

Resurrection from Cynicism
April 8, 2018
Rev. Lynne M Keel

Today is the second Sunday of Easter, just one of many Sundays between now and the middle of May that we observe as the Easter season in the Church. By now, the Easter candy has been moved to the clearance aisle, but we in the Church still proclaim that He is Risen, indeed. After the crescendo of Easter Sunday, after we've worn our new Easter outfits, after the horns and the strings have been put away, however, admittedly our Alleluias grow quieter and more subdued. We go back to our daily routines, and this idea of Resurrection can become an afterthought. These extra Sundays of Easter help remind us of the Resurrection, but we often find ourselves still wrestling with what exactly it even means. And even if we begin to grasp the implications of conquering death, many of us are too tired or jaded to embrace or experience it.

Jesus may well have sprung out of the tomb like a spring chicken, but most clergy and church staff will tell you that we hang out in the tomb quite a bit longer. It takes about two weeks before we start to feel alive again, and I know many of you are walking slower these days as well. For those of us beholden to the academic calendar, students and teachers are fed up with lesson plans and projects, and parents are burned out on carpool and weekend swim meets. Taxes are due, work projects bear down, and I think I speak for all of us when I say we are sick and tired of the cold and the rain. We are longing for sunlight and warm, summer days and time away.

So while we can conjure up the excitement and adrenaline for the first Sunday of Easter, an entire season of trying to understand and live into the Resurrection can seem a bit daunting. Additionally, our senses have been dulled from the space of 2,000 years of human behavior post-Resurrection, more or less, remaining the same. It begs the question from the more cynical among us: what exactly has changed? If Christ has conquered death, why don't I feel a little different? If this realization is supposed to transform our lives, why don't we behave as reconciled human beings? It feels more like an ancient mythical tale to tell, rather than the very present, life-changing news that it really is.

Our scripture this morning offers a somewhat jarring glimpse of the power of the Resurrection story on one particular community. We will be reading from the book of Acts, which you may remember is the story of the birth of the Church, post-Resurrection days. At the place where we will pick up, the apostles have already converted upwards of 5,000 new followers with many more to come. I invite you to listen now to the power of the Resurrection story on a brand new fledgling Christian community as I read from Acts 4:32-37. Listen for God's word to you today:

³²Now 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. ³³With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴There 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. ³⁵They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to

each as any had need. ³⁶There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”). ³⁷He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles’ feet.

This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Upon first glance, this description of the early church seems at best cute and naïve and at worst, shocking and unrealistic. Most of us struggle to understand this text, because it does not seem relatable to our current context. Out of the gate, we are told that this whole group, these 5,000 new believers were of one heart and one soul. They were unified, they were on the same team; dare I say, it sounds like they got along! And I’m a little jealous; I’ll own it. Ministry in the 21st century looks a bit more like refereeing a boxing match than hearing a Quaker peace testimony. Much like the divisiveness of our culture, the church has become a receptacle of anxiety, fear and disagreements regarding issues as vast as the theological doctrine of creation to what kind of coffee to serve during the Sunday School hour. This idea of unity sounds lovely, but from my skeptical perspective, where two or three gather in Jesus’ name, there is sure to be conflict.

The second theme that immediately emerges from our scripture sounds a lot like socialism. We are told that the worshipping community didn’t claim private ownership of any material goods and that all their resources were held in common. Now, before anyone freaks out or shuts down or starts waving their political flags, it’s important to state that our modern conversations and even the usage of the word socialism are a relatively recent development in human history, dating to around the late 18th and early 19th century. For the purposes of this scripture and this sermon, I invite you to remove any of your lenses or biases you may have around our contemporary understanding of socialism. Let us instead try to understand this new Jesus movement in the context of the 1st century.

These new converts lived within an economic structure that was mostly agrarian-based with some trade. It involved the use of slaves for labor, and it utilized a banking system that was clearly not backed by any sort of insurance like the FDIC. All of this is to say that their economic resources were never very stable. In some ways, it might have seemed more appealing to invest their resources in a community that had committed to having their backs when things weren’t going so well. Even so, that would still require an insane amount of trust in the apostles and in the story of Jesus. It’s not like Jesus was the only show in town claiming to perform miracles and the like in the 1st century.

There were many prophets and healers during that time, but this group was so blown away by the story of Jesus’ life, death and Resurrection that they were ready to go all in. They put everything on the table for this guy. We just read about a man named Joseph, later known as Barnabas, who sold a piece of property that belonged to him to finance this movement. He brought the entire sum of money and laid it at the apostle’s feet. Not just the profits or a portion of the proceeds or a tithe of 10%. No, he gave the entire sum of money. If we read on about Barnabas, we realize how instrumental he would be to the birth and growth of Christianity. Not only did he donate all of his means, but he was an active disciple working hard on the road to spread the gospel.

He was given the name Barnabas by the apostles, because it means “son of encouragement.” He would earn this title as the one who would ultimately vouch for the apostle Paul after his conversion. If you remember prior to Paul’s conversion, he was known as Saul and had a brutal

reputation for persecuting Christians. So you can understand why the apostles didn't trust Paul and didn't want anything to do with him. Yet, Barnabas was convinced that God had a plan for Paul, and he traveled on many missions with him. And sure enough, the spread of Christianity and some of our greatest theological doctrines come directly from Paul. How might the church have been different if Barnabas had not responded to the Resurrection, and instead kept the status quo? What if he had remained a Joseph, he kept his job, and he hoarded his investments?

While we can certainly stand in awe of Barnabas' great sacrifice, I still think it is a huge stretch for most of us to see ourselves in his story. I don't know if we can envision ourselves selling off all our property and entrusting it to these new church leaders who, by the way, left their jobs to follow this rebel Jesus who got himself killed and has now supposedly risen from the dead. It is tempting to think that this way of socialism makes more sense in the first century, but people are people. There were as many reasons to be suspicious of humanity back then as there are today. Anyone remember Judas?

The truth is, we have all been betrayed enough times and seen enough heartbreak, and watched enough corporate corruption to be cynical. Living a communal life of unity, reconciliation and socialism sounds all good and fine, but from our 21st century worldview, haven't we seen those principles collapse time and time again? I can't tell you how many times I have despaired of this world and vowed to join a commune or start my own. But it's not like I can point to an example of one that has lasted through the generations, including this community that we are reading about this morning. So maybe that's why we receive this idea of unity and communal care so pessimistically.

But, ultimately, I don't think any of us wants to live this way. Part of why we are drawn to these stories over and over is, because we want them, we need them to be true. We need to have hope and optimism. I want to be Barnabas! I want to see the Resurrection through his eyes! I want to be so utterly shocked and excited and transformed that I can't help but share the good news. This new community of faith had heard the same stories about Jesus that we have, yet they proclaimed them so passionately and gave of themselves so fervently. What is their secret?

I suspect, for them, that it boiled down to their willingness to allow the Resurrection to change everything for them. I think their ultimate realization and buy-in to the Resurrection was what gave a level of credibility to the Jesus movement that had never been seen before and has never been seen since. It is one thing to hear values and ideals preached about social justice, unity and love from someone you respect. It is entirely another when those same ideals were delivered by the Son of God before, during and after he had been crucified. This is a game changer. It meant that no imperial structure, no economic forces, no divisive government could keep them from having eternal, abundant life. The message of the Resurrection was so compelling that they lived as though anything was possible because finally, for the first time, anything was possible. And I think we forget that. I know I forget that.

In our exhaustion, fatigue and anger about the ways of the world, we become small and finite. We often believe that the government won, the corporations won, this or that political party won, the IRS won, etc. We say things like "it is what it is." We accept defeat and keep our heads to the ground and lose vision. Poet Ann Weems writes this about the disciples post-Crucifixion, "Three days those who loved him huddled, their hearts trembling, their faces swollen from tears. They

would no longer see Jesus. He himself had said from the cross, It is finished. They felt finished, too.”¹

The disciples thought that was the last chapter, and they had been defeated. They had many more reasons to feel jaded and cynical than we do. But the thing is, once they lifted their heads and opened their minds and hearts, once they realized that it wasn't over and that Jesus is alive, they started living their lives that way. They came face to face with embodied Hope, and they fully embraced it to the marrow of their bones. They became Resurrection people. They carried that Hope across the countryside and shared it with anyone who would listen. They didn't have to buy into the narrative of the Roman Empire anymore because Jesus is Risen! He is Risen Indeed!

Many of you were able to join us on our Church Retreat about a month ago in the mountains of NC. For those who missed it, our speakers from In Christ Supporting Ministries led us in a series of talks about Christ being present in the room. They reminded us of our Reformed understandings about the Resurrection, that because Jesus conquered death, He is alive and well today. He is not in some faraway, vague heaven. He was in the room with us as we listened to our speakers, as we prayed, as we worshipped, as we played and broke bread together. He is here today sitting in our pews as well as on the park bench down Union Street sitting with our homeless neighbors. He is in your room as you sleep at night. He is in your car as you navigate rush hour traffic. He is in your classroom, he is in your office, he is at family game night. He is at your doctor's appt, in the hospital room and at the nursing home during physical therapy.

Because Jesus lives, he walks with South American immigrant communities, he walks with American students marching for their lives, he ducks with the employees of YouTube as they hide from the latest round of bullets fired. He is in the mountains of Haiti, he is on the plains of Africa, and he is in the slums of India.

Our retreat leaders reminded us that when we are willing to receive the Resurrection and remember that Jesus inhabits every facet of our lives as well as every other human beings' lives, it shifts our lenses and our perspectives. We are introduced face-to-face with embodied Hope, and new possibilities are opened up in unimaginable ways. Suddenly, our burdens, our exhaustion, our negativity, and our cynicism fade away, and we are invited into new ways of being in this world.

For this first century group of new believers, the Resurrection meant that Jesus could completely reorganize their economic structure and invite them into a space where all people are loved, cherished, and cared for. They didn't have to be abused by their government or be selfish with one another. Because Jesus lives, they could see that there was enough room at the table for everyone to sit and enough food for everyone to eat. They could be reconciled to one another, because they had Jesus in common. The enthusiasm for this new life in Christ was just too good to be kept a secret, and the gospel news became contagious. We would not be here today, if the Resurrection had not changed everything for this group of people and for the whole world.

¹“We Have Seen Jesus.” *From Advent's Alleluia to Easter's Morning Light: Poetry for Worship, Study, and Devotion*, by Ann Weems, Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, p. 139.

For us, it means that we don't have to grieve "the way things used to be" anymore. It means that we don't have to cling so tightly to our money, our possessions, our political beliefs, our power, our theology or anything else that separates us from Jesus or one another.

Because Jesus lives, we can see all the different places he is at work, and we are invited to participate in His kingdom work. We can see him at work in the mountains of Bayonnais, Haiti. We can see him at work feeding and housing those in need at CCM, the Salvation Army, Habitat for Humanity, and Opportunity House. We can see him at work at the Bilingual preschool, we can see him at work in the Logan Community, we can see him at work all over this community! Sometimes, we even see Jesus at committee meetings!!! And the best news is that we are invited not as spectators but as active participants!

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, we have the greatest privilege, much like our 1st Century church ancestors, to bear witness to the miracle of Resurrection, and like them, we get to play a part in Kingdom-building – even trying out radical ideas like socialism. I believe it is needed now more than ever. Our society is crying out to be saved from itself. May the Holy Spirit sweep us off our feet, remove the scales of cynicism from our eyes and inspire us to join in God's holy work of reconciliation. Thanks be to God, Amen.