

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Sermon Title: Church
Scripture: Matthew 16:13-19
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Matthew 16:13-19

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' 'Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.'

Well, as you've already gathered from the hymns, the Scripture, even the headline on the bulletin, today's whole church service is about ... Church! Just ... Church. Church as a place. Church as an activity. Church as a people. Church as an idea. That's why, to the confusion of everybody, I put this right there at the top of the Sunday bulletin:

Church At Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

Those are two different connotations of "Church." Greenfield Hill Church, that's us. In this place, a particular people, in a particular place. But the word "Church," by itself at the top, is something else.

In my career, I've guest-preached at hundreds of churches across America, of every imaginable type, large and small, fundamentalist

and liberal, ethnic and denominational, formal and informal. And among some people, they see Church as an ideal, a goal. They'll say, before the service begins, "We're going to have real Church today!" And if the service was particularly good that day, afterward folks will say, "We really had Church today!"

So I put "Church" up there at the top as sort of our idealized goal for today. Not just two hymns, an anthem, a sermon, a prayer, and let's get out of here in 55 minutes, but something bigger, deeper, richer.

The fact is I'm writing a new book, and it's called, simply, *Church*. Another fact is that writing is both an exciting and a humbling activity. I was at my favorite coffeehouse on Friday, and when I went to pick up my cappuccino, the barista says, "I'm reading your book every night. I love it! My kids say, 'Mommy, why won't you play videogames anymore?' and I tell them, 'I have to read this book!'" True enough, but you can also go to Amazon.com and find a copy of my last book for 99 cents! And exactly one review.

Then there's my wife. Spouses exist for one purpose: to provide a reality check. Alida says I can't write a new book until I get rid of the 6,000 copies of my last two books that are sitting in the attic. Now, I prefer to think of the 5,500 we *have* sold, but she keeps bumping into the 6,000 unsold. Good point. But if I do get to write again, it will be *Church*, a subject that right now, is on everybody's mind.

We are three weeks from Easter. Our church will be packed to the gills. Churches all over the world will be full of great music, great pageantry, great joy. Christ is Risen! He is risen, indeed!" the proud celebratory boast of Christians for 2,000 years. God wins. Love wins. Love wins, we win. For one shining day, we get a glimpse of Church as "real Church." Something big, something grand, something monumental.

Much of the world is also caught up in the pope. The last pope defied tradition and retired, and now the world's Roman Catholic cardinals are gathered in Rome at the Vatican to elect the next pope. For half the Christian world, that's a big deal. For the other half, well, we don't have a pope. Well, why not? Our Scripture gives an explanation. Toward the end of his life, after spending three years with his disciples, Jesus asks them, "Who do people say that I am?" In other words, "What's the gossip? What's the talk around the water cooler?" And then he asks the disciples themselves, point blank, "Who do you say that I am?" In other words, "You've been with me nonstop for

three years; you've watched me, listened to me, followed me, questioned me, helped me. Now it's time to decide: who do you think I am?"

At that point, Peter blurts out, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God." At that point, I imagine Jesus putting his hands on Peter's shoulder, and he said, "You are Peter (which means "rock"), you are Peter, the rock on which I will build my Church. I will give you the keys to the Kingdom. And whatever you decide on earth is settled in heaven. And the gates of hell will not prevail against the Church."

For Catholics, that's pretty clear. Jesus is making Peter the first head of the Church. And all the popes down through history, they all lay claim to being in a direct succession from St. Peter. You will hear that a thousand times in the days ahead. "Who will inherit the seat of St. Peter?" "Who will follow in the 'footsteps of the fisherman,' St Peter?" "Who will be next in the succession of St. Peter?"

For Protestants, Jesus was affirming Peter for what he declared, his statement of faith. "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God." For Protestants, it is that declaration of faith that is the foundation of the Church. Not the person of St. Peter, but the faith of St. Peter. So we don't have a pope.

Actually, we don't need a pope — we have Alida! If something needs to get done, planned, decided, fixed, or led, we have Alida. But pope or no pope, we still have "Church." This organization, this institution, this idea, this movement has been around for 2,000 years. A lot has been done to try to destroy the Church, a lot of it self-inflicted. Efforts have been made to defeat the Church, silence the Church, co-opt the Church. We're still here.

A great professor said to me, "The proof that the Church belongs to God is that after 2,000 years of lousy leaders, we're still here!" Some of us grew up having to read the book (or else we saw the old Burt Lancaster movie) *Elmer Gantry*, about a crass, immoral preacher. But I think we'd all agree that the fictional Elmer Gantry had nothing on the real scoundrels of religion. My profession has robbed, cheated, manipulated, exploited, terrorized and betrayed people. And yet, Church is still here. I don't think there's any other business, corporation, movement, bank, industry, or idea that could have survived such an onslaught of attacks from within and without. Yet the Church is still here.

I invite you to open my book of poetry, sitting next to you in your pew, to page 19, a poem I titled "The Gates of Hell," based on today's Scripture. I wrote it during a visit to Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic, a city and a nation whose religion has lived a microcosm of all the battles, all the struggles, all the divisions, all the wars that Christianity has ever faced. And yet, I was surprised to see, impressed to see, "the Church still stands."

The Gates of Hell **(Matthew 16:18)**

*Across peaceful and hostile lands
spires still inspire
The Church still stands
atheists do their best
to lambaste
religion's excess
nevertheless
The Church
with capital "C"
us, we
still stand
and withstand
every
adversary.*

*The Nazis and Communists
have come and gone
no need to be afraid
I saw their May Day Parade*

*Once, yes,
they did suppress
and in time may try again
to mock or oppress
yet
the Church still stands
Gothic, Baroque, whatever
it does matter
the Church is structure*

*girth
heft
power*

*Presumed, assumed, exhumed,
Power, symbol and time
beyond fear
when yesterdays are past
the Church is still here.*

*The Gates of hell
cannot prevail.*

The Church still stands. Church is still here, "spires still inspire, precisely because Church stands for something greater than clergy or creed. It is said that "nothing is more powerful than an idea whose time has come." Church is an idea, and with Christ, its time had come. And it's still here.

Alida led a magnificent class on Tuesday night, looking at the movie "Les Misérables," based on the novel by Victor Hugo. It was so fascinating that I asked her to do it again this morning after the 10:30 service, a shortened version. If you possibly can, come. You'll be glad you did, whether you saw the movie or not. I'm not going to dwell on the story, except to say that it is wonderful story about justice and injustice, about poverty and hope, about loss and love. And it is majorly, majorly, majorly about faith, redemption, and forgiveness.

I'll leave that to Alida. But here's the point I want to make. Victor Hugo, the author, had a real love/hate relationship with religion. He wasn't keen on organized religion. He definitely didn't like clergy and he wasn't all that happy with God. The cowardice of religion and the fickleness of God both drove Victor Hugo around the bend.

And yet, when Hugo wrote one of the greatest novels of all time, one of the longest novels of all time, one of the most complex, tradition-breaking novels of all time, one of the most enduring, best-selling novels of all time, he makes a bishop of a church the first hero. He makes the central teaching of Jesus Christ the centerpiece of the story. And he makes the greatest promises of Church, forgiveness, and eternal life the climax of the story. Victor Hugo loved "Church," the idea of Church, even it he didn't think much about *THE* church or *A* church. In other words, he held out hope for Church if it ever gets its act together. And sometimes it does.

Let me close with a multi-layered story that might actually bring together my last book with my next book. My last book, as you've heard a million times, was *My Habitat for Humanity*, the story of my years as president of Habitat International, the Christian mission that builds houses with the poor all across America and around the world. I was president way back in the early days, getting Habitat started not only in Africa and India, but also in New York City and even Westchester County, N.Y. I'll come back to Westchester County in a minute. Jump ahead to Hurricane Sandy, wreaking destruction up and down the coast, including Queens, places like the Rockaways and Breezy Point, neighborhoods devastated by destruction. A large group of our church members, ASP veterans, went there in December to help, and it was overwhelming.

Alida and I went back last week. Right in the middle of Breezy Point, 130 houses destroyed by fire, now a gigantic empty lot. All around that emptiness, hundreds of houses turned over on their sides, or upside down, crumbled like little matchstick houses, people's lives and memories and dreams, torn apart.

And we stopped by Christ Church - Breezy Point, a tiny little church that barely hangs on in good times. I've been preaching there for over 40 years, and there are never been more than 30-35 people in attendance. But they have a big heart. They buy my books in volume, and they've given \$30,000 - \$40,000 to our FOCI India work through the years.

So we dropped in. It's a little white clapboard church, and the ocean came tearing through there too, knocked the altar through the back wall, tumbled the pulpit, smashed all the pews up against the walls, and thoroughly destroyed their fellowship hall. What few members they have, most lost their homes, their possessions. And yet ... and yet, visiting that church was the most exciting visit we could possibly have! It was amazing. The church was full of life, full of people, full of activity, fully of hope.

Remember I mentioned Westchester County Habitat for Humanity? Thirty years ago, I spoke in Rye and Scarsdale and White Plains, trying to find people who would care about their neighbors. Now, 30 years later, Westchester Habitat is living in Christ Church - Breezy Point!

The minute the water subsided, Westchester Habitat moved into Christ Church, organizing volunteers, 4,500 so far, bringing in college students from all over, meeting with broken and broke homeowners

from one end of the Rockaways to the other. One family in our church gave \$10,000, and they use every penny they can find to buy materials, to help clean up, tear down, fix and repair and rebuild.

That's "Church." Every day they're having "real Church" at Christ Church. This sermon has gone on long enough, so I'm not going to list all my supporting evidence, Bible verse by Bible verse, but I can tell you this: all the ways the Bible defines "Church," that church is having "Church." And we're part of it. They're part of us. We're part of them. That's also "Church."

As Jesus almost said, "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name ... that's Church!"