

EASTER IN A TIME OF PANDEMIC

The Second Sunday of Easter

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Today, I would like to begin to explore with you what an Easter faith looks like in an age of pandemic. Lent corresponds quite naturally with the experience of COVID; suffering, sacrifice, and discipline are things we are all experiencing right now. Talking about making more room for God in the midst of it is not a leap at all.

But what about the themes of Easter? New life, resurrection, joy? How do these things intersect with the lives we are living? Over these next several Sundays during the Great Fifty Days of Easter, using the lessons from the book of Acts that we will read each week, we will engage with this question. My prayer is that we will discover together that just as Easter lasts for fifty days, as opposed to only forty in Lent, so the themes of Easter surpass those of Lent in their pertinence for our community and our world in 2021.

Today's lesson is another lectionary text that is one verse shorter than the way many scholars would present it. Reading the text, which is Acts, Chapter 4, verses 32-35, without including verse 31 (which is never read in the Sunday lectionary cycle – does this sound familiar?!), causes us to miss the context for the state of affairs that is described. In our lesson today, we hear that “the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.” (Acts 4:31) The result was that “There was not a needy person among them.” (4:34a) This ideal state did not occur out of nowhere, though: it follows directly on the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Verse 31, the second outpouring of the Spirit the community has experienced (the first being Pentecost itself). Listen to the verse: “When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.” (Acts 4:31) It was *this* ideal community that owned everything in common and met the needs of all its members. It was a *Spirit-organized community*: for Luke (who is the writer of Acts), the connection between the influence of the Spirit and how the community lived was absolute. Acts is a book infused with the Holy Spirit, from beginning to end. It is Part Two of the story of the followers of Jesus depicted in Part One, the Gospel of Luke. It is based entirely on the idea that Jesus did not leave his followers alone but gave them the gift of the Spirit to allow them to continue his work and to grow the Jesus Movement. That Spirit filled Jesus' followers and shaped who they were, what they did, and how they organized their community. Jesus' gift of the Holy Spirit allowed his movement to reflect his image, concretely. The community of Jesus followers in the book of Acts is a Christ-shaped community.

So there are two key ideas on which to focus as we begin our dive into the book of Acts and what it means to have an Easter faith today. First, again, Acts is really Luke-Acts – a two-volume set that tells the story of Jesus and then continues with the story of his followers after his death, resurrection, and ascension. This second part of the story is built entirely upon the experience of the Holy Spirit, which was the Risen Lord's gift to his followers. So, for Luke, an Easter faith is a Spirit-filled faith. The Spirit was present at the birth of the believing community.

And the second key idea is this: for Luke, the Holy Spirit is no abstraction. It is a powerful, personal felt presence that guides the choices of the new community. The Holy Spirit guides the community into conformity with Christ. And to be in conformity with Christ is to reflect the

created order itself. Jesus taught his followers the will and purposes of God, the Creator. Now, the Spirit guides the Church to live those out.

So the real sense of the book of Acts is that when the community chose to have all things in common, they were not making an intellectual decision but doing what the Spirit compelled them to do. God's will and purpose was that there would be no gaping divide between haves and have nots: the needs of all would be met equally. To step into the book of Acts is to step into a world in which this truth is felt keenly: holding anything back as a private possession in a way that impoverished others would have felt like a violation of the Spirit's guidance. The guidance was powerful and palpable: *do it this way*. Live the way God intended for humans to live from the beginning. The Christian community is the community of the New Creation, a return to how God made things.

Okay. So... what about us? If an Easter faith is a Spirit-filled faith that leads to Christ-shaped community, what does this mean today? Most fundamentally, it means that if an injustice makes you uncomfortable, *pay attention to the discomfort*. If you've just had a nice meal, pick up your device or your newspaper and read that 19% of the children in Westchester County are food insecure, and feel uncomfortable: pay attention. If you're relaxing in your comfortable home and are watching televised images of climate refugees in Bangladesh rushing to escape the ravages of flooding and feel uncomfortable: pay attention. If you are sickened by the images of the murder of George Floyd as the trial of Derek Chauvin continues: pay attention. We Christians are people who believe in the Holy Spirit, who dwells with us just as she dwelled with the first believers. If a Christian feels discomfort in the face of injustice, it may well be the Spirit saying, "respond to this," or "change your life," or "do it differently" – and we ignore these promptings at our own spiritual peril.

On the other hand, if we pay attention to the promptings, there is no limit to what God can do. An Easter faith informed by the book of Acts is just this: faith that we can be a people who pay attention to our discomfort in the face of the terrible injustice and suffering of our world, knowing that if we respond as we are led to, God will bring transformation. How the world needs this kind of faith. May we embrace it for ourselves today.