

Christ is Risen! Now What?

Acts 2:36-47

Second Sunday of Easter/30th March 2008

This is how we left things at the end of the sermon on Easter, with these lines:

*Let us not mock God with metaphor
analogy, sidestepping transcendence;
making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the
faded credulity of earlier ages:
let us walk through the door.*

That's how we left things last week, with these lines from John Updike's provocative poem, "Seven Stanzas at Easter," which are an appeal for *reality*.

*The same hinged thumbs and toes,
the same valved heart
that – pierced – died, withered, paused, and then
regathered out of enduring Might
new strength to enclose.¹*

Christ is risen! – *really* risen. Alive. Real. Something happened that morning – unique, and powerful, and real – an earthquake whose tremors continue to shake the world and stir the soul, whose aftershocks, in time, forged the church.

On Easter we shouted, "Christ is Risen!" A day made for exclamation points. But on the day after, the week after, the years, centuries, millennia after, exclamation points morph into question marks. Yes, we believe "Christ is Risen!" But, now what do we do? If resurrection is really real, then what do we do with this event; how do we handle an earthquake? How then do we live or go on with life as usual? How can we ever go back to the day before Easter? "Once you wise up, you can't dummy down," as Kierkegaard (1813-1855) said. Who would want to go back to the old normality? Yet, how do we live *from* an Easter reality? Are there any tangible signs in our lives and our lives together that Easter has really made a difference? Is there any proof that we are different people because of that event? Can we feel the tremors of resurrection in our lives? Where are our souls quivering with "fear and great joy" (Matthew 28:8)?

The earliest tangible sign of resurrection reality was the formation of the church. Some could easily scoff at this idea, even argue that the history of the church, right up through the present is probably proof that the resurrection did *not* take place – an institution plagued by corruption and abuses of every kind, full of people who are graceless, unloving, unforgiving, if not downright mean. Nevertheless, it is the church with all of its brokenness and sin that Christians then and now witness the resurrected Christ – and lives are transformed because of it. The church was formed on this side of resurrection, post-tomb, as a post-resurrection phenomenon. *The church was formed when a group of people became radically, joyfully,*

¹ Full text may be found at: <http://www.edow.org/spirituality/updike.html>. First published in *Telephone Poles and Other Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1963).

gratefully responsive to God's activity in the world and went about ordering their lives according to that experience. It's like, as Luke tells us, what happened in Jerusalem on Pentecost, Acts 2. This is how any church is formed and ever open to reform.

Now, if I were a betting man – but I'm not as a Presbyterian, Presbyterians frown on games of chance – but if I were, I would guess that most of us hearing this story were drawn to the size of the membership rolls at First Church, Jerusalem. “About three thousand were added” to the community. Even Joel Osteen, pastor of the nation's largest mega-church, Lakewood Church in Houston, TX, can't compete with these statistics. My guess is there's a part of us that wishes we could do that, that every church could do this. I'm sure this would make Peter Nord, our executive presbyter, very happy. Okay, maybe not 3,000, then how about 300 or even 30, new members at CPC. What was their secret? How did they do it? Can we replicate it for today? A lot of churches and denominational judicatories are asking these questions. Local Methodist minister friends have shared stories of their new bishop for the Baltimore-Washington Conference. He's stirring things up quite a bit by establishing membership goals for each church in the Conference. He wants to see measurable outcomes. As you could guess, this is causing considerable stress among the clergy. My guess is that for some clergy, having *more* accountability is probably a good thing. Maybe we pastors need some incentives to grow churches; although, I'm grateful that I don't get paid by commission for every new member to CPC. Maybe the congregation needs some incentives to grow, maybe our *per capita* could be reduced not by removing people from the rolls, but by increasing the rolls so we could get a discount. Just a thought.... Whatever we do, we have to very wary of coming up with gimmicks or adopting the latest church growth technique to get people into the church, get them to join, then expect them to pledge, in order to get them to help pay the bills so that everyone else can keep their pledge the same or pledge less. That's not evangelism.

First Church, Jerusalem, I believe, didn't set out to grow, they didn't have statistical goals in mind, nor were they simply trying to preserve an institution (because it was brand new), nor did they have to worry about the bills. How were so many baptized into the community? Peter preached – and boy, did he preach – he probably didn't know what had come over him or the magnitude of the power of God being communicated *through* him. This is what the text says, “*So those who welcomed this message were baptized....*” “Those who were hospitable to Peter's message were baptized. Those who were *open* to the amazing work of God through Jesus Christ were baptized and became part of the church. They were open to the message – and that's when everything changed.

And then these people who were open to the message were baptized into a new reality, a new world, a new way of life for them and their children, they lived their lives differently. They worshipped God passionately. They devoted themselves to teaching and learning, to education in community, together. Augustine (354-430) once said “we wouldn't be able to love another unless one person learns something from another.”² After worship, they met in their homes, in intentional community where they could break bread “with glad and generous hearts.” They were dedicated to fellowship, not superficial relationships but a community where Christ was at

² Quoted by Barbara Wheeler at the Big Event hosted by Baltimore Presbytery, Woods Memorial Presbyterian Church, Severna Park, MD.

the center and the community gathered in all of its wild diversity (and it was diverse), into a new people. Often, when I stand here in the pulpit preaching, I can look down the center aisle and imagine Jesus standing there at the center of the sanctuary. With Christ at the center, all that we do and say rotates or gravitates around him. And the early church called this experience in community *koinonia* – real, honest, authentic, loving friendships, transparent fellowship made possible because Christ was in their midst. “All who believed were together and had all things in common.” They sold their possessions and distributed them throughout the community with open hands to any in need.

This is what happens when we’re open to the reality of Christ’s presence in our midst. *Being hospitable to the message, to the gospel allowed them to become hospitable to each other.* Devotion to God yields devotion to others. Openness yields openness. The more they were open to the Spirit’s presence, the more open they became to each other, and then free to open themselves up to the world. They were not afraid to share this new reality. These are the tangible signs of resurrection reality; these are the distinguishing features of being church. “And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved – not members, but *disciples*. They’re not always the same.

This is what happens when we’re open to the reality of Christ in our midst – our hearts are changed. With glad and generous hearts they shared their meals. The early Christians were known for their generosity, especially to strangers, to those beyond their families, to those in need (which they didn’t do throughout the Empire). They were open-handed because they were open-hearted and they were open-hearted not because they were trying to be nice or trying to appear good, but because they knew – *really knew* – that the one who stretched out his hands, who opened his heart to the same humanity that broke it – was alive.

Perhaps this story will make this more real. Ron Heifetz, who teaches leadership at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, tells of a time when he was in England with his wife, Susan. After giving a talk on leadership in Oxford, he travelled through the English countryside for the weekend, a weekend that coincided with the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah. They stayed in the village of Castle Combe, where the movie version of *Dr. Doolittle* was filmed. As the evening approached, they wondered how they would celebrate the holy day far from any Jewish community.

Just before sundown, which marked the start of the New Year, they discovered an old Anglican church, more than 600 years old. They wandered in and sat in the front pew, “A Jew in an Anglican church facing Jesus on the cross,” he writes. Weeks before together they attended a Jewish workshop on ecumenism whose theme was a subject that sounds more Catholic than Jewish, the concept of the sacred heart. The sacred heart, they learned, was a reflection of God’s promise not to keep you out of the fire and the water but to be with you in the fire and the water.

Ron looked up at the image of a man tortured for his beliefs – a frightening sight perhaps for anyone who has not been acclimatized to it, but more so for a Jew, conscious of a history of persecution. After decades of feeling a smoldering outrage with the violent abuses of Christianity, Ron found sitting in that church a very challenging leap across a deep divide. Sitting there, looking at the cross, he wondered what Rosh Hashanah would have been like for

Jesus. He looked up to the cross and said, “You were one of our teachers. Why not keep each other company on the New Year? Nobody else is here to celebrate with us.”

Ron stared at Jesus and meditated, “Reb [Rabbi] Jesus, will you tell me your experience on the cross. This is Rosh Hashanah, when we contemplate Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Will you please give me a message?” After ten minutes, Ron got very excited. He asked his wife to come with him; taking her by the hand, he led her outside into the crystal-clear late afternoon sun and asked her to sit by him near the trunk of an enormous old pine tree.

“Sousan, I need to share this with you, but I can’t tell you, I have to show you. Could you lay down here beneath this tree and stretch out your arms spread-eagled, and just stay there?” Together they lay there outstretched, looking up.

“How do you feel,” he asked.

“Really vulnerable,” she answered.

“Me too.

And that’s it.

That’s the message.”

“To feel, as Reb Jesus felt, the gravest doubt, forsaken and betrayed....” To cry out in desperation, when you “believe you’re doing the right thing, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ But in nearly the same instant, to feel compassion, ‘Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.’ ... Jesus remained open.”³

Jesus remained open. Maybe in this sense Reb Jesus has given something new to the world and we’re the evidence. It is possible to love and therefore suffer and even endure untold anguish without closing one’s heart, without withholding one’s hands in fear. Jesus remained open, and when his church does the same, there’s no telling what he can do through us. Hospitable to the message of the gospel and allowing the Risen Christ to form us into a new people, we are now free to open up to a world in need. When his church takes on the shape of its crucified-risen Lord – stretches out its arms – people will know it. Christ *is* risen! We know what to do.

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³ Story recounted in Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Living* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 227-230.