



## “Life in the Spirit: Practicing Resurrection”

Acts 4:32-35

April 18, 2021

Easter has a way of doing things to people. Following the crucifixion of Jesus, that Friday afternoon of swirling chaos and pervasive fear, the disciples run from the scene, keep their distance, scatter like shepherd-less sheep, then reconvene in a huddled mass of anxiety beyond locked doors. But when Easter arrives, this disappointed and disappointing bunch becomes something different altogether. The Church. People of the Way. A Community of the Spirit. The Body of Christ. Easter has a way of doing things to people.

This morning’s scripture passage from the Book of Acts is a picture of what Easter makes possible. Unity of heart and soul. All possessions are shared in common. A powerful testimony to Christ’s resurrection. Not a needy person among them. The Early Church community looks like the perfect way to be a Christian.

*And* so unlike the experience of being a Christian for many of us. And so, I believe, it is quite natural for us to want to go back and relive the “good old days” of church—when there were no doctrinal debates, no political posturing, no budget meetings, no heart-wrenching decisions or entrenched divisions. It is particularly tempting when we read this text as Christians confronting the complexities of living faithfully in our own time—a time when many congregations waste precious time and energy drawing lines of exclusion; when too many identify the Christian faith with fleeting happiness or prosperity or power; when the unity of the church is under constant threat from partisan wrangling, political extremism, ideological idolatry, and irrelevance. You may have seen the headlines declaring the results of Gallup’s latest report on religiosity in the United States. The analysis from Religion News Service summarizes—“Ask Americans if they believe in God and most will say yes. But a growing number have lost faith in organized

religion. For the first time since the late 1930s, fewer than half say they belong to a house of worship.” And so we idealize the Early Church, or perhaps the church of our childhood or another era, and disparage today’s expression of it. Perhaps some of us consider retreating from the harshness of the world and the harmful perceptions of church, preferring to huddle in likeminded isolation, protective piety, or smug sectarian superiority.

Here’s the problem. These practices of pessimism or inclination to isolate belie the witness of the Church in Acts. Despite the halo we insist on attaching to the Early Church, it too struggled with human need, contented with culture, and found itself in the middle of political debate.

This morning’s passage comes just two chapters after Pentecost and a lot has happened to the church in a short span of time. It does not have any stars in its eyes anymore. It has already encountered poverty in the face of a man asking for help on the steps of the church. It has already encountered theological controversy. It has already been hassled by the culture; in fact, two of its ministers, Peter and John, have already done jail time. They’ve had a healthy dose of reality and there is no shallow romanticism about the church left. What we have instead is the picture of a church utterly determined to live the way of the Risen Christ *in the world*. In the world. Our ancestors in the faith remembered that Jesus didn’t rise from the dead to escape the grasp of this broken creation—his resurrection opens the way to redemption for all of us, for all of creation. The theatre of resurrection is *this* world. We are called to embody the newness that God intends for all. *This* is how we live the faith, and how we share it with others.

Just before Easter, a friend sent me a wonderful

interview with my old professor Stanley Hauerwas, a provocative, brilliant theologian and Christian ethicist. The entire interview is worth reading, but I want to quote his final answer to you today. The question had to do with the handwringing over the loss of Christian identity in recent decades, polls like the one Gallup just published. Here's his response:

*"I...think that one of the good things that is happening today is precisely the loss as Christians of our status and power in the wider society. That loss makes us free. We as Christ's disciples ain't got nothing to lose anymore. That's a great advantage because as a people with nothing to lose, we might as well go ahead and live the way Jesus wants us to. We don't have to be in control or be tempted to use the means of control. We can once again, like the first Christians, be known as that people that don't [lie to] the world. Despair is a sin, and I'm hopeful because being a people of peace is ultimately about God's victory in the world. It's not about us."*

A people with nothing to lose. Put another way, we can live as a liberated people—set free from every allegiance and distraction that pulls us away from faithful living. We can live in the world as God's people because God has given us the gift of belonging. In this way, we can be the church on fire, the church renewed, restored, resurrected by the power of God.

Only an experience of the resurrection could transform a circle of shuddering disciples into a community of convicted believers ready to risk for the truth of those convictions. Without Easter, they're hopeless. Because of Easter, they are fearless. All that changed was everything—their very understanding of reality. If death is defeated, the disciples ain't got nothing to lose. So why not live the way of Jesus? Why not join the movement of the Spirit? Why not give what you have to those whom God says belong to you? Why not change the world through the power of this gospel?

And so it is for us. Without Easter, we're hopeless. Without Easter, I could not stand in this pulpit days after yet another senseless killing and speak about the grace of God and the capacity for change. Without Easter, we could myopically focus on our own security and turn aside from the suffering of our neighbors.

Without Easter, we might believe that what is will always be—that weapons can never be beaten into tools for cultivation, that human prejudice is indelible, that those with the most toys win. Without Easter, the message of Jesus is halted at Golgotha, stamped out by sin and denied by death.

But we are an Easter people. And so today I *can* stand in this sacred space and proclaim the God of grace. We can live as those who are free to follow Jesus in every part of our lives. We can reimagine reality in ways that call us to the common good, to mutual care, to extensive compassion.

Easter has a way of doing things to people. This is what Luke records in his description of the early church in Acts. And this is what I want to tell you is possible in our churches and our communities and our nations and our world. If we are to live out the Easter vision of the world, if we are to practice resurrection we must break down boundaries, cross borders, leave behind our insecurity and fear, and engage *this* world in transforming ways. The message of Easter is this—the Risen Christ is on the loose. No longer bound to the First Century or a hill called Calvary, but free. Free to reign among us in humble power and love.

Because of this, and for no other reason, we can receive a fresh infusion of hope this day. In all our humanity and brokenness, we are the community of God's people shaped by Easter. Resurrection happens in and among us.

If, by God's grace, you can believe this gospel truth, then your life (and our life together) must give witness to the new life...and the new world...God is making possible. Easter has a way of doing things to people. We beg you, O Lord, may it be so with us. Amen.