



“Faithful Awe and Generosity”  
April 30, 2023 | 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter  
Rev. Nancy Enderle | Acts 2:42-47, Psalm 23

According to our liturgical calendar, today is the fourth Sunday of Easter. I would venture a guess that most people, certainly within the wider culture, think that Easter occurs on one day, hence the name: Easter Sunday. The notion of a liturgical season of Easter is less well known as is evidenced in part by the lightning quick speed at which the store decorations change from bunnies and eggs to merchandise for Mother’s Day.

What does it mean to be a people who keep the story of Easter alive for weeks beyond our Easter day celebration? I like to think it reflects the early Christian community’s awareness that the fullness of what happened in the Christ event was something more than a singular occurrence. Something more significant than once upon a time. Eugene Peterson, who authored the Message, a contemporary paraphrase of Scripture, wrote in his introduction to the book of the Acts this compelling description:

“It is Luke’s task to prevent us from becoming mere spectators to Jesus. Of the original quartet of writers on Jesus, Luke alone continues to tell the story as the apostles and disciples live it into the next generation... The story of Jesus doesn’t end with Jesus. It continues in the lives of those who believe in him. The supernatural does not stop with Jesus. Luke makes it clear that these Christians he wrote about were no mere spectators of Jesus any more than Jesus was a spectator of God – they are IN on the action of God, God acting IN them, God living IN them. Which also means, of course, in US.”

This is echoed in the cover quotation from Benedictine Sister and author, Joan Chittister when she writes, “Easter is about dazzling light—but only if it shines through us.”

The book of Acts, particularly these first few chapters, describes how that light shined

through the community and leaders that first followed Jesus. It conveys the stories of how the communities of faithful heard something, saw something, experienced something that changed them. Elsewhere in Acts and in other early historical accounts they were referred to as the People of The Way.

I particularly love this designation because I feel it reflects what I have heard people describe, and I have myself experienced, as the essence of faith. It is a way, a journey on which we wander, stumble, get back on track, much more than a destination with a point of arrival; it involves following Jesus Christ, more than believing information about him.

As we ponder these verses in Acts, I think they invite to consider how we might consider being followers of the way of Christ in our time. Might their experiences shed some light on how we can live into the blessings of the Christ event in this place and time?

As we look for meaning in these verses, one of the first impressions that becomes pretty clear is that, as Eugene Peterson wrote, the way of Jesus is not a spectator sport. These descriptions of their life together are engaging and active. There are no couch or pew potatoes who sit passively and watch a show about what Jesus and his followers did in the past. To emphasize this point, Luke tells us that Christian faith changed where people live, how they understand property ownership, and their sense of communal obligation in response to any one in personal crisis. Further, it has changed how they understand something as basic as a meal. How they ate together was mentioned twice in 6 verses, with a third reference to the spirit in which they shared a meal – with glad and generous spirits.

In Luke's account of Jesus' life and those who followed him, meals play an important role. Throughout Luke, Jesus eats with a variety of people in a variety of settings: with tax collectors (Luke 5:27–32), with Pharisees (7:36–50, 14:1–14), in the home of strangers whom the disciples rely on for hospitality (10:1–12), a Passover meal (22:14–30). So it is worth considering the meaning that is held in these stories of meals.

One scholar notes that for Luke, meals become an opportunity for social critique and revealing barriers to social interactions. Who is fed at our tables matters. One quickly thinks of the cruelty of segregated dining, and white and colored water fountains as evidence of how damaging the experience of exclusivity and meals can be to a community. Then, by resurrection day, a new kind of meal interaction takes place. In

the end of Luke, meals are shown to be the place of revelation, a defining point in the life of the community.

In a book titled *Eating and Drinking with Jesus*, Presbyterian Scholar, Arthur Cochrane explored the role food played in our story of faith, particularly in our Christian scriptures. Highlighting the verses in today's scripture, he described how the early Christians, or people of the Way, experienced breaking bread as an act of fellowship that was called an agape, or love feast. They would share in a Eucharistic meal in the morning and return for an agape feast, which is referred to in vs. 46 by Luke's description that they "broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.

In his book, Cochran poses a rather controversial idea, that we've missed the mark, or certainly failed to realize the potential blessing by reducing the experience of eating and drinking with Jesus to the sacramental understanding of the Lord's Supper. Cochran points out the breaking of bread was meant to be a joyful feast in which the community celebrates with gratitude the blessing of Christ's presence in all of life and particularly when we stop and remember his presence in our midst as we break bread. Each time we break bread we are fed by the elements of the earth and nurtured by the love shared in community. And Christ is present. This is why we pray before meals and why we share meals with those who are hungry and pay close attention to not just who is at our tables, but who are missing from them. We eat this way in recognition of the holy Presence and the bounty of our gifts.

Interestingly, in Covenant's Connection Newsletter this week I noticed there's a potluck on the 1st Wednesday of the month, a party with cake and lunch for new members and recent baptism families who joined the church and received their baptism during the pandemic. AND there is an opportunity to collect apples for students at the school we support. All of these events indicate the blessing of drawing community together to break bread and serving others.

The verses in Acts describing the joyful and active community response to the presence of Christ also include a reference to the importance of prayer. This priority is even echoed in our PC(USA) Book of Order in the governance section, G- 3.0105. There, the language is used with the imperative "shall" – which is as close as Presbyterians get to doctrine – declares "meetings shall be opened and closed with prayers." This directive conveys importance and gravitas.

And what happens when a community is ordered around prayer? Well, I know what happens when it isn't. For a couple of years in between serving congregations, I worked in a corporate consulting firm in downtown NYC. I vividly remember noticing how different it felt and the different tone that was set when meetings were started without prayer; without acknowledging the Spirit's presence and guidance. I really missed pausing, setting aside our notions of self-importance and acknowledging that everything we do is because of and made possible through God's wisdom, guidance, and grace. I noticed how that act of prayer before a meeting created a significant sea change in a room. I also missed the community prayers that I had known to be offered on my behalf during difficult times.

Though not described in these six verses in Acts, elsewhere in our Gospel accounts, Jesus expands this notion of prayers that are shared in the community to include prayers that root the individual in a deepening sense of and attunement with the Divine presence within. Gospel accounts reveal that Jesus himself practiced the rhythm of finding time for prayer as he often ventured out alone and sometimes spent long periods of time in solitude and prayer.

I would go so far as to say that personal AND community prayer are essential for following the way of Christ. Especially considering the description in Acts of a community in which all is shared for the common good with generous and glad hearts, and where those who have much respond to any who are in need with generosity. These actions of self-giving love show up in the lives of people who have journeyed deep into prayer and found love's pull so profound that every decision and each step of their journey is different because of it.

This ordering of life; this emptying of self is central to the way of Christ. And Acts reminds us that finding companions for the way who share in the joy and challenges is key. It is also important to remember that the way, the journey, will most certainly feature failures and mistakes. St. Benedict wrote that the spiritual life is made of this: we rise and fall, we rise and fall. There is great truth and grace in that acknowledgment. In fact, a very few chapters further into Acts details how far the early communities went astray. But like the idyllic images in Genesis of a life ordered by God's provision in the Garden of Eden, this depiction in Acts 2 offers a beautiful and similarly idyllic description of the power of a community of grace and generosity, one in which all that is lost and broken within ourselves and other is held in tender loving compassion by God and one another.

And so we gather, not because we are particularly stellar versions of humanity, but because like those first followers of Jesus, we have been touched by the life of God's own beloved son. Touched by his life and empowered by his Spirit to be bigger than our own selfish impulses and appetites lead us to be; to respond with awe and generosity as we gather in our sacred places, as we pray, as we listen to Scripture, and as we eat and drink of the bounty of our fellowship with God and one another. May that be our path, our way, as we follow the one who gave himself to us in love and calls us to live and love and serve in and through him.

Please pray with me:

*Oh living Christ, in this season of Easter, may we be ever so more attuned to your spirit in our midst that you may be made known in this fellowship in all our bread breaking, and may our joy inspire those who hunger and thirst for living presence with the Divine and deep connection within a community of others who seek this gift in their hearts and share it generously with others. May it be so, amen.*