

Easter 2B 2018, Acts 4:32-35, April 8, 2018, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

Last Sunday the Christian churches of the West celebrated the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Churches were filled with happy and joyous Christians. We sang the stirring resurrection hymns, we shouted “Christ is Risen,” the church was drenched in lilies and flowers. This morning our brothers and sisters in the Eastern Orthodox churches are celebrating Easter, because they use a slightly different method for calculating the date to celebrate the resurrection. But their celebrations will be no less festive, no less joyous than ours were a week ago.

The church’s celebration of Easter is not just confined to one day, however. Easter is a whole season in the church, lasting a full seven weeks. We call this season of Easter the “week of weeks” lasting forty-nine days until the fiftieth day after Easter which is Pentecost.

During this Easter season our scripture readings focus on Jesus’ appearing to his disciples after the resurrection. Today’s traditional gospel reading is the story of Thomas, unfairly, in my opinion, referred to as Doubting Thomas. He needs to see Jesus for himself. But Jesus turns it around and blesses those who will come to believe through the witness of Thomas’ testimony.

This morning I’d like to turn to another of our readings, the first one from the book of Acts. During the Easter season we read from this book showing us how the resurrection message began at Jerusalem, but quickly spread throughout the world. Acts shows us how revolutionary, how radical, this news about Jesus rising from the dead becomes. The message changes lives, it changes how people live, it becomes a force that will shake kingdoms.

Our reading this morning tells us how the radical resurrection message changed the church in Jerusalem. They all became socialists. They abolished private property. They pooled all their resources together in order to take care of one another. How’s that for a radical vision? What does it mean for us that at least here, in Jerusalem, at this particular time, some Christians responded to the gospel message of Jesus’ resurrection they decided to pool all of their possessions together and live like hippies on a commune? Are we to take it from this scripture that we too are supposed to sell everything we own, put it all together in a big account and just use what we need?

Before I tell you no, that’s not what it means, and that we can’t necessarily follow exactly what the believers in Jerusalem did, let’s just sit for a moment with what may be an uncomfortable truth. Namely this: there was a time when Christians, responding to the message of Jesus’ resurrection, came to believe that personal possessions just didn’t seem important anymore. A new and different vision caught their hearts and their imaginations. That vision, with Jesus at the center, broadened beyond individual needs and desires and priorities to include others in the community. They believed it was a scandal and offensive to God that some people with money don’t need to worry about food or clothing or shelter or education while others didn’t know where their next meal was coming from. This was more than an extra five dollars for the Food Bank, or even serving a meal for the poor. These believers came to a new vision of community living where everyone shared one another’s burdens and blessings.

We don’t know how long this vision lasted in Jerusalem. But we do know from the writings of Christians and non-Christians alike in those early years that Christians gained a positive reputation for caring for the needs of others. They were willing to go to great lengths to serve the needs of the poor, even to the point of giving up their own possessions. One Roman emperor, a couple of hundred years later, complained how Christians not only helped the poor among themselves, but also helped the poor who weren’t Christians. Their generosity

undermined the government's efforts to keep the population under control, and sowed the seeds for future social transformation. The most famous statement comes from the Christian writer Tertullian in the second century, "Our care for the derelict and our active love have become our distinctive sign before the enemy. . . See, they say, how they love one another and how ready they are to die for each other."

Clearly, early Christians made a positive impression on the world around them. Their care for one another, their desire to meet the needs of the poor, even their willingness to die for each other, stood in marked contrast to the rest of society.

One wonders how true this is today. A couple of years ago a major three-year study reported how young people aged 16 to 29 who did not belong to a church thought of Christianity. The results were shocking, sad, and a challenge to the church today. The vast majority of young people think of Christianity as "judgmental, too political, insensitive to others, and just plain boring" Perception is often reality and it seems to me that the public face of Christianity is in trouble. It's a hard truth to swallow that when I'm sitting in a coffee shop somewhere and look around that, were I to identify myself as Christian, many young people would write me off as judgmental, insensitive to others and probably a bigot.

Is the answer to adopt the radical life of the early church by selling what we own and live communally with one another? Well, that would surely get us noticed wouldn't it? And if we were able to sustain it for, let's say, more than 72 hours, we might even get a story in the local paper, and if we lasted a week or more, maybe CNN would send a camera crew. There are pockets of Christians here and there who have tried to do that, but by and large it didn't last during the time of the New Testament and it's not likely to last now.

So what's the answer? The answer is Jesus and the resurrection. I know that sounds like one of those Sunday School answers. But Jesus is the source of the vision shared by those Christians in Jerusalem. The writer of Acts tells us plainly, "With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all." Their vision is rooted in the resurrection of Jesus fueled by grace. It wasn't that they had to sell everything. But for them, at that moment, they realized that Jesus living though dead made all the difference in the world. I think their vision was probably something like this: "Jesus lives. He's my future. I have nothing to worry about. My possessions aren't going to secure my future, because that belongs to Jesus. I'm going to share what I have now where it can do some real good."

So what difference does the statement "Jesus lives, though he once was dead" make in your life? In the life of your family? In the life of this church? Does the resurrection of Jesus speak directly to you in the way you live, what you do with your money, how you make your plans regarding the future? Does it sound like grace and good news and a life-changing message of hope? And if so, what does that mean, here and now? Our response may be different than the early church in Jerusalem who sold all they had and shared it among themselves. Or maybe not. How is life different now that Jesus lives?

A church that doesn't seek to answer that question for itself in its own time and place just simply ceases to be the church. But we need not fear that possibility because Jesus lives. Amen.