

He Is Risen, Indeed!
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Acts 4:32-35

³²Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. ³³With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. ³⁵They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

John 20:19-31

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." ²⁸Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

I have said to you before that I feel for Peter, so often being portrayed as not understanding what we can see so clearly. If there is one figure for whom I might feel worse, it's Thomas. Doubting Thomas. The one who we remember as not trusting that Jesus had returned until he had touched the wounds that Jesus had shown to the disciples while he was away. Believe it or not, the actual text portrays Thomas as the most faithful of the bunch. Both weeks, Jesus greets those gathered by saying, "Peace be with you." Then, both weeks, unbidden, he shows them his hands and his sides. The disciples, in the first week, rejoice, but it is Thomas in the following week who responds exclaiming in recognition Christ's identity, "My Lord and my God!"

And, if that weren't enough to convince you that Thomas had a more faith-filled response, remember back to our reading from John last week. When it was still early on the first day of the week, Mary

Magdalene saw the risen Christ at the tomb and then went back to the disciples to share that she had seen the Lord and to share what he had told her, that he was ascending to his father and their father, to his God and their God. We begin this morning's reading from the gospel of John with, "When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews..." The first day of the week. The very same day that Mary Magdalene had shared with them the good news that Christ had indeed defeated death, affirming all that he had taught them. And where were the disciples? Hidden behind locked doors lest the leaders of the Jewish faith seek them out to kill them, NOT out sharing the good news.

And, a week later when Thomas was with them, what do we read? "A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut..." Again, the disciples are hiding behind closed doors. But, this time, it's a full week after Mary Magdalene shared the good news and after Jesus said to them, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you. Receive the Holy Spirit." They were commissioned a week earlier, given the gift of the Holy Spirit, and yet they are not out spreading the good news that Mary Magdalene shared with them. Instead, they are still behind shut doors! Thomas can at least say he had yet to be commissioned.

So, maybe, Thomas wasn't worse than the rest. But that doesn't change the fact that none of them seemed to take their commission to heart. The word "commission" comes from the Latin *commissio*, which comes out of *committere*, meaning "the act of bringing together." How apt to describe Jesus' charge to them. The Father sent Jesus to bring people together in God's name and so Jesus sent the disciples to do the same. And when Jesus sees that they hadn't begun, how does he respond? Gail R. O'Day reminds us, "He never lectured the disciples for hiding behind closed doors even after they had received the Spirit, nor did he censure Thomas for wanting a tactile experience of the risen Lord. The stories are parables of grace."¹

Grace, forgiveness, new life, thankful response - all part of the joy of Easter, all part of the proclamation that "He is risen, indeed!" Even with Easter Day behind them, and us, the message of joy remains and waits to be told. You may already realize that Easter is not confined to one day in the church calendar but is a season unto itself called Eastertide. A pastor friend of mine has been posting in Facebook each day the ways in which he is holding onto the joy of Easter Sunday, in an effort to help himself not forget the day we celebrated just a week ago. Maybe by this point you don't want to see another marshmallow Peep or jelly bean or chocolate egg ever again but you, too, are called to remember Easter and to continue to celebrate it and share the good news. In fact, we are called to be Easter people all year, sharing the hope that the resurrection brought and continues to bring. He is risen,

¹ *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 6*, p. 405.

indeed!

Like the disciples, though, it's easy to turn the lock on the door out of habit; it's easy to go back to our pre-Easter, Ordinary Time, mid-week lives, back to being busy, back to being distracted, back to the rest of life, where hope and joy are less frequent visitors. Our other reading from Acts is meant to buoy us, to encourage rather than discourage. Reading about the early church's seemingly idyllic behavior can make us wonder if we even stand a chance of meeting their noble standards. Well, there, too, is a bit of misconception. We read that the early church was of one heart and soul, NOT one heart and mind. And we read that all shared. Except, in the very same book of Acts, we can read about Ananais and Sapphira who sold everything but kept some back for themselves. And we read about the need for the role of deacons to help make sure the widows, who were being neglected in the distribution of food, were remembered.

They weren't as perfect as we might like to paint them. But they *did* remember to be Easter people. "With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus." By the time Acts was written, well after Jesus' ascension, the disciples, those who follow, began to live into their role as apostles, those who are sent. They had been given the gift of the Holy Spirit *and* they chose to *receive* the gift of the Holy Spirit. They were richly blessed for the work they were called to do. We can and should be emboldened by their example but must be cautious not to paint a halo around them. Cynthia Campbell, scholar and former president of McCormick Theological Seminary, cautions us saying, "Anyone who has hummed 'Those were the days' knows the trap that such nostalgia represents. On the one hand, indulging in nostalgia draws one away from the reality of the present into an imagined past. On the other, even the most sincere indulgence in nostalgia contains an undertone of cynicism; most of us really do know that the past was never quite as rosy as we imagine it to have been."²

So what can we do? The early church was richly blessed for the work of their commission. And so have we been, and even more so, for Jesus says, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." How then does this assembled group of people who gather as First Presbyterian then behave as an Easter church full of Easter people? Like the early church, we pledge our finances to help others, pledging a tremendous twenty-five percent more than last year. That is how we show that the message of Easter is stronger than poverty. Like the early church, we welcome members and baptize, committing in those acts to support one another in faith with love and guidance so that we might all come to know Christ better. Like the early church, we support the work of those who serve Christ beyond our own doors. We contribute to the Hope Center and St. Joe's Clinic and other groups which serve the larger community of which we are a part. We participate in the CROP Walk to fight hunger

² *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 6*, p. 384.

locally and globally. And, next week, we will add our offerings to a special offering for Al and Ellen Smith so that they might continue their important work of ministering to the least and the last in the Roma peoples in Russia. Most of all, we hold each other accountable.

It is not bad to remember history, history of the early church, history of this church - there is much good to be learned from history so long as we don't let it dictate what can and cannot be done today. We hold each other accountable in that we don't let one another forget our commission, the same one Jesus gave to the earliest church. It is the same one we promise on behalf of infants, the same one we affirm for ourselves at confirmation, the same one we vow to fulfill when we recite the ancient Apostles' Creed - we pledge to go and make disciples by sharing the joyful message of Easter. He is risen, indeed! We were extraordinary last week, gathering to sing and proclaim and claim the good news that we have been given new life through Jesus Christ, life where we are freed from worries about ourselves so that we might care for others. We are still extraordinary. We are back here, together, asserting that hope wins. Christ *is* risen! Go out from this place as extraordinary Easter people.

Let us pray: God of grace, forgive us for the days when we forget to be Easter people, and ignite your hope within us that we might continue to be extraordinary. Amen.