

'Why are we staying in this room?'

Sexual harassment came out of the workplace and onto the living room TV during the Clarence Thomas hearings. A recent publication tries to cast doubt on the testimony of Anita Hill.

Belonging to the gender that "doesn't get it," I've had to listen hard to the complaints of women before I realized that men don't get it on two fronts: we don't get what constitutes sexual harassment, and we don't get how difficult it is for women to speak up about it.

The difficulty of speaking up originates not just from embarrassment or fear of not being believed, but from politics, role confusion, peer pressure, racial pride and the threat of losing a job.

The testimony of Anita Hill opened the door of a dark little room. It gave the nation -- women and men -- permission to speak out loud about an ugly topic we'd kept locked up far too long. The room had provided its own comfort: hurts were kept private; no one spoke up publicly. But thanks to the leadership of some bold women, we asked ourselves a painful self-scrutinizing question: "Why are we staying in this room?"

On the Seventh Sunday of Easter we meet the disciples - men and women - sitting peacefully in a dark little room (Acts: 12-14). It provided its own comforts: they lived together as the closest of friends and devoted themselves to constant prayer.

They needed the comfort of that room: Jesus had just ascended to the heavens (Acts 1:1-11). With their leader gone, the mission now lay in their hands. But this was the same terrified band of followers who ran from the garden on the Mount of Olives the night before Jesus died, who pitifully defended Jesus by cutting off a slave's ear, who watched the trial at a distance and hid during the crucifixion. Even after the joy of the resurrection, they retreated to their little room.

Welling up around the disciples on this Seventh Sunday of Easter is the same fearsome, self-scrutinizing question: "Why are we staying in this room?" Its comforts provided security but blinded them to the needs of the world outside and to the mission Jesus left them to complete. The following Sunday, Pentecost, the question will persecute the disciples so icily that they'll burst forth from the room, filled with the Holy Spirit, and onto the streets of Jerusalem. There they will talk openly about fear, sin, and murder -- but this week they're afraid.

We all have our dark little rooms: family secrets we don't dare discuss; personal sins we'd never confess; child-molesting church leaders we've done too little about; addictions we're convinced no one else knows about; immoral work habits we never report; contributions to the Church we've never made.

It's comfortable in that dark little room. We can pray. We can keep peace. We can keep the pain quiet. And then one day the question burns too deeply within us, like a tongue of fire: "Why are we staying in this room?"

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