

Easter sustained

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Buddy Stallings, Vicar,
at the nine o'clock service, April 19, 2009: The Second Sunday of Easter.
Based on John 20: 19-31.*

This week in my *Crossroads* article I wrote about life after Easter—and specifically that we are not there yet! Easter lasts 50 glorious days, which means we have about 43 more wonderful days ahead of us—days when the Paschal candle burns brightly, every hymn is a hymn of hope, nary a confessional word need be heard, and eating a leftover chocolate bunny is both non-guilt-producing and non-caloric. It is a great season in the church year, a party that goes on for quite a while.

Today we are presented two post-resurrection stories, two different angles on life after Easter, snapshots of what it could mean within and beyond these glorious days. The lesson from the Acts of the Apostles, written probably at least ten years earlier than John's gospel but still 50 years after Jesus' death, paints a Utopian view of what can happen to a group of people who have lived through an amazing experience, have lived through it and lived to tell about it. The story from John's gospel shows another side to après-Easter life, quite a bit darker, and more suspicious.

The story of Thomas is the easier way to go here for me as a preacher. Easy that is if you don't have too much trouble imagining that Jesus was quite literally raised from the dead and that he made a series of physical appearances to his disciples after his resurrection. If you can get beyond that understanding of the gospel story—some faithful people can and some equally faithful people cannot—then the story about Thomas is simply a didactic piece, a little morality tale about doubt. The writer of John has Jesus clearly claim that those who can believe without seeing, i.e., those who can believe without doubting, attain the higher mark. In John's threatened world of competing religions, there was no room for doubt

This year, though, I am not going to say much about Thomas. For years I have confessed my attraction to him, my understanding of him. I have felt sorry that he was away when Jesus first showed up, and I have wondered where he was. Was he shopping,

was he trying to see his family, or was he just taking a nap? Lord knows I have missed many an event by being somewhere else, by dawdling behind, or falling asleep earlier than everyone else. I also know beyond any doubt that had I been he who heard such a story upon my arrival, I'd have wanted to see the physical evidence as well. So I will not preach about Thomas today lest I spend the entire time pontificating about why doubting is a good process. You can come to the forum after this service to be a part of that discourse.

The story from *Acts* always has fascinated me. It is probably a good thing that it shows up in the lectionary on Low Sunday, as today is known, a moniker which recognizes what we all know: many, many people come to church on Easter Day, not so many the next Sunday, thus Low Sunday. Hearing about an example of what for all the world looks like and probably is an example of Christian communism is a bit of shocker and is, perhaps, best heard by the regulars.

The scripture, if it is to be read as literal history, is pretty clear: "Everything they owned was held in common. There 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. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need."

There is no indication in scripture that this practice of shared ownership among followers of Jesus was in play prior to the resurrection. In fact, the writer of *Acts* connects the two events directly: "With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all." Grace indeed! Grace, I would say, so great that for some short period of time, genuine and inclusive community was actually attempted, resources combined so that all would have enough. Many New Testament scholars have claimed that it was a temporary impulse that grew from their belief that Christ's return was imminent, that in their lifetime he would come again. The idea of this explanation

is that there was no need for much accumulation, for soon they'd be relocating to eternity anyway. That assumption is probably correct, but that mere fact does not refute the power of grace in their lives that led them to want to live in a radically different way. That is one response to life after Easter. Their memory, their acceptance of the stories they had heard, the power of the risen Christ in their own hearts—something led to remarkable and unimagined generosity, commonality that seemed to be directed only toward the care of one another.

Of course, it is not practical; of course, it never works; of course, it is just an ideal. For me to claim anything other than that is to be too hypocritical even for me. I have no intention of giving all that I have away. If I were to do so, soon—sadly very soon—I'd be a ward of somebody—the state, the church, or one of you. And what good would that do anyone? Besides, we pay taxes to provide services for others, to establish a net, albeit a net with many holes and not much cushion, to catch the most vulnerable. We also give to the church, an action which in turn addresses the needs of others.

These are the arguments that we use, and they are absolutely correct. But if we can take a deep breath and read this story as poetry rather than prose, inviting the spirit to affect our hearing, we may find that we are deeply moved by the impulse regardless of the outcome. This moment in the life of the early church is like the early weeks or months of being in love; the ego boundaries fall away and because of that love, there is nothing we would not do, nothing we would not give for the object of our love. Of course, that euphoria doesn't last, but the memory of it is critical to our sustaining love. In fact it will get us through some much less ecstatic moments to come.

Maybe that is what this moment in Christian history is about—a time when the community was so “in love” with Christ that there was nothing they would not do for one another, nothing they would not give one another. It is great to think about, no matter how distant it feels, a great moment of incarnated love

Incarnated love is the point of connection for the stories—at least as I read them. Many years, in fact a couple of millennia, have passed, making us clearly among those who have not seen and yet have come to believe. We cannot touch the nail marks in Jesus' hands as Thomas could have done; we have long since given up any notion truly of giving all for the community. And, yet, these stories still have power in our lives—particularly in our relationship to one another and to others.

Every time we share a broken heart or comfort a weary spirit, every time we wipe a furrowed and anxious brow, every time we rub a tired back, perhaps even when we accept a reflection in a mirror that startles us, we experience the presence of Christ in a way that is as real as touch. And what of those moments when the impulse to give so that all may have enough is so powerful that we can't say no to it, when we feed a hungry mouth or clothe a naked body? What of those moments when we deny the voice inside that says, “There is too much need for me to have any real impact” or “I have to hold on to every dime I have in this frightening time” or “They should get a job”? These are after-Easter moments that remind us that the story lives.

Easter is here, and the promise of our faith is that it is here to stay. Surprising us by grace again and again, the story of Easter never ends.

Alleluia! The Lord is Risen Indeed: *Amen.*

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