Isaiah 25:6-9; Acts 10:34-43; Mark 16:1-8

They fled. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome fled from the empty tomb. “Terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” The young man in the empty tomb said, “It’s okay. Don’t be afraid. Jesus is risen; you will see him in Galilee.” But, they are afraid; they are awestruck; so awestruck that in the moment they have no words. What’s racing around in their heads? What’s awakening inside of them? Possibility. What if he is alive? What does that mean and what’s going to happen next? They don’t know. And, right there, in the openness to possibility, right there the Holy Spirit moves. Right there, hope lives.

Steve Carlsen is the Dean and Rector at Christ Church, the Episcopal Cathedral in Indianapolis. Recently, he shared a great story about embarking on a missional venture with his parish. He brought in a well-known speaker to talk to the parish about how to connect “missionally” with the neighboring community, how to go out and meet the people where they are, to go out and be a part of what the Holy Spirit is already doing in the community. The parishioners and Steve and the staff were inspired. So, they started imagining, discussing, and developing a proposal for a ministry in the community. After much planning, they were ready to implement, ready to go. But, it didn’t happen. The project failed. The project failed and they had to have some hard conversations in the parish about why it had failed. They came up with three reasons. First, everyone had a different idea of what it was they were doing. Second, when they were honest with themselves, they recognized that they were simply transplanting the institutional church to another place in the community, rather than building a relevant ministry
for that neighborhood from the ground up. Third, though they had studied the neighborhood where this mission activity would take place, the neighborhood turned over just as they signed a lease. The project as originally intended failed, and here’s what happened next.

The turnover in the neighborhood was all about gentrification, which led to higher rental rates. A group of struggling artists had to leave the neighborhood because they could no longer afford the lease on their space. So, what happened? The parishioners of Christ Church Indianapolis opened themselves to the possibility in these new circumstances. They gave the artists space in the cathedral to display their art. And, the parishioners learned how to advocate with the local government for people in need, how to speak to power for change, for justice and righteousness. What happens when our hearts are open to possibility? The Holy Spirit moves and we live into resurrection.

You may recall hearing about St. Paul’s by-the-Sea Episcopal Church in Ocean City, MD. Back in 2013, a man who was a client of their food pantry, entered the rectory of the church, drenched in gasoline, and set himself on fire. The Rectory went up in flames and both this man and the Rector died. A tragedy. Yet, with time, this parish was ready to move forward. The Rectory, badly damaged, was demolished and rebuilt; the new construction was just completed this past month. Beyond rebuilding the rectory, these parishioners lived into new life. It would have been easy for the parish to shut down the food pantry given the events. But, they didn’t. Rather, the parishioners of St. Paul’s by-the-Sea reached out to other churches in the area – a Methodist Church, a Lutheran Church, a Presbyterian Church, a Baptist Church and another Episcopal Church – and they built an ecumenical food pantry. Through this collaborative effort, they are now serving 16,000 people a year. What happens when our hearts are open to possibility? The Holy Spirit moves and we live into resurrection.
Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, in one of his videos about The Jesus Movement, talks about the reading of the Gospel on Sunday morning. We finish reading the Old Testament and New Testament lessons and then, the mood shifts. Music begins to play. The acolytes gather in front of the altar with the torches and the Gospel book. Something important is happening. The Deacon, the clergy person who serves at the intersection of the church and the world, come forward to process with the acolytes into the congregation, among the people. We all stand and we turn toward the Gospel book, in reverence and in expectation, to hear about God’s love which makes us free. Think about people all over the world, in church on Sunday morning, standing, turning toward the Gospel book in expectation, desiring to learn about God’s love which creates and nurtures and inspires. We turn our hearts toward Jesus and listen and hear.

Jane Shaw, who is the former Dean of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco and now Dean for Religious Life at Stanford, says this about living in God’s love: “Faith is not about conforming to a particular doctrine, but an adventure in which we are constantly surprised by grace” (A Practical Christianity: Meditations for the Season of Lent, New York, NY: Morehouse Publishing, 2012, pg. 48). This is why we turn our hearts toward Jesus on Sunday morning and throughout our lives every day of the week – to be open to the love that is grounded in compassion and justice and forgiveness, to be open to new life. We turn our hearts and see Jesus in our loved ones, in our friends and neighbors, in our colleagues and teachers and coaches and mentors, in our civil servants, in our shopkeepers, in all whom we encounter during the day, including the stranger. We turn and open our hearts. We open our hearts and the Holy Spirit moves and new life emerges and resurrection is made real and we are fully alive.

The prayer we say for the newly baptized beautifully encapsulates the call to open ourselves to new life (BCP, p. 308). We pray, “Sustain them, O Lord, in your Holy Spirit. Give
them an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works.” Jesus was crucified and, yet, he came back...he came back, so we would know the unceasing opportunity for new life in God’s abundant love. Claim resurrection in your life. Claim the resurrection which gave birth to ever-present new life for all of us. Alleluia!