

**Don Brown
St. Mary the Virgin
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Easter 6 C**

When I was a child my family and I often vacationed in Oregon. Once we visited some backcountry canyon whose name and location I've long forgotten, I was encouraged to shout into the canyon and listen for the echo.

I was reminded of that long ago time when I heard a story about a couple who were visiting the Grand Canyon and they stopped at a scenic overlook named Echo Point.

"Try it!" urged the wife.

"I think it's silly," declared the husband. "But if it will make you happy, I'll try." He shouted at the top of his voice, "Baloney!" After a moment, he remarked, "See, nothing happened."

"Try it again," suggested his wife.

This time the husband shouted at the top of his lungs, "I'm the best looking man in the world." Then the

echo came back....."Baloney!" Not the answer he wanted to hear.

How often does life present you with answers that you don't want to hear? I read a survey claiming that only 1/3 of men and 1/2 of women in the US rate their lives as "happy." How about you? Is your life all that it could be? Are you happy with who and what you are?

Haven't there been times in your life when you wanted to do the right thing but you just couldn't summon the courage to take action? Times when you wanted to tell someone something that needed to be said but your fear kept you from getting the words out.....words that would heal a broken relationship, or words that would give hope or encouragement, words that would set a situation right.

Have you ever set what you thought was a realistic goal and then not been able to achieve it? Do you behave in ways that you later regret? Do you ever wonder why you have difficulty being the person you believe God wants you to be?

I'm not sure it was a message from God but seven years ago a couple of people who were out to dinner with Carol Anne and me challenged me to do the yearly AIDS fundraising ride, 545 miles from San Francisco to Los Angeles. My response was to express incredulity. "I could never do that. I'm too old, too out of shape, carrying too much weight."

After doing some research and thinking about all the opportunities or challenges in life I'd rejected because I told myself, "You can't do that," when if I'd just taken a risk and tried, I could have done X Y or Z. So I started training and that first year I rode every one of those 545 miles and I've done so each year for the last six and I intend this June 5th to 12th to do this ride yet again.

When you feel the pressures of life, or are angry, or depressed, or frightened, or feel challenged beyond your ability to respond, one way to find some peace and new direction in your life is to take the risks you need to take to become the person God is calling you to be.

A core belief of Christianity is that God created the universe and gifted us with life. Out of that flows the conviction that, no matter how hard we might have worked, all that we have is a gift from God. God has given us all we need to build a life that is positive, growing and good. Yet if we are to realize our potential, we have to be risk takers who are brave enough to step out in faith into an uncertain future. That's true for us individually and it's equally true for St. Mary's. We are either taking the risks necessary to grow or we are in the process of shriveling and dying.

Christians from St. Paul to Harriet Tubman, to the uncounted and millions of Christians whose stories we don't know, all of them have had the courage to risk for the sake of the Gospel. The fact that St. Mary's is still here and thriving after 125 years is a testimony to many folks who were willing to make sacrifices and risks for the sake of Christ's mission of healing a hurting world through the life and witness of this congregation.

In the jungles of Malaysia when the natives want to capture a monkey they put a choice piece of fruit in a heavy pottery jar with a narrow opening at the top just large enough for the monkey to stick his hand and arm through. The monkey reaches in but then can't get his paw out of the jar while holding onto the fruit. Logic tells us the monkey would just drop the fruit but he just will not let go.

Fixated on this one piece of fruit, with his captors fast approaching, the monkey starts trying to run through the jungle dragging the big pottery jar. Unwilling and therefore unable to let go of the fruit, the monkey is easily captured.

What are you unwilling to let go of in your life? What is holding you back? What is it in your life that prevents you from risking and growing into the person God created you to be? Fear, pride, laziness, depression, indifference?

In this morning's Gospel Jesus assures us that we, each and every one of us, has been given the gift of the Holy Spirit in our lives. This is the Spirit that consoles us, brings Jesus's gift of peace, and energizes us to take the risks we must take if we are to grow as humans created in the image of God. It is the Holy Spirit, if we have the ears to hear and the hearts to receive the message, it is the Spirit that propels us forward no matter how tough things can sometimes get.

When we are attentive to the promptings of the Spirit, miracles really do happen in our lives, in the life of our church and even in a world that pays little or no attention to God.

I've known people who have conquered addictions because they have, with God's help, taken the risk to begin turning their backs on old behaviors and attitudes so they can embrace a new life. Sometimes it's friends and loved ones who did the pushing, but the person

enslaved to the addiction finally, with Spirit's prompting, makes the decision to begin a new life.

I've walked into the valley of the shadow of death with folks whom the Holy Spirit gifted with calm and peace as they faced the end of one life and the beginning of another. There are many married and partnered people whose beloved has died, and parents who have lost children, who have with God's grace been enabled to work through their grief and pain and come out on the other side with new hope and reasons to go on living a full, positive, productive life.

In this 125th anniversary this year of St. Mary's, we are going through our time of transition as we prepare to call our next rector. This is a time for having the courage and will to look back as we prepare to move forward.

Today or in the weeks ahead, please take the journey up the stairway to the Great Room. Posted on the stairway walls you'll see wonderful displays prepared by Mary Morganti and Christina Landry recalling some of the

milestones of our history. One of the great gifts of studying St. Mary's history is gaining some perspective on the present, as we learning of St. Mary's past struggles and the triumphs, knowing that through it all, God walks with us as a congregation as we continue our pilgrimage of "Growth in the Spirit".

God's Holy Spirit in our own lives, in the life of St. Mary's, gives us the will to take the risks we need to take to grow more fully into the individuals and community God created us to be.

Pray about what risk God is calling you to take in your life as a Christina person. Pray, learn and act. May this be so for each of us and for St. Mary's. AMEN