

Sermon

April 30, 2023 [First Reading: Acts 2:42-47]

Have No Fear, Little Lutheran Flock

Pastor Dan Peterson

Grace to you and peace from God, the source of life, and from Jesus, God's Son, who is that life in the world. Amen.

As I mentioned at the outset of our worship today, the title of today's sermon is "*Have No Fear, Little Lutheran Flock.*" My goal here is not only to comfort or even challenge, but again, also as I said at the beginning, to inspire. Let's hope that's the case.

On Easter Sunday, I began a four-part series on the Resurrection that culminates today. The question we should be asking, I argued, is not whether the Resurrection happened, but what *difference it does or might make in our lives.*

I asked it with respect to us in the here and now, but also with respect to those audiences of the Gospel writers: what difference did it make to *them?*

Imagine how we might be changed, if, instead of simply looking to the past, we look for "signs of the Resurrection," to borrow the language of the Nicene Creed, in the *present.* What if, instead of simply being a reanimated cadaver, the risen Christ is a *living reality* we can experience in the here and now?

If that's the case, how might we describe this "living reality of Christ in the here and now"? Well, one answer comes to us from none other than Martin Luther.

He writes, "Our Lord has written the promise of the Resurrection, not in books alone, but in every leaf of springtime." I love that, especially on a day like yesterday: "every leaf of springtime." In other words, this is the power of renewal and transformation in nature and history, which, through Christ, we can experience personally in our lives, a kind of power that *empowers* each of us.

I think here of Paul in Philippians 4:13, where he says, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me." That included hardships, calamities, beatings – Paul did all of that empowered by the risen Christ – a power that enables us to live a new way of life. We heard about that recently in Colossians 3: to die to our old selves, our egocentrism our selfish desires, to "be crucified with Christ," as Paul says in Galatians 2, "and reborn, raised to new life for others."

Suddenly, here, we see that the Resurrection can be relevant for us. It's not something that simply happened once upon a time in the not-so-distant past. It's a living reality that continues, both in nature, but in a personal way, in and through Christian faith.

That was Easter Sunday. On the second Sunday of Easter, we turned to the experience of the living Christ as present in community. Our Gospel reading for the day was John, and John in the Gospel reading talks about Thomas. The question I raised was, of all the stories about Jesus John had at his disposal, which he acknowledges at the end of the Gospel, *why did John alone among the Gospel writers choose to include the story of Thomas?*

Well, the answer, I think, is twofold. First, John was writing for a Greek-speaking audience that had been displaced from the original location of Jesus's ministry. In other words, Jesus was a Jew living in Palestine, whose primary language was Aramaic – scholars guess he also would have spoken Hebrew, Latin, and Greek (and then of course, English, but that's relatively minority opinion there).

So, Jesus lived as an Aramaic speaking Jew in Palestine. John was writing for a primarily *Gentile* audience, living most likely in the seaport of Ephesus. Accordingly, John included the story to emphasize the importance of believing in Christ *without* the direct evidence that the earlier Aramaic community had. "Blessed is the one who has not seen and yet still believes!" That's the point of the Thomas story. So, it was there originally, to comfort and uplift those who had not seen directly the Resurrection.

Secondly, I believe the story was included because it stresses the importance of community as essential to the experience of the risen Christ. Let me say that again. It stresses *the importance of community as essential to the experience of the risen living Christ*. Recall Thomas's circumstances. He was away from the other disciples. He was alone, presumably. He was isolated. He was separated from them. Only when Thomas is brought back, or reintegrated into community, does he experience the appearance of the risen Christ! This is no accident. This is no coincidence. As Matthew 18:20 has it, Jesus is with us "whenever two or more gathered in His name" – that's His promise. Like Thomas, therefore, God in Christ calls each of us, as God did today, out of isolation and into fellowship, *out of isolation and into fellowship*. There and here we experience the living Christ together in worship, which is to say, through Christian fellowship.

Religion, therefore, is not what a famous philosopher described as "what one does with one's solitude." That's not to say solitude is bad. One can certainly have spiritual experiences in solitude. But when divorced from community, solitude easily becomes *solipsism*.

Have you heard that term before? It's a word that refers to the theory that the self is the only reality. So, without community, solitude easily can become *solipsism*. When you say someone is *solipsistic*, you're essentially saying they're a narcissist. They believe they are the only reality. And, of course, we all know people like that – everybody else but ourselves...

Now, if community is essential to the experience of the living Christ, not only within us, but among us, when we gather in His name, what distinguishes us from other types of communities, other social clubs, like the Rotary Club, or Lions?

Well, I think there are a number of ways to answer this question, but let me just offer two briefly.

First, from the beginning, the Christian community has been defined by *love*. That, at least in the early church, was what made the community stand out apart from other religious communities in the ancient world.

Second, what makes us different is that at the heart of our community is a ritual where we share what we have in Holy Communion, which is to say we share what we've been given. On the third Sunday of Easter last week, therefore, I preached on the harsh words of Paul in First Corinthians regarding communion. Listen to these words closely: "Whoever eats the bread and drinks the wine in an unworthy manner," Paul writes, "will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord" [verse 27, Chapter 11]. Again, "for all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves." That's verse 29.

This Body, however, we discovered, was not only present in, with, and under the bread and wine on the table. What Paul is referring to here, as well, when he talks about "discerning the Body," is the community of believers at the table. *You are the Body of Christ.*

You practice, or I should say, *we* practice the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner, when we fail to discern the Body at the table as a community of equals, where all distinctions, Jew or Greek, as Paul says; male or female, slave or free, gay or straight, Republican or Democrat — all those distinctions fall away.

When we exclude people, say, because they are poor, such that, as Paul writes, "the rich become intoxicated and the poor leave hungry," then we are receiving Communion in an unworthy manner. But at *this* table, distinctions in status or prestige based on wealth, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc., have no place whatsoever, for all are one in the body of Christ.

When we repeat the action of sharing, which Christ Himself instituted, we commit ourselves to radical inclusivity, where, even if we don't all have the same, all have enough.

Now, let's put this all together. I love it. (Notice how the sun shines — that was planned.) Let's put this all together:

If the Resurrection is an experience of participating in the reality of the living Christ, and if we essentially experience the living reality of Christ in community, and if Christian community is distinguished by the emphasis that places on sharing as evident in the Lord's Supper, then what consequences might there be, not only for the Lord's table and how we practice it, but also, for how we take this out into the world?

For an answer, I invite you to turn to the First Reading, the book of Acts chapter 2. Notice the first verse: "The baptized devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."

The important word that I see here is "breaking" — breaking of bread. It's not just the bread itself. It's about *breaking* or *sharing* the bread in Jesus's name. It's a ritual *action*, not simply a ritual thing.

They break the bread together, and in prayer they devote themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship. What happens next after they break bread?

Well, as you can see, there is a change in lifestyle informed by the sacrament. Here we have the birth of a wholly new type of community not only in *Western* history, but as far as I know in *world* history.

Look at verse 44. "All who believed were (*I wish "believed" would be translated "trusted."* *It's much more – faith is an attitude of trust. It's not submission to doctrine...*)
"All who believed were together and had all things in common."

There's Consequence 1: they had all things in common.

Consequence 2: they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. So, Consequence 2: they would give to others as others had need. And then they exhibited – we see this in verse 46 – tremendous gratitude at home when they were not in fellowship with others.

Now this lifestyle I think, understandably makes a lot of Christians, especially our evangelical brothers and sisters, uncomfortable today. Why? Because it makes it sound like the early Christian community was a bunch of Commies, a bunch of Communists who dissolved private property and shared everything they had together. Now, the way critics of this passage get around it, at least insofar as it's read as lending itself to a communal lifestyle, the way folks get around this is to restrict it to the beginning of the Jesus movement, to relegate it to the past some 2,000 years ago. But notice the language; notice the language!

We take a look again at verse 45: "All who believed *would sell*, and in the process, they were *being saved*. Now I love this statement of "being saved" – in the Greek, that is to say the language of the New Testament, these verbs are not written in the past tense! They're written in what's called the present progressive, which means *it is an ongoing activity* that cannot be relegated to the past. It's something that *continues* to happen, or at least should happen, when Christians break bread together and gather in Jesus's name.

Now again note that they were "being saved." A famous Eastern Orthodox theologian from England named Kallistos Ware tells the story of how one time he was on the train, and he was dressed in garb that's even more ridiculous than what I'm wearing right now. (*This isn't ridiculous. This is actually my favorite thing to wear. If I could wear it out and about I'd be so happy and excited*), but in any case, he is wearing the priestly garb, he's got the big cross. And of course, as you know with orthodox priests, he has, not the short Lutheran beard, but the long, orthodox beard.

And a young man approaches them. And he says, "Have you been saved?"

And what Ware does and I think it must, might be in reference to this passage, he says, "I am *being saved*."

What he's done is turned something that we often relegate to the past, whether it's in the context of Jesus's ministry, or some moment earlier in our own lives where we accepted Jesus, as if thereafter it was "a done deal." What Ware says is, no, this is an *ongoing process*, which is consistent not only with the book of Acts; we see this in other New Testament writings as well. (It may be the caffeine but I find this really exciting. I hope you do, too.) Second Corinthians 5:19: "In Christ," Paul says, "God *was reconciling* the world to God." So not that God had already completed the reconciliation. But we are part of a *process of reconciliation*. The same I think is true of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a *process*, especially when it's really hard.

Again, Ephesians 3:16-17: "I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, God may grant that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith as you *are being rooted and grounded* in love." God isn't finished with you yet. God isn't finished with *us* yet! God's Spirit is continually remolding us, remaking us, renewing us, and yes, raising us – not only as individuals, but also as Christian community.

Now, about two months ago, I talked about how I was approached by a couple people in the church, shortly after I returned from caring for my mother. They told me that the closure of Queen Anne Lutheran Church in two to five years was and is a foregone conclusion.

That may be true, I replied, for those who cannot look beyond the cross; for those who cannot see beyond the possibility of defeat, despair and failure.

But we know how the story ends. It doesn't end with defeat and failure. It ends with new life and new beginnings! As people of the Way, indeed as people of the Resurrection, people who experience the living reality of Christ in Communion, especially through the breaking of the bread, we have hope. Because He is risen, *we* are risen!

This Easter season, therefore, I invite you to do as the early church did. Having experienced the same kind of fellowship hopefully, at Queen Anne Lutheran Church, especially again in our breaking of the bread together – make the new life to which you have been called your goal, your purpose, your way of being in the world. See possibility instead of just defeat, see Resurrection in every leaf of springtime, see Resurrection all around you, as the power of the living Christ in our lives. You, the church, and the world, will be all the better for it.

And all God's people said:

Amen.