

2 Easter
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Responding to the Resurrection

It is a real joy today to have these Scripture lessons to preach from! They are among my favorites in the Bible. Usually we pick one to focus on, and that's sufficient. A preacher can get into enough trouble with one text; he or she doesn't need to complicate things with three or four. But these are each wonderful passages, and, like chocolate after Lent, I give in.

On Maundy Thursday, we saw Jesus washing his disciples' feet and commanding them to the humble service of caring for one another and for any people in need, loving, he said, as I have loved you. Now, in Acts, we see the earliest church doing exactly that. It says they were of one heart and soul, and, as evidence of that unity, they sold their possessions and held the balance in common, for distribution to any who were in need. Apparently there was no need for an annual stewardship campaign; they gave it all the first time around! Psalm 133 exclaims, "O how good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity." They were one in love, not so much love as a feeling, but love as practical action.

The collect for today asks that "all who have been reborn into the fellowship of Christ's Body may show forth in their lives what they profess by their faith." And that is what those earliest Christians, all followers of Jesus, were trying to do: practice what they believed. In the General Thanksgiving, used during Morning Prayer services, the Prayer Book says, "And, we pray, give us such an awareness of your mercies, that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise, not only with our lips (as the Apostles in Acts were doing, testifying to Jesus' resurrection), but in our lives, by giving up ourselves to your service" (just as those first Jerusalem Christians were doing, by sacrificially serving one another).

In First John, the writer says that those who have been in contact with Jesus are impelled to tell other people about it – they must testify to their own experience of the risen Lord – what they have seen and heard – so that the whole community of God's people may be united in joyful

fellowship with the Father, with his Son Jesus Christ, and with one another. What God has done for us in Jesus is the deepest bond we have. It unites us in the joy of proclaiming, "Christ is risen!"

["He is risen indeed!"]

First John also says that because of what Christ has done for us, bringing light to our darkness, our sins are forgiven. And he continues to do so. He is our ongoing advocate with the Father, the once and for all atoning sacrifice for our sins, and for the sins of the whole world. We are, therefore, free, free to walk together in the light, with him and with one another, in unity, as beloved children of God. This is our resurrection identity, and we can claim it every day.

But in those first few days after Jesus rose from the dead and began to appear to his disciples, at different times and in different places, it took a while for the reality of his resurrection to sink in. Faith did not come easily, even in the face of this greatest of all miracles. And then, there is the "so what" question. So, Jesus is risen, what does that mean for the community of Jesus' followers from Easter onward?

Well, we have seen already from Acts and First John, some of the components of the answer. We are unified in sacrificial service to one another and to any in need. We affirm our resurrection identity, the deepest bond of our unity, as forgiven, beloved children of God, because of what Jesus Christ has done for us.

And each of the four Gospels' post-resurrection stories, including today's lesson from John, help us to discover further components of the answer. In Mark, the women who came to the tomb, expecting to anoint with spices the body of a dead man, have those expectations blown away, when they are told "He has risen! He is not here." So shocked are they, that they apparently don't even hear the part about telling his disciples what they have discovered; they flee from the tomb confused and terrified . . . Well, that's one option. He has gone on ahead of us, but we are not yet ready to meet him. This whole resurrection business is quite bewildering. I think I'll go home and watch the Masters.

In Matthew's account, the women, just as afraid, but now beginning to be joyful with hope, finally make it to tell the other disciples that Jesus has risen and gone on ahead of them to

Galilee. So when the apostles get there, they do meet the risen Lord. It says, "When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted." But, whether worshiping or doubting or both, Jesus commissions them to make disciples of all people, telling everyone the good news of the gospel and teaching them Jesus' ways.

In Luke, it is the women again who are the first witnesses to and proclaimers of Jesus' resurrection. They find the empty tomb, where they had seen Jesus' body laid. They receive the message that he has been raised from the dead, and they go and tell all this to the other disciples. And Luke adds, "But they did not believe the women; their words seemed like nonsense." Pete, however, got up and ran to the tomb, saw that it was empty and said, "Hmmp! Weird!" (It's in the book.)

And so, we come to John's Gospel, and our reading for today. There, Mary Magdalene, representing all the women, finds the empty tomb, tells the disciples, two of whom run to the tomb, find it empty, except for the Shroud of Turin (or not), and it says, . . . "they all went home." (I don't think the Masters was on that day.) But Mary does not go home, she waits in the garden, and Jesus comes to her. After mistaking him for someone else, she hears him speak her name, and Jesus calls her to become a proclaimer of his resurrection.

Next, we find, that when they all went home, they locked the doors. Empty graves, dead Messiahs appearing in visions, maybe a hit list of Jesus' gang members with their names on it. They were afraid, and not just the women, and rightly so. But Jesus, not limited by locked doors, appears in their midst, and says, twice, "Peace be with you." He shows them his pierced body, gives them his Spirit, and sends them out, beyond the locked doors of fear, into the world to be agents of forgiveness and new life.

And, just as in the other three Gospels, there creeps in the element of doubt. Thomas the Twin had not been present when Jesus first appeared to the others. So, they told him, "We have seen the Lord." And he said, "In your dreams. I won't believe unless I see for myself." So, Jesus came, and a third time said to them all, "Peace be with you." (They must have needed it still.) Then he turned to Thomas personally, just as he had to Mary in the garden, and said, "Thomas,

with your fingers and your hands, know that I am real. And from now on, don't be unbelieving but believing."

So Thomas saw and believed, and ever since, we who have not seen, including those first readers of the Gospel of John and that early Christian community in Acts – we who have not seen and yet who have believed, and have kept on believing, and have kept on serving, and have kept on forgiving, and have kept on loving -- we who have not seen and yet believe receive Jesus' Easter blessing.

And so in his name, go into all the world in peace. Be people of the good news. Rejoicing in the power of the Spirit, believe, serve, forgive, and love, as Christ has served, loved, and forgiven you.

In the name of the Father, the risen Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.