This Side of Easter

John 20:19-29

Acts 4:32-35

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It’s been a week and here we are….on this side of Easter.

For many of us, Lent can be an uncomfortable season. We slowly make our way to the cross for 40 days, anxious to get through Holy Week and land triumphantly at Easter. It’s not a comfortable feeling to reflect on our own mortality and our own complicity in Christ’s death. We don’t like to think that we would have been part of that crowd shouting, “Crucify him!” We’d rather bask in the glory of Easter morning, smelling the lilies, raising our halleujahs.

We like to proclaim that we are an Easter people. We live in the hope of the resurrection; we worship the risen Lord.

But, is Easter really just another day in our liturgical calendar? Or, might we really consider what it means to *be* an Easter people?

Both of today’s texts offer two different options for what it means to be an Easter people.

Our Gospel text offers the familiar story of Thomas who, upon being told that the other disciples had seen the risen Lord, expressed his doubts. He tells his fellow disciples, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

Because of Thomas’s words, he has been doomed to be known by the moniker - Doubting Thomas. When I was younger, Thomas was always brought up as an example of what *not* to do when it comes to your faith. Don’t be like Thomas. Don’t ever doubt.

But perhaps we’ve not been fair to Thomas over the years.

Perhaps we should turn our attention to his disciple-friends instead.

At the beginning of the John passage, we learn that it’s evening on Easter Day. Earlier that morning, Mary Magdalene had discovered that the stone had been rolled away and the tomb was now empty. She ran and got Peter and an unnamed other disciple who then engaged in a foot race which John feels the need to tell us about which makes us wonder if perhaps it’s the writer himself who won the race….but I digress.

The two disciples see the rolled up cloths, and return to their homes, perhaps feeling devastated and confused because as the writer tells us, “they did not yet understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.”

Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene and instructs her to tell the other disciples that Jesus is ascending to his Father and to Mary’s Father, to Jesus’s God and to Mary’s God. Mary does exactly what Jesus tells her and announces to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord.”

Our Gospel text today begins just a few hours after all of that. We find the disciples locked away in a house out of fear. Mary has told them this good news and they are still afraid and are struggling to be an Easter people. They don’t understand yet what has happened and the significance of it. Instead, they are living in fear.

Then Jesus appears and we have this wonderful Johannine Pentecost. The disciples receive the Holy Spirit from Jesus, who sends them saying, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

It’s a spectacular moment. The disciples, who still don’t understand the Scripture and what resurrection means, have now seen the risen Lord, and have been sent out from that home in which they had locked themselves and sent to forgive the sins of their brothers and sisters and to spread the good news of the Gospel — that Christ has come to forgive our sins and to free us from death so that we might live as Kingdom people.

After they tell Thomas about their experience with Jesus and Thomas expresses his doubts, the text follows up with the disciples a week later. And...we’re right back where we started. The gospel writer tells us that “a week later, his disciples were *again* in the house” and that the doors were shut to keep the disciples in and anyone else out.

As Gail O’Day, former dean of Wake Forest School of Divinity, points out, “Thomas is actually one step ahead of these disciples — he only wants what [the disciples] already have received — but the disciples have received and still do not live as an Easter people.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Our Gospel text offers one glimpse into what it might be to live on this side of Easter — afraid and shut away from the world, keeping the Good News of the resurrection to ourselves. The Acts text offers yet another.

That text begins by telling us that “the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul.” We learn earlier on in that chapter that the community of believers had grown to 5000 members. So this whole group being of one heart and soul is pretty significant. We’re not just talking about a unified Session of a church or even the entire congregation of Covenant, but 5000 people — all being unified in heart and soul, all wanting the same thing: to spread the Gospel to the ends of the earth. That’s unheard of today.

When I was interviewing for my first call, I spoke with one committee at a church which shall remain unnamed which was about the same size of Covenant. One of the questions that I asked the search committee was, “How does your congregation handle conflict?” Their answer was a quick, “We don’t have conflict in our church.” This took me by surprise — every church, even the healthiest ones, have some form of conflict. My next question was, “Well, imagine that you did. How do you think your church would handle it?” One man sat back and thought about it for a moment and then said, “Well, if we did have some form of conflict, I guess that person would just leave the church.” Thankfully, when I interviewed here, the committee and John were very honest about conflicts that Covenant has had in the past and how the leadership and the congregation navigated them faithfully.

A church without conflict is a rare thing indeed and yet in Acts 4, we have close to 5000 people all living in community with one another, being in agreement in heart and soul. It won’t always go well for the church. By Chapter 4 in Acts, we already get hints about the dangers the leaders of the church will face by those in power. Just a few chapters after today’s text, Ananias and Saphhira will sell their own property but keep back some of the proceeds and bring only a part of what they have to the apostles. And in another few chapters, we’ll learn about the widows, a particularly vulnerable group within the community, being neglected in the daily distribution of food. But right here, in this moment, the church is all unified in one heart and soul.

The biggest difference between the disciples’ reactions in our Gospel passage and the 5000 believers’ actions in the Acts passage is found in the center of the Acts text.

In verse 33, we learn that the apostles and the believers trust that it is the power of the resurrection of Christ that allows their congregation to grow and follow the mission that Christ has charged them with.

But as seminary professor Samuel Balentine points out, “the imperative of [the apostles’] mission, however, is not only to *proclaim* the resurrection gospel, but also to *embody* its redemptive truth by caring for one another in ways that secure the fullness of life that God intends.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

A week after that first Easter, the disciples weren’t ready to embody the redemptive truth of the resurrection. They were just doing the best they could to make sense of all the goings-on of Holy Week. They couldn’t picture an embodied gospel movement yet. They weren’t living as an Easter people yet.

Today, a week after yet another Easter, — what has changed for us? Are we shutting ourselves away from the world? Or are we ready to live as an embodied movement — reaching outside of our church and our congregation to find those who are hurt, hungry, or lost? To give the disciples a little grace, the resurrection was new territory for them and their world had just been turned upside down. For the congregation of 5000, they’d had a little bit of distance from the resurrection and there had been many post-resurrection encounters with Jesus to help them make sense of it. For us today, we’ve got 2000+ years worth of stories of God’s redemptive work throughout history. So there’s really no excuse for us *not* to embody the Gospel.

Embodying the good news doesn’t just happen on one day of the year. Easter is a season in which, as one commentary writer puts it, “for fifty days, the church lives into the reality of the resurrection, of what it means to be a community shaped by the dying and rising of Christ, by the expectation-shattering reality of life victorious over death.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

We are an Easter people when John and I have to navigate our way around all of the collection boxes in the vestibule for all of the items this church collects for our community. We are an Easter people when we share the Easter play our kiddos performed with our loved ones — especially to those who have been hurt by the Church and could use some good news. We are an Easter people when we set up card ministries and find new ways to reach out to our home bound members. Shortly after we began live-streaming our worship services, one member who hasn’t been able to attend in person stated, “I couldn’t come to Covenant, so Covenant came to me!” We are an Easter people when we continue to take Covid-19 seriously, continuing to wear masks for the sake of our sisters and brothers in Christ. We are an Easter people when we seek ways to live as an embodied movement, not as a people who are paralyzed by fear and insecurity.

So, here we are, on this side of Easter. We’ve made it through the grief and drama of Holy Week to the other side. How will it change us? How will we live in a way that says, “I’ve been changed by the resurrection”?

When this pandemic is over, we may be tempted to go back to living in the “good old days” of pre-pandemic life, but instead, we need to examine ourselves and our journey and greet Christ on the other side of the pandemic, on the other side of Easter. What lessons will we bring with us? How has this pandemic given us a better understanding of what it means to be an Easter people? Who was hurt the most during this year? What surprised us about our nation and our society? Where did we see Christ’s redemptive power at work?

I know I’m ending this sermon with more questions than answers for you, and for that, I’m sorry. But it’s where I am right now -- full of questions about the future. We’re on the other side of Easter...about to be on the other side of this pandemic. How will we embody Christ’s mission in the days to come?

Throughout both texts — in the Thomas story and in the Acts story — the Holy Spirit is at work, energizing and supporting the communities. It’s the Holy Spirit that gives the disciples the eventual courage to leave the house and begin their own ministries in the name of Jesus. It’s the Holy Spirit who brings the 5000 together to form the first church communities and who inspires the early church to pool all of their resources for those who were in need. And I trust that the Holy Spirit is at work in our own congregation today, finding new ways for us to embody the gospel on the other side of Easter and soon, hopefully, on the other side of this pandemic.

I’ll close with one final, lingering question.

When we feel the Holy Spirit prompting us to try new things on the other side of the pandemic, will we have the courage to be an Easter people and not only proclaim the gospel, but to embody it as well?

I pray we will.

All praise be to God.

Amen.

1. Gail O’Day - Feasting on the Word. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Samuel Balentine; Feasting on the Word; Page 387. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Gail O’Day; Feasting on the Word; Page 401 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)