

A Sermon Preached at Maple Street Congregational Church, UCC
Danvers, MA
June 11, 2017
Rev. Kevin M Smith
Matthew 28:16-20

Don't Hold Back

Some of you might know that I co-managed the campaign of a woman in Oregon who ran for governor of the state. To a lot of people's surprise we won and elected Oregon's first woman governor. The woman we elected was a single mom when she was first elected to the state legislature. Before being elected to the legislature, her only previously elected office was for the school board of a local school district. You see, Barbara Roberts threw her entire being, her entire self, into making sure her son, who was autistic, could get a public education like everyone else. When she was a young mother and she and her son were turned away by the local public school, she wouldn't stand for it. She got elected to the school board and then she set about to change the hearts and minds of the legislature at the state capitol and to change the law of the state, which later led to change across the country. Barbara went to the capitol, found a supportive senator, and threw everything she had into getting justice and an education for her son. And, she changed the world for autistic young people in Oregon and, later, around the country. She committed her whole being to this purpose. It was not merely a political purpose. *It was a moral imperative for her and her son and many other children.*

Later on in Barbara's life after she was elected to the legislature, and later, to Secretary of State, an opportunity came along to move up to the governor's office. She threw caution to the wind, put her entire livelihood on the line, and committed everything to wanting to lead a state where timber and fishing jobs were disappearing, domestic abuse and substance abuse was skyrocketing along with unemployment, gay and lesbian people were being discriminated against on all kinds of levels, and critical species were going extinct in the rivers, oceans, and woods. Barbara, her long-time aide and me stopped everything we were doing, left our jobs and embarked on a crazy crusade to help people who were facing daunting challenges in their personal lives. Our opponent was a very well-liked and respected attorney general. He was highly educated. Barbara had never received a college degree. He was well-funded. We didn't have much more than a few thousand dollars to start. Let's just say that the deck was stacked against us. One big difference between two people who were both very well liked by people of both parties was this: Barbara threw her all into her work to change government and her opponent steered a much more cautious path. Barbara risked herself totally taking clear stands on every issue before her. Her opponent reserved judgment and commitment. The campaign was without a lot of the mud-slinging that has become the culture of politics today. The choice was between change and caution.

Jesus' disciples were headed to the mountain to commune with the resurrected Jesus. They had run away, they had betrayed Jesus; they had claimed they didn't know him.

When the time came for them to be counted to stand up for love of everyone, they had gone lacking. Now, they were on their way to meet Jesus who never gave up on them, who forgave them, who inspired them to cast away their fishing nets and follow him three years earlier. But, when it came time to ante up they had faltered. They had reserved their whole selves for fear of public scorn, for fear of bucking the crowd, in fear for their lives and livelihoods. They did more than hide their love of their neighbors, of people different than themselves, of the poor, and different, and outcast, they dug a foxhole and crawled in to protect themselves. It seemed that three years of Jesus' sermons and words and healing and miracles and love of them and the different among the culture were not enough to equip them for risking all for love of neighbor.

As we read from Matthew in *The Message* version of the scriptures earlier, while the Jesus' followers were "headed for the mountain Jesus had set for their reunion. The moment they saw him they worshiped him. *Some, though, held back, not sure about worship, about risking themselves totally.* They had watched all that Jesus did and heard all that he had said and they had watched him die a terrible death and some of them *just-held-back-not-risking-themselves.* Someone once said, "Great things never came from comfort zones."¹ For a species to thrive, and sometimes even survive; for a people to grow and live out their purpose; for a church to make a difference, to grow in faith and today also to grow in numbers it cannot operate from the comfort zone. You cannot grow if you never come out of your cocoon. It took the courage of one man to ask twelve others to leave safety behind and follow him. It took his life, all that he had, and later all that the disciples had to start a movement that has lasted over two thousand years. *Those people are your legacy.* Those risk-takers are in the DNA of the People of the Way, otherwise known as Christians. Paraphrasing Tony Robbins, which I don't often do, but when he said something like this he has it right, "We must stop being afraid of what could go wrong, and start getting excited about what could go right." When there is something that is fair. When there is an action to right old wrongs. When the choice is between love and welcome or comfort and looking inward, choose love and welcome. Reach out especially to those have turned away from the church, who have feared walking through the doors of a church, to the lonely, the oppressed, the different, the poor, the young, and show them they are welcome here to worship a God of love, be with a vital community that is inclusive, nurturing, kind, and caring. May we not forget where we have come from—we have come from a hand-full of people who cared about the people discriminated and enslaved back in their day. They cared about people who were different than them. The roots of this church were embedded in rich soil and risk-taking. To grow and thrive we must go back to the beginning, to why this whole enterprise was begun. We must recapture that past, look around us and see who is being left-behind, or disliked, or shut-out today and welcome them in. Nothing ever grows by standing still—it needs to branch out, risk opening itself up to the nurturing rays of the sun. And sometimes, ways that aren't working and branches die in order to be reborn.

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https://www.google.com/search?q=quotes+about+taking+risks&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ved=oahUKEwj_fGskYbUAhUM7YMKHX24DIEQsAQILQ&biw=904&bih=379

Paraphrasing Martin Luther King, Jr. who said, “The ultimate measure of a [people] is not where [they] stand in moments of comfort and convenience, but where [they] stand in moments of challenge and controversy.”² Jesus told his friends, “I’ll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age.” (Matt. 28:20b)
Amen.

² <https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/keywords/controversy.html>