

Grace to you, and peace, from God the Creator, and from Jesus, who is the Christ, Amen.

I haven't preached from the aisle since before the pandemic, but as you'll see, the message I have in mind requires some interaction with the congregation. That would be impossible from the pulpit.

So, when I teach classes, I often begin by way of review, and I thought that might be appropriate for the second Sunday of Easter. What were the five "Wow Factors" that stood out to me in last Sunday's readings. Do you remember?

Number 1: *Paul's talk of being saved in First Corinthians*. Not that one "is saved," but that one "is in the process of *being* saved." So, salvation here is not a moment in time; it's an ongoing process. The word for "salvation" in Latin means "health; to be made whole." And for Martin Luther and others, that process is one we undertake for the entirety of our lives in Christ.

So, being saved was Number 1. What also stood out to me was Number 2: *The presence of an early Creed embedded in the first few lines of 1 Corinthians 15*, where Paul says, "I receive what I hand on to you." (Now, most people in the congregation – actually all of you except one – didn't really find that particularly interesting, but I did, because I'm a nerd, and I find these things fascinating.) How interesting to see the earliest form of a Creed, possibly, in the New Testament; one that contradicts the language of the Gospels, which we'll talk about in a moment, and one that anticipates the Apostles Creed, right there in the text! Of course, we also know that throughout the New Testament, you'll find occasional Creeds; you'll find hymns, like in Philippians 2, the "Christ Hymn;" also, the "Prologue," the first chapter to the Gospel of John, many believe, is a hymn. So, hymns and creeds, the artifacts, you might say, of early Christian worship, are embedded in, with, and under the whole New Testament.

What else was a "Wow Factor" that I identified? Number 3: *Was Jesus buried after he died, or was he entombed?* The gospels say he was entombed, that is, creatively called by scholars, the Tomb Tradition; whereas Paul, who's writing at least 20 to 30 years before the Gospel of Mark, represents what's called the Vision Tradition. Paul has a vision of Christ; in fact, Paul has *three visions* of the risen Christ that we see or at least that are described in the book of Acts. Apparently this was the case for the other people listed in Paul's arrangement of witnesses. So, was Jesus buried? Or was Jesus entombed? The language of the Apostles' Creed reflects the former; language of entombment reflects the later gospels.

Number 4 – Big Wow Factor, although not for all of you: *Who is not present among the witnesses Paul identifies in First Corinthians 15? Women!* (I say "not all of you," because my Assistant Minister last Sunday was more, ah, disappointed, but not surprised. Is that a fair characterization? Yeah, she said, "I'm not surprised by that; men have been doing that for centuries!") So, I thought it was really interesting, when you look at it in comparison with the Gospel reading that was chosen for last Sunday, by our lectionary editors, where the first person to whom the risen Christ appears is a *woman*.

So, what do we do with that? Is it the case that Paul *inherited a tradition* that was exclusively male when it came to the witnesses of the risen Christ? Or is it the case that Paul *modified* the early Creed that he received, and *omitted* references to women?

As the old Tootsie Roll Owl commercial used to say, “the world may never know.” (I actually do. I know how many licks it takes to get to the center of a Tootsie Roll Owl Tootsie Pop; it’s 330. I counted in the third grade.)

All right. Let’s see that’s four. So Number 5, only one more. One more Wow Factor from last Sunday. I’ll tell you this. It is the most important word in the Lutheran faith. Grace. Right. Martin Luther says that justification by grace – that you have been claimed, loved and embraced by God, without your own doing in any way whatsoever – is the article or teaching by which the church stands or falls; we lose that, Luther says, we lose our faith, we lose Christianity.

So I invited, based upon what surprised me, to see if any of those surprised you. And I was really pleasantly surprised, you might say, to find that most of you were really surprised, and are often surprised *by grace*, as Paul was, at the end of the reading. Paul talks about how he persecuted Christians, but then God claimed, embraced, and loved Paul with God’s reckless, abundant love, and set Paul free to be a minister of the gospel of grace. Thanks to that, the world was changed, and we are here today.

So those were the five Wow Factors.

You may also remember that after the service, we had not one, but two Egg Hunts. The first one drew children from throughout the community, as well as children in our own service, or in our own congregation. The second one was exclusively for Amelia and Ethan, because they were having so much fun at the Easter breakfast, that they *forgot* that there was an Egg Hunt happening upstairs!

Now what you may *not* know, is that it turns out, in spite of these two Egg Hunts, that additional eggs were found. *Additional eggs were found*. I have them here. And I’m told the contents of these eggs have, by someone, or by the Holy Spirit, been altered, that somehow, by the work of the Spirit, what’s inside these eggs relates to today’s readings.

So, are you ready to find out what’s in these eggs? If so, let’s crack open each of them and find out. We’ll start with the first. Let’s see what’s inside. A piece of paper... “Identify what makes the first reading controversial, and why.”

Okay, not an easy one. (I don’t know who planted these, but I will get you; I will have my revenge!) “*Identify what makes the first reading controversial, and why.*”

Well, you heard it. You see it now. The disciples, the early Christian community, “sold their possessions and shared what they had with others.” The abolition of private property, in this case, seems to suggest for some that the early disciples were a bunch of communists or socialists.

In fact, it turns out that this practice, of abolishing private property and sharing what we have in common, goes all the way back to the book of Leviticus, and its talk of the Jubilee tradition in chapter 25. Rosemary Radford Reuther, a Catholic feminist theologian,

summarizes it beautifully. She writes, “In the Jubilee tradition-” (By the way, somebody also planted these notes in my text, so that’s great. That’s great.) “In the Jubilee tradition, we have, not one great cycle defining history from beginning to end, but a series – listen to this – a series of revolutionary transformations, or revolutionary cycles that continually return to starting points. Every – how many years? – seven years. Every seven years. The Jubilee tradition in Leviticus 25 teaches that there are certain basic elements that make up life as God intended it. Each family has its own land, its own vine, its own fig tree, and if they live on Queen Hill, its own dog. No one is enslaved to another. The land and the animals are not overworked.

But human sinfulness creates a drift away from this intended state of peace and justice. Some people’s land is expropriated by others. Some people are sold into bondage. Nature is overworked and polluted. So, on a periodic basis, 49 years or 50, there must be a revolutionary conversion. Unjust debts that have piled up are liquidated. Those who have been sold into slavery are released. The land that has been expropriated is returned. Land and animals are allowed to rest and recover their strength; humanity and nature recover their just balance. They live together as God intended.

Every 49 years – so you multiply seven times seven, you have 49 years. It’s in this 49th year, which many believe now may have been the year that Jesus conducted his ministry, the Jubilee year, every 49th year, property is returned to its original owners, slavery is abolished and Israel exists as God intended it.

So, why is this controversial? As I said, it refers to the redistribution of wealth, which some would link with communism or socialism. To that I would say, “not exactly.” The sharing of possessions here is voluntary, rather than required. It’s not through the means of the state; moreover there is no community of production, or notion that a new economic order is being established.

That said, there are serious consequences in the Christian community for those who do not live this lifestyle. And guess what? Next week, I think in chapter five, you will learn about Ananias and Saphira, who offer a counter-example in their greed and deception of community members, both of whom die as a result. So this is very serious for the early Christian community. Voluntarily, they came together, shared what they had, redistributed their wealth, sold what belonged to them, and gave the proceeds to the poor, and lived again, as I’ve said, as God intended. In other words, the early Christian community here embodies the ideal Israel. It embodies the ideal Israel.

All right, that seemed to go okay. All right. Let’s see what the next egg says. I’m nervous now...

This one says, “You should get an award, Pastor, for how much you work and how much you ca –” wait, that’s not written here. Sorry...

It says, “We have the best and most amazing Cantor on the West Coast of any Lutheran Church.” [*applause.*]

It also says, “*What continuity do you see between today’s readings?*” Well, that one’s easy. Take a look at the Second Reading. I want you to notice a couple of words there that are

worth identifying. There the author writes, in verse 3, “We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us, and truly our fellowship – *koinonia* in Greek, meaning “to gather together,” – is with the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ.”

And then again in verse 7, “But if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.”

So, fellowship. What we have here is an opportunity to call people out of isolation and bring them into Christian community, to call the “spiritual but not religious” from isolation and bring them into fellowship with the Gospel, and with each other.

We see that implied in the Book of Acts chapter 4, our First Reading, and fellowship, and the sharing of property, constituted what it meant to be in the State of Israel as God intended it.

We also see it in our Gospel reading for today, which exemplifies how these texts are linked. What’s the difference between Thomas and the rest of the apostles? The apostles were gathered together, they had fellowship in the upper room, and it was in the midst of that *fellowship*, that they experienced the risen Christ.

This is why Dietrich Bonhoeffer 2000 years later, will talk about how Christ exists as the congregation, or as Christ himself says, in Matthew 18, “Where two or more are gathered, there I am,” (which is very important to remember at the 8:00 service when we sometimes only have two. Christ is still present.) Thomas, on the other hand, is apart from community. He’s, perhaps, isolated. And because of that, he doubts. It’s only when he’s brought back into the fullness and fellowship of the Christian community, that he experiences the risen Christ.

In fact, not only does he experience the risen Christ, but he falls at the feet of Jesus and says, “My Lord and my God!” Extremely subversive language, at the end of the First Century. That pledge of allegiance to Jesus *counters* the pledge expected of all Roman citizens to the Emperor, to the Caesar. So what you have here is a politically subversive text encased in a resurrection narrative.

So what links all of these readings? Fellowship. Fellowship, insofar as it changes the way we live and treat one another; fellowship, insofar as we experience the risen Christ, when we come together.

Now, enough about me, I want to give one of *you* a chance... Pat, would you open this and see what’s next for us? [It’s chewing gum!] All right... so you got some chewing gum. (!?) Now, why is it that you get chewing gum and I get the hard questions? That’s not fair at all. So what’s, what’s that? So now, I want you to notice what’s next here. This wasn’t planned. Pat *offers the chewing gum back to me*, just like one would in the Book of Acts chapter 4. ... All right. Why don’t you hold on to that and we’ll come back to that later in the service.

All right, let’s take a look at another egg.

This one says, "Pat Sobek is a true treasure of Queen Anne Lutheran Church." [applause] It also says, "Imagine you are a good Lutheran with a nose for the gospel. Hmm. Can you do that? *Imagine you are a good Lutheran with a nose for the gospel. Where do you see the gospel, or good news, in today's readings? For whom, also, is it good news?*"

So where do you see the gospel in today's readings? Well, we can start with 1 John 2:1-2, which is at the end of our Second Reading, where we learn that "if anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous, and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only, but for *the sins of the whole world.*" We hear a lot of Christians talk about how some people are going to heaven and others are going to hell. I want you to notice the language here. Instead of talking in those categories, this author simply writes, "the sins of the whole world."

Or again, when we say the Words of Institution during the Eucharistic liturgy, we hear about how the covenant is *for all people*, "shed for you and for all people." So, what we have here is an expression of Christian universalism. God in Christ, through the sacrifice of Jesus, cleanses the world of its sin.

Now, that language may be troubling to you, the language of sacrifice, but it's important to remember that this is the way that Jews thought: that you sacrifice something meaningful in order to gain God's pleasure, or in this case in order to cleanse oneself. So, it's not as if Jesus is paying off God, who is angry, and wrathful, and needs a blood sacrifice in order to be satiated. There are a lot of people who think that, but between us, that's totally wrong. What it *is* about is how the sacrifice of Jesus doesn't change *God's* demeanor so much as it cleanses *us*. So the motive for this is not God's thirst for blood; the motive for this is God's willingness to go so far as the sacrifice of Jesus to cleanse us, indeed the whole world, of its sin.

All right; let's try another one. Heidi, would you mind opening this one? Ach! You get candy as well. Okay, so we have more candy... let's see if I can do the same...

This one says, "Heidi is *another* treasure of Queen Anne Lutheran Church!" [laughter] In addition to that, it says, "*How, if at all, might we as a church practice what we see in Acts 4?*"

Who wrote these? Those are tough questions! *How might we practice what we see in Acts 4?* Well, Dietrich Bonhoeffer has some advice. He tells us that "the Church is her true self only when she exists for humanity. As a fresh start, she should give away all her endowments to the poor and needy." Period. full stop. "The pastor should be paid by way of free will offering and should, Bonhoeffer adds, take up an additional occupation in order to support him or herself." That would be challenging. That would be challenging.

It's an uphill battle when it comes to this question, isn't it? Why? Because most American churches do not work this way. Capitalism honors individualism and wealth. For many today, the specter of communism lurks behind the references to communal ownership in Acts 2 and Acts 4, raising suspicion, and encouraging a speedy jump to more comfortable verses. Americans might teach our children to share but *only within limits*. Is this why so many American Christians understand this passage and acts as metaphorical instead of

literal? In other words, this is referring to “spiritual poverty,” rather than material poverty.

Now I would challenge that, and going back to the point I made about or the question we had about the gospel, there’s more gospel here than just the salvation of the whole world. Where is the good news? In the Book of Acts, the good news is for the poor. It’s for the poor. Most people in that period of time lived at subsistence levels. They didn’t have a lot of things. And so when the early church came together, they were fed; they were clothed.

We had a gentleman last night, it was about 1 am, who was outside the church door – you would be surprised, when I work late, how many people experiencing homelessness lay out here. And I thought, well, the first thing I could do is ask the man to leave the property. But then I thought, is that really who I’m called to be, as the pastor of this church? So, I went out to him. I gave him some food. I got him a blanket from downstairs. He said, “I’ll be gone by morning” I said that’s fine; it would be helpful if the door entryway is free – but just stay warm tonight. That is, in a small way, sharing the property of the church with someone who does not have the privilege or material abundance to support himself.

That said, this kind of language of redistributing wealth causes a lot of Christians to become uneasy. We see this for example, in our response, the Brazilian Archbishop Helder Camara received years ago. He writes, “When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I asked why they are poor, they call me a communist.”

Why are people poor? And what can we do about it? I think at minimum as, as Queen Anne Lutheran Church, Acts 4 can invite us to ask about resource allocation in our faith community. How do we spend our resources: our time, our talents, and our treasures? To whom do they go? Does our community agree or disagree about how we give and receive; about who *deserves* to give or receive, and why? So the hope might be that Acts 4, rather than avoiding it because it says something uncomfortable, something that goes against the grain of American individualism and capitalism, the point is, let’s *stay* with this text. Let’s *contemplate* this text.

The original title of today’s message was “Set up to Fail.” Let’s ask a middle class pastor to preach to a largely upper class congregation about how we need to redistribute all the wealth we have so the poor and the needy can live in abundance as we do.

Not an easy task, but certainly one in this case worth considering, when it comes to the way that we spend our time, our talents and our treasures.

All right, let’s do one more egg... I believe... Ken. See what’s in there. You got the Laffy Taffy, the green one? Oh my gosh. Well, I have to have one too. I got licorice....

And now I invite each of you who have your candy, your chewing gum, or your Starburst, to share it with your neighbor. There you go. In this small way, I think we can embody the communal nature of today’s First Reading.

In Jesus’s name we pray,
Amen.