and gets to the core of our lives.
- And he speaks (3) about the Holy Spirit as shy. In other words, the Spirit focuses not so much on himself but on Jesus, always pointing us in the direction of another.

So let's continue to think about Christian experience today, using the words "the Holy Spirit" interchangeably with "the resurrected life of our Lord Jesus Christ."

**The Holy Spirit is Strong**. Let's begin to think about the Holy Spirit as a person, as somebody who is strong, stronger than we are, our helper in the face of our weakness.

John Chapter 16 is a passage of scripture in which Jesus speaks to his disciples just before his death, just before he is taken away, tried unjustly and crucified. The disciples know that something's going wrong and they are scared that they are going to be left all alone; having been with Jesus for up to three years they're going to be all alone. And Jesus speaks to them to comfort them. And he says to them beginning at Verse 6 in John 16 he says

"Sorrow has filled your hearts. Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away for if I do not go away the advocate will not come to you. But if I go I will send him to you. [DR: note that earlier in the Gospel, in John 14, Jesus has equated this "advocate" with the Holy Spirit.]

So Jesus is saying that this "advocate" (the Holy Spirit) will not come unless he, Jesus, leaves. He's leaving them but, then again, he's not! He's going but he's coming again. He's going to be able to be with them wherever they are, because he's going to come to them, not visibly but in the person of the Holy Spirit. Because of his resurrected life, wherever we are in time and space he can be there too, in a way that was not possible before.

The word used in our translation (the New Revised Standard Version) for the Holy Spirit in John 16 is the "advocate." Let me point out that if you go to other translations you will find different words used to name the Holy Spirit instead of the "advocate."

- For example if you go to the King James Version (many of you grew up with this translation) the English word speaking about the Holy Spirit is the word "comforter."

- If you read the New International Version of the Bible you will find the Holy Spirit being spoken of here as the “counselor”.
- If you read the New King James Version of the Bible you will find the Holy Spirit being spoken of here as the “helper.”

And I’m going to settle down (following the great catholic scholar Raymond Brown) on the word “helper” as the best way to speak about the Holy Spirit in John 16! He points out that “helper” is generic . . . and that when we need an “advocate” the Holy Spirit helps us in this way, as our advocate; when we need a “counselor” the Holy Spirit helps us in this way, as our counselor; and when we need a “comforter” the Holy Spirit helps us in this way as our comforter. In each circumstance, the Holy Spirit is the help we need, the right kind of help, the right amount of strength we need, in our weakness.

So Jesus says to his followers that they are not going to be abandoned or left alone, nor will they be too weak to handle what they need to face: rather, there is a power that he wants to give them, the power of his resurrected life that they will be able to use whenever they are in need – whatever that need may be! We cannot make it by ourselves, and we need not ever be by ourselves. His assurance is that the Holy Spirit, the strength of the Holy Spirit, will come.

Recently I watched the Academy Award winning movie called Gravity. It stars George Clooney and Sandra Bullock (it’s one of those relatively few movies that you can more or less say from the pulpit “this is a movie you should watch” – without being too embarrassed about something that’s going to occur in the movie along the way). Without giving the story away, it’s a movie about the fact that we cannot go it alone. Even from a secular level we cannot go it alone: we all need help; we need somebody else beside us, and sometimes we even need somebody else inside us if we’re to survive and thrive. From a secular level this is the message! But it’s also profoundly true on a spiritual level, and especially within the context of our understanding of the Christian faith.

Many people just turn to Christian faith as if Jesus is a good teacher or a good example and say I will try my hardest to follow him. But that is always a counsel of despair. If we come to Heaven and say we tried enough God will say I don’t think you did. We never do. We never can make it by ourselves. Former Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple lived about a hundred years ago put it succinctly like this:

“It’s no good showing me a life like the life of Jesus and telling me to live a life like that. Jesus could do it, I cannot. Just as it is no good giving me a play like Hamlet or King Lear and telling me to write a play like that. Shakespeare could do it, I cannot.

But (he says), if the genius of Shakespeare could come and live in me then I could write plays like that. And if the spirit of Jesus could come and live in me then perhaps I could live a life like that. This is the secret of Christian sanctity. It is not that we should strive to live like Jesus in our own strength but that Christ by his Spirit should come and live in us.

To have him as our example is simply not enough. *We must have him day by day and moment by moment as our helper as well.*

We're not alone. We don't need to be alone. There is somebody stronger than we are who longs to be our helper and that strength comes to us by the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is strong, says Jesus, in John 16, and we must rely on his strength and rely on his help – but that's not all!!

**The Holy Spirit is also sharp** – and has the power to cut into your lives – which at times may seem to be very uncomfortable . . . cutting into our lives to get below the surface which becomes hard and brittle – like a surgeon's knife – to get to the place where real healing needs to and can take place.

So the 16th Chapter John and at Verse 8 Jesus says this about the work of the Holy Spirit: a work of sharp conviction within our lives.

*(The Spirit) will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment.  
About sin because they do not believe in me;  
about righteousness because I'm going to the Father and you will see me no longer;  
about judgment because the ruler of this world has been condemned.*

The sharp work of the Holy Spirit is the work of bringing conviction of the truth about who we are and who Jesus is, and about what he has done for us.

- Sharp conviction about our *sin*: that our sin really does alienate us from God and this alienation is deadly serious.
- Sharp conviction about the *righteousness* of Jesus: that it was the righteous sinless one who died for us on the cross.
- About the fact that his death he bore our *judgment*: his death was a death for sin!

For those truths not merely to be theological truths, but to strike deep into the heart of our lives as the basis on which we find life, that's the work of the Holy Spirit – taking what we've heard but pay little attention to, and leading us to the place where we believe it, then sealing it as a truth deep within the heart of our being. It's hard in this world sometimes to get beyond the surface. But that's the job of the Spirit: sharp, cutting into our lives so that the truth can truly sink in.

Some of you know that poet Maya Angelou died this week. She speaks of this kind of sharp work of the Holy Spirit working through an important person in her life (and the Spirit so often works through somebody brought into our life who does the work of the Holy Spirit). This is what she says about her life before she became really committed to an understanding of the love of God. She says (in *Power of the Word*)

In my 20s in San Francisco I became a sophisticate, an acting agnostic. It wasn't that I stopped believing in God it's just that God didn't seem to be around the neighborhoods that I frequented. One day my voice teacher asked me to read from *Lessons In Truth*, a section which ended with these words: God loves me. I read it and closed the book and my teacher said read it again. I pointedly opened

the book and sarcastically read “God loves me.” He said read it again. After about the seventh repetition, [DR: so he kept on saying it – “Read it again. Read it again.” It takes a while to get past the veneer you see. It needs a razor sometimes to cut through the outside where something that’s as familiar as “God loves me” can become something that’s real]. After about the seventh repetition I began to sense [DR: the work of the Holy Spirit?] that there was a possibility that God *really did love me*. Me, Maya Angelou. I suddenly began to cry [DR: Ah, the veneer’s gone! A sharp cut has been made so that the truth can begin to lodge deep beneath the surface of life] at the grandness of it all. I knew [DR: this is now a radically different Maya from just five minutes before] that if God loved me, then I could do wonderful things. I could try great things, learn anything, achieve anything. For what could stand against me and God? That knowledge humbles me. That knowledge [DR: and she begins to become poetic!] melts my bones, closes my ears, makes my teeth rock loosely in their gums. It also liberates me.

The Holy Spirit at work through her teacher – taking something she’d known forever, “God loves me,” and turning it into something powerful and transformative within her life – the truth cutting sharply, not to hurt but to heal, into her life.

Sometimes the Spirit’s sharp work hurts. It’s painful. Sometimes it’s just uncomfortable and creates within us a “dis-ease.” Often it’s an experience in which we feel that “I’m so far from God because I’m so aware of my weakness and my sin. I don’t like it here.” In each case though, it’s the prelude to something else – a prelude that we so often must go through before the strength of God can really be a profound influence on our lives.

**The Holy Spirit is Shy.** So there is this sharp work of the Holy Spirit and there is this strong work of the Holy Spirit. Let me conclude by speaking about the third aspect of the Holy Spirit that Jesus speaks about in John 16 to his disciples before he leaves them: the fact that the Holy Spirit is shy! Jesus says this to his disciples in John 16:13 and 14:

*When the spirit of truth comes he will not speak on his own . . . he will glorify me because he will take what is mine and declare it to you.*

In other words, the strong and sharp Holy Spirit is shy about himself – but effusive about Jesus! He’s always going to be pointing away from himself to Jesus.

Many people who speak about the Holy Spirit speak as if the Spirit wants to speak about himself (the Spirit) when, according to Jesus, the Spirit wants to push us in the direction not of himself but of Jesus.

The Spirit’s work is rather like the work of John the Baptist in the gospel stories (Mark 1:7, John 1:27, 3:30). Remember John the Baptist? What was his role in the gospel stories? His role was to point away from himself to another, to Jesus; to say, “I am not the one who is to come. There is another coming after me

who is greater than me the thong of whose sandals I am not able to untie so great is he. I point to another. He must become more; I must become less he says.

This is the work of the Holy Spirit. Shy! Pointing us to another. Or to put it another way: the work of the Holy Spirit is like the work of the person who gives the speech of introduction for a keynote speaker. In 1992 Marilyn Reeve wrote a Communication Handbook for teachers at Dartmouth College and in it is a section on speeches of introduction. It goes like this, she says:

It is wise to remember that the purpose of a speech of introduction is to introduce the speaker. Build interest in the speaker's subject, build credibility for the speaker by showing he or she is qualified to speak on the subject. Unfortunately the introducer's lack of tact is more frequent than we like to admit. Brevity is essential. Long winded introductions are inexcusable. Remember that the audience came to hear the speaker, not the introducer. [DR: Have you ever been somewhere when you sometimes wonder whether that in fact is the case? And then this great line]. The speech of introduction is the hors d'oeuvres to the main course.

The Holy Spirit knows that Jesus is the main course, and constantly points us back to the one who is the main course. Shy about himself and effusive about Jesus.

Sometimes all three of these characteristics of the Spirit are combined together: the sharpness, the shyness and the strength of the Holy Spirit. W.F. Batt was an Air Force fighter pilot in World War II. He was in church one Sunday evening when the 53rd Chapter of Isaiah was being read – a passage of Scripture he'd heard before but now he heard in a new way, drawing him closer to Jesus Christ.

He says that as Isaiah 53 was read "*it was the first time I realized that Christ's death on the cross affected me personally.*" Isaiah 53 speaks about a person who was wounded for my transgressions and bruised for my iniquities and with whose stripes we are healed. He began to see more clearly than before that this was about Jesus (the "shy" Holy Spirit pointing to Jesus). He says "*I certainly had no overwhelming sense of sin and I reckoned that I had lived a normal decent sort of life. But I knew too that I'd never really thanked Christ for what he had done for me on the cross, and that ingratitude was just as serious a form of sin.*" [DR: Here is both the sharpness and conviction of the Holy Spirit]. "*As I thanked him that night and offered him my life in gratitude, a sense of assurance came to me based not on any feelings and certainly not in any sense of worthiness. Not because of anything I had done, but because Jesus Christ had done all that was necessary for my salvation.*"

So he found strength to live his life in a different way from that moment on. The Holy Spirit shy, draws us to Jesus; sharp convicts us of sin; strong coming to us in our weakness. All three of these activities and characteristics of the Spirit are embodied here at the table of our Lord to which we come to day.

We are going to partake of the Lord's Supper, we're going to eat bread and we're going to drink of the fruit of the vine.

- Jesus the vine is here at this table and he wants his life as it were to flow through us.
- We come to a meal because we want to be strengthened by the food that God gives to us because we are weak and the Holy Spirit wants to strengthen us.
- This bread and this cup are the body of Christ broken for us and his blood shed for us, sharply convicting us that without his life and his death we have no salvation
- And at this table the bread and cup always point us back to our Savior as the center of our attention, the one who wants to come and live not just beside us but as we eat and drink within us.

The Spirit of the Risen Christ, his life at work in your life and mine, the work of the Holy Spirit. May we not only know this in our heads but experience this with our lives.

#### **Addendum: The Holy Spirit in John's Gospel**

##### **John 14: 26**

26 NRSV: The **Advocate the Holy Spirit**,

- Greek: "*parakletos*": The Helper, Strengthenener
- NIV: The Counselor, the Holy Spirit
- KJV: The Comforter, the Holy Ghost
- NKJV: The Helper, the Holy Spirit

whom the Father will send *in my name*,

will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.

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