

Reflection on the Word: Easter 2, April 11, 2021

Acts 2:43-47; 4:32-33 and John 20:19-23

Sometimes, as the church, we think of ourselves as a gathered people. Today's gospel reminds us that we are a *sent* people. Merely gathering is not enough. We are truly the church when, having enjoyed the worship, fellowship, teaching, and spiritual feeding which is part of our gathered experience, we then are ready and willing to go out as bearers of the good news of Jesus Christ – witnessing, forgiving, helping, serving – in Jesus' name.

In the account of the early church from the book of Acts, we see a community giving of themselves faithfully. And as we read the description of the life of that early faith community, we might want to reflect on what our actions say about our faith and about what we believe.

“We are called to be the church.”

This statement from A New Creed of the United Church of Canada is daring. It is challenging. And like the other affirmations it makes, about living in God's world and believing and trusting in God, it carries with it some important questions that we as a community of faith are going to be wrestling with over the coming weeks.

- Who is “we”?
- What does it mean to be “called”?
- And what kind of church are we called to become?

2.

The Creed speaks to a church which celebrates God's presence, lives with respect in creation, loves and serves others, and proclaims the good news about Jesus. These are great guidelines for being a faithful community of Christ ... but we need to make them concrete. So we might ask:

- Are we called to be the church as we were 50-60 years ago, the church we remember from our youth?
- Are we called to be one of those big budget churches like we see across town, or on TV, with mega programs and multiple staff teams?
- Are we called to be the church that does everything, that meets the needs and responds to the aspirations of every person who comes through our door, or are we called to be the church that does a few select things really well?

In looking for examples to follow, a faith community to learn from, many go back to the Early Church as described in the Book of Acts.

Why?

- Perhaps because of its proximity to the life and times of Jesus; some of those early church figures actually walked with Jesus and learned from his teaching and example.
- We might be drawn to the Early Church because it was a smaller movement, easier to wrap our heads around. It was before things like denominations and traditions made the church branch out into a complex and often dysfunctional family tree.
- Or we might be drawn to the Early Church simply because of the compelling picture it paints for us of what it means to be followers of Jesus.

3.

Listen again to that picture of what the early church was like:

- There was a sense of awe at the many wonders and signs of God.
- The believers were united and shared everything.
- They would sell their goods and possessions and distribute the proceeds to those who were in need.
- They spent time together in the temple.
- They broke bread together and shared food with gladness and simplicity.
- They praised God and demonstrated God's goodness to everyone.
- And daily, the Lord added to their numbers those who were being saved.

What a compelling picture of what it means to be the church! It is this depiction of the Early Church, and a few of the stories that surround it, that will guide us over the coming weeks, as we explore the meaning of our creedal statement, "called to be the church".

For many, the stories of the Early Church are compelling because they take us back to a time when the church was young. Think back to when you, yourself, were young, and how certain values and ideals inspired you. And then think of how, as we age and accrue experiences in this less than ideal world, we often lose track of the idealism of our youth and become cynical about the world and our place and possibilities within it.

Many may think of the stories of the early church as being idealistic and visionary and perhaps not attainable in our

4.

own time. And yet, if we are truly an Easter people, then these characteristics which are written about in Acts, ought to resonate with who we are, even today.

I think of the story of a church where, on Easter morning, the congregation sang:

"Easter people, raise your voices, sounds of heaven in earth should ring ...

Alleluia! Alleluia! Easter people, let us sing."

Following the service, on the way out the door, a four year old boy asked the minister, "What's an Easter people?" Obviously, the unfamiliar expression in the song had caught his attention. The minister, kneeling down beside him, replied that "Easter people" are people who live their lives as if the story of Jesus being raised from the dead was really true.

And of course, the work of figuring out what it means to be an "Easter people," is an ongoing task, one which we will be about in these 50 days of Easter, as we explore more closely the example of the early Church and what it says for how we might be church in our own day and time.

We begin with the statement: "Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done" (Acts 2:43). The foundation of a life of faith, and the core of any community of faith, is the awe and wonder we exhibit when we take time to notice the things God is doing around us.

We don't have to look far to be amazed at God's handiwork in the natural world around us ... a raging sea, majestic mountains, an early morning song bird, a colorful sunrise ... all have the power to invoke awe and wonder.

5.

And it doesn't take big, loud, and miraculous to invoke a sense of awe ... though there may be times when that has happened ... when a life has been transformed, turned around for the good; or a person has been healed; or an enemy becomes a friend. For there are also so many small, quiet, and seemingly ordinary ways in which we are moved to feelings of awe ... a hymn that is sung, the first crocus in spring, a baby's smile, an unexpected gesture of care and concern.

God is continually providing signs and wonders all around us, every day, if only we take the time to notice.

And we as the church are called to be a noticing people...

- slowing down in a society that runs at an increasingly breakneck pace.
- seeing with new eyes and considering the perspectives of others, including the Divine.
- being willing to put ourselves in situations that are new, and perhaps uncomfortable; that are risky and yet full of potential.

Noticing the big and small movements of God means seeing with the heart and imagination and faith, just as much as with the eyes and other senses.

A common description of worship is that *worship is anything we do in response to the things God has already done*. On this second Sunday of Easter, with Alleluias still ringing out around us, we are called to think about the implications of what happens when the Resurrection takes hold of the lives of individuals and communities, as it did

6.

those first followers of Jesus who formed the early church ... And for whom the works of the almighty drew forth much awe and wonder.

They truly became an Easter people – moved from hiding in fear to courageous witness; gifted with peace by the empowering breath of the Holy Spirit; commissioned with the power to forgive; formed into a new community marked by unity, generosity, and fellowship.

I read of a woman who keeps on her refrigerator a quote by Sister Helen Prejean, the Catholic nun made famous by the adaptation of her life in the movie *Dead Man Walking*. Prejean writes, "I pay attention to what I do so I know what I believe." Perhaps that quote should move each of us to wonder and ponder this: 'Does the life that I live—and the life of my community of faith—bear powerful witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, or not.'

And then to pray that we might more fully become the "Easter people" that God's grace is making us to be. Amen.