

Building an Easter Community

Luke 24:36b-48

College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Since today's assigned lectionary Gospel reading from Luke is similar in many ways to last Sunday's lectionary reading from John ("Doubting Thomas"), I decided to use this occasion to address a few more things concerning Easter. But this time, from a more practical standpoint than from a theological perspective. A more "What difference does it all make?" point of view.

Here's the bottom line: the Easter event is a mysterious and unexplainable experience, both in the life of the first disciples, the early church, and in the life of the church ever since that time. Easter is not easily grasped nor readily investigated. **The resurrection is not subject to empirical proofs or rational verification. I caution you about anyone who would tell you otherwise.**

Out of that mystery, however, come real and concrete promises: promises of new life, transformation, and hope. These promises have been, and continue to be experienced in the lives of countless people and in the church.

Today's Gospel Lesson shows that an experience of risen Lord, while mysterious is nonetheless real. I am among those who believe that the presence of Christ was real to those first disciples and that the presence of Christ is real in the church today. By whatever means Christ was made real after Jesus' crucifixion, the early church became a community that bore witness (by word and by its very life) to a real chance for new life.

One of the Easter mysteries that unfolds is that a community of faith can be empowered, and that it as well as individual members can be **transformed**. The scriptures give evidence to the kinds of transformation. Transformed from fear to courage; transformed from feelings of hate and resentment to love and forgiveness; transformed from a sense of worthlessness to understanding oneself as a valued, blessed and beloved child of God.

It is these and other experiences of transformation and empowerment that bear witness to the building of an Easter community.

We learn that change in the old order is not only possible but necessary. The Easter event proved to be very disrupting. If it hadn't been, there never would have been the religion we know as Christianity.

Of particular interest to me in this biblical text is Jesus' concern in how his disciples were going to bear witness to the reality and meaning of the resurrection. I began to wonder how modern-day disciples of Jesus, like you and me, best share that witness. **How do we, as College Hill Presbyterian Church, bear witness to new life, transformation and hope?**

The New Testament reveals that perhaps the most lasting reaction and the most powerful witness to the resurrection took the form of a community of faith in which people cared deeply for each other and took care of one another. **The early church was known as a community of the resurrection. In such a community, people transcended differences – including the seemingly insurmountable differences of culture, social status, and religious backgrounds – in order to together live in unity and see to it that no one is left alone in need. That is the community that changed the world. That is the community in whose heritage we stand.**

A non-Christian world listened to the message of the early Christian community because the world saw in the lives of those Christians a distinct love for one another and a unique unity. Frankly, I believe **the church today has a problem communicating its message of love and redemption because the church itself so often appears neither loving nor redeemed. Part of our ministry is to help change that perception.**

Another Easter mystery that unfolds before us is a blueprint of *how* to live as an Easter community. At the center of this community resided a conviction that no one can be church alone. These first followers of Christ became a church to the degree that they became committed to living as a community – a **family**. That is a term we sometimes use here to describe this congregation.

Not everyone, of course, in that original community (nor ours for that matter) held the same opinion about everything. And individual members differed in strengths and weaknesses, which is another way of acknowledging their (and our) variety of gifts. Unity developed as people matched strengths with weaknesses (their differing gifts) and considered **their purpose as community was as important as their own individuality.**

Undoubtedly, people offended and got mad at each other in that kind of arrangement. But all knew the power of forgiveness that lay at the heart of Jesus' life and ministry. **A true Easter community, therefore, is a forgiving community.** We, too, are called – in all of our diversity and differences – to be and do the same.

Forgiveness, in addition to love, is at the very core of Christianity. It's the only way people can hope to live in right and mutual relationships with one another. **Building and deepening our relationships with each other must always be among our top priorities as a family of faith.**

Scripture and tradition do indeed consider the church as a family. Today's Epistle Lesson from 1 John reminds us that as children of God we are all part of God's family. What are the implications of this? Let me ask it this way. **Do we envision the church as a place to choose our friends, or something deeper, as a fellowship in which to live out our ties as family?**

The difference between those perspectives impacts the manner in which we move in and out of a fellowship of faith and it determines the possibility of

real unity within our congregation. And it distinguished us as an Easter community as opposed to just another social club.

Dr. C. Welton Gaddy, pastor of Northminster Church in Monroe, Louisiana, puts it in perspective this way:

Culture presents a problem to the church. Culture is about me: my wants, my ideas, my wishes, my plans – do it my way or not at all. [And yes, at times we all are guilty of that, including myself. And for those times, I ask for your forgiveness.] Church is about community, compassion, acceptance, forgiveness, and ministry – acting together in the name of Christ. Culture prizes an individualistic consumer economy. Church pursues a community of sharing in which individual possessions are the means for meeting needs throughout society.

A community of the resurrection embodies the spirit and compassion of the resurrected Christ, accepting within it persons at all stages of spiritual development, emotional health, and physical sufficiency.

The strong minister to the weak; the assured to the doubting; the calm to the angered; the healthy to the sick – all knowing full well that at some point in the future the situation will change and those receiving ministry will need to minister because those who have been offering ministry will be in need of receiving ministry.

The “proof” of the resurrection, therefore, isn’t found in any scientific sort of way, but is found in how we, as a family of faith, minister to and treat one another, and how we minister to and treat the people that we come in contact with on a daily basis.

So let me leave you with this charge: Live the promises of Easter: new life, transformation, and hope, bearing witness to our God who redeems us, blesses us, and sends us out. That is what makes us an Easter community.

Amen.