

Pastor's Message – 4/7/24

1 John 1:1-7b

Acts 4:32-35

Last week, we celebrated Easter: the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. We are 2000 years removed from the event, but the first followers of Jesus actually witnessed the event. Last week we heard Matthew's account and this week we hear from one of the eyewitnesses, from John, from whose 1st Letter we read today. "We saw him with our own eyes," he writes, "and touched him with our own hands (vs. 1b)." Walking with Jesus, listening to Him, seeing the miracles, witnessing his crucifixion, and seeing Him resurrected had a profound effect on them. They were changed and, because they saw Him alive, John writes, "We testify and proclaim to you that he is the one who is eternal life (vs. 2b)." And then we hear from Luke in our reading from Acts how those followers became the beginnings of the church and how it affected them.

We were not there; we've only heard the stories in the Bible and over the centuries. The question raised by our Bible reading today is, "What difference does Christ's resurrection make for us today?" The Easter message can be tested with two questions: 1) Is it true? and 2) Does it make a difference? Followers of Jesus believe the Easter message to be true! That's the good news. But does it make a difference in our lives today? How are we different because we believe? What do we take away from John's testimony and that of the early church?

How many times have you heard someone in the church remember fondly back to the days when every pew was full, the Sunday school had 400 children, and the preacher's sermons were consistently brilliant and inspiring? This particular brand of storytelling is especially prevalent where, at least to some extent, the stories are true.

In most mainline denominations, there was a post-war increase in church attendance, mostly because it was a serious social faux-pas to miss Sunday worship. Sunday schools were larger, stores were closed, and hockey games were played on Saturdays. Those were the good, old days. But things have changed. How much have they changed? How does Jesus' resurrection affect us now?

In ancient times extended families shared what few earthly goods they owned in order to survive. Possessions held in common within extended families was practiced all over the known world at that time. The followers of Jesus, having left their former lives, found themselves outside of biological families, but instead

became the family of God, continuing to share in common within this new family as they always had at home in earlier times.

This arrangement is foreign to our middle-class, individualistic, capitalist lifestyles, and our emphasis on biological family ties, but we must remember that this early church believed that Christ would return in glory during their lifetimes. There was no need for them to plan for a future on earth, with property and possessions.

This new family of God shared a common cause and a common devotion to Jesus as Messiah. They ate together and supported each other—an enormous difference that exists between us and the earliest followers of Jesus. Supporting each other, I believe, is the ongoing and forever appropriate response to the belief that Jesus has risen and is risen even today and every day. Not a “circle your wagons” and “everyone for themselves,” but looking out for the other and loving each other as Jesus loves us: the “mandatum novum, the new commandment, that Jesus gave His disciples during the Last Supper.

Acts 4:32-35 has been the center of much attention over the years in discussions of “Christian communism” or “Christian socialism.” Given the political history of socialism and the continuing hostility, it should probably come as no surprise that commentators on this passage have been divided — sometimes sharply — on the question of whether the practice of the Jerusalem church recounted here was a ‘failed experiment’ or an ‘ideal of the kingdom’ to which all Christians should endeavor to return.

The Acts reading tells us that the early followers of Jesus were “united in heart and mind,” which recalls the Old Testament charge to Israel: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut. 6:5). By choosing to echo this phrase, the author of Acts portrays the early Christians as not only devoted to one another but wholly devoted to God. Only by being completely committed to God and to each other could the early followers of Jesus “testify] powerfully to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.”

It is troubling that it sometimes appears that leaders of megachurches seem to imply that big churches are an expression of the “real” church because of the great numbers of “members” who worship there. What about the small rural churches where spectacular numerical growth is not possible. Can the average church of 50 – 100 people not testify powerfully to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus? The “glory” of the church is not large buildings with the best sound and lighting technology, but it is the loving and the sharing and the sacrifice of the

community of faith. The church that follows the model of Acts 4 is the church that shares and serves.

What makes this church community different from other communities? The Christian community is the place where resources and gifts are shared. Is this an Acts 4 church? "No one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common" (v. 32). Furthermore, they sold their lands and houses and "laid (the proceeds) at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need" (v. 35).

In an American capitalist society, it might be considered a bit radical to cash in one's equity and bring the money to the church council for distribution. Few congregations, if any, are communal.

But there are many congregations that enjoy an attitude of sharing: hot dishes delivered to the doors of the sick, trucks pull up when someone needs help with a move, church members pick up other church members for worship or drive them to the grocery store or to the doctor's office, United Methodist apportionments are distributed to the local and national churches and around the world to feed the hungry and provide homes for the homeless and the abused. The spirit of sharing is alive and well in this church and many. These are things that need to be lifted up and talked about – not to blow our own horn or pat ourselves on the back, but to tell the story that this church is a place where God's love is seen and felt and God's grace is present. Consider for a moment the ways in which this Christian community extends generosity to those within and those beyond the church walls. How does the larger community see and know that Jesus is resurrected here now and again?

The Christians of Jerusalem had been rescued by Jesus, so they wanted to rescue others. They "gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus" and shared their resources with such generosity that there "was not a needy person among them" (vv. 33-34). They became part of a movement called "the Way" (9:2), which took their lives in a new direction. It is no wonder the early Christian church was known as the Way. It was a way of life that stood in glaring contrast to the world. Of course, everyone was forewarned that in this kingdom everything is backward and upside-down — the last are first and the first are last, the poor are blessed and the mighty are cast from their positions of power.

The Christian Way still stands in contrast to the world. Instead of "me first," it is "us first." Instead of "hate your enemy," it is "love your enemies" (Matthew 5:43-44). Instead of "store up treasures on earth," it is "store up treasures in heaven" (Matthew 6:19-20).

In the new Christianity of first-century Jerusalem, Christians worked together to help those in need. Rather than the church being split into liberals and conservatives, “the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and mind” (Acts 4:32). Possessions were not hoarded, but instead “they felt that what they owned was not their own, so they shared everything they had” (v. 32). Rather than the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer, “There were no needy people among them,” because they pooled their resources and distributed aid “to give to those in need” (vv. 34-35).

We are still part of this movement called the Way, one that takes our lives in a new direction. Having been rescued by Jesus and given new life by his resurrection, we can see a need, meet a need, and change the world. And like the Christians of Jerusalem, we do this best when we work together and stand united.

How do you respond to John’s testimony? What experience of Christ have you “heard . . . seen . . . looked at . . . touched”? And then how do you share your experience of the risen Christ with others? How are you inspired to share your experience of God’s grace?

Pastors whose churches host 12-step recovery groups sometimes have the opportunity to interact with group members as they come and go. One pastor told of an encounter he had with a member of an AA group who observed, “I’ve met Jesus in your sanctuary a time or two, but he never fails to show up at AA meetings.”

What the AA member is talking about is grace, the unmistakable sign of God’s favor, as people in crisis discover and claim the spiritual power to remake their lives for the better.

The earliest followers of Jesus faced the challenge of creating communities unlike any that had existed before. This was an amazing opportunity because they had the chance to build communities from the ground up, creating more open, intentional, and caring fellowships than they had known before. But it was also daunting. They sought to build their new communities in a politically, socially, and religiously hostile world where they were not guaranteed success. Both of our Bible readings today reveal early Christians struggling to form new communities, make them whole and healing spaces, strengthen them to survive the harshest threats, and build them to endure. Because of their courage, we still live in Christian communities of all kinds, and we continue to find ways to make them caring communities. They inspire us to carry on in the continued blessing of God’s grace that this Church has the courage and commitment to live in and show the light of God.