

There is New Life
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
Acts 4:32-35
April 8, 2018

We're only a week past Resurrection Sunday – the memories of an empty tomb not yet faded. And in most years, I bet you'd expect today's lection to come from John or Luke, and include a snippet of Jesus' first encounter with the disciples after Sunday morning – the Emmaus Road appearance, or perhaps Jesus enjoying a bit of his fish sandwich on Sunday evening. And in most years, you would be right.

But the book of Acts caught my attention this week, and so I decided to stray from my usual adherence to a gospel selection. And here's why: To me, Acts is the story of Resurrection. And in this season of Easter, I think we need to examine what resurrection really means. After all, we've only got a few more weeks before we deem everything around us "ordinary" again.

It just so happens, that two of my very favorite passages of scripture occur in Acts, and each of them occur before today's reading.

Following Pentecost, Peter and the other disciples were so filled with the Holy Spirit, that they helped others be filled too: their acts of preaching and praying and healing were mighty powerful. Acts 2 recounts the earliest days of the new group of believers which would form the Church we know today:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47).

If you listen closely, this is a story of resurrection. Do you remember how Jesus lamented the fate of the Temple? God's house, "his Father's house," had been corrupted from its initial purpose. The Temple was no longer a place that brought people back together, but rather, it had become a place to divide and to exploit others.

But not here. Here is an account of people gathering in worship, in God' house, and living into their intended purpose: the praise and worship of God, the care for one another, and the life of shared abundance. The cornerstone, that is the spirit of the Christ, the one the builders rejected, has been restored to its proper place. And in this temple, Friday is a distant memory. And this temple is fluid. It resides in homes and hearts as well. And there is new life!

The power of this new community is evident. In chapter 3, we're told that Peter and John heal a man who is crippled – the town knows him as a panhandler – but nevertheless, he is filled with the spirit. Upon being healed, the text tells us:

Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. All the people saw him walking and praising God, and they recognized him as the one who used to sit and ask for alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they

were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him. While he clung to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them in the portico called Solomon's Portico, utterly astonished. (Acts 3:7-10).

Again, listen closely. Do you hear a story of resurrection? Friday has come and gone, but the potential of Jesus – the ability to be wholly-attuned to the will of God – is now made manifest in Peter and John. And John and Peter can offer God's healing. And they can offer the same sort of purpose to a crippled beggar that Jesus offered to two wayward fishermen. The monotony of life, be it the back-breaking labor of net-casting, or the hopeless pandering for spare change, has been replaced by a new spirit – a spirit that walks, and leaps, and praises God, all at once. And there is new life!

Peter and John catch a lot of flack from the authorities about their healing ways. But such flack does not diminish their confidence, nor their resolve to share God's spirit. It actually emboldens them. And their small band of 70 grows to more than 5,000. Today's text tells us how these early believers live with one another:

Now 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. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There 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. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. (Acts 4:32-35)

And not to be redundant, but do you hear the story of God's resurrection? In the first passage, God's temple breathes new life. In the second passage, God's people breathe new life. In this passage, God's ways breathe new life.

Jesus, you'll remember, didn't come to abolish the law, but rather to fulfil it. And although it had been many centuries since they were practiced – Rome and other conquerors made sure of that – the Sabbath of the land and the Jubilee were a part of the law Jesus hoped to fulfil.

Israel's story was based on shared abundance: God's enough-ness. Manna in the wilderness kept the people alive, but you'll remember, it wasn't designed to be hoarded. In fact, it would spoil overnight. You used what you needed.

So too, was God's intention for the land. Every seventh year, the fields were to be left unharvested to ensure their long-term health. And in that seventh year, debts were to be forgiven. And every 49th year – the seventh Sabbath – lands were to be returned to their original owners. In such a system, every person, in every tribe, maintained his/her subsistence, and no person or tribe could amass unreasonable wealth.

Jesus stood in a temple riddled with corruption – men and women making it an economic engine. And he ministered to women and men beaten down by a vassal system that robbed peasants not only of their wealth and lands, but of their dignity, too. And he ministered to a nation no longer sure of and no longer able to see the presence of God in the world, and the goodness of that presence.

And he proclaimed, "Here in this place, God's realm is breaking into the present." We experienced it with Him. And now again, that same spirit, that same power, that same sense of love and community

and healing, was being made manifest by those with whom Christ gave God's spirit. Friday is a distant memory in Acts 4. The Jubilee is not something longed for, but rather it is something experienced. Here. And now. And there is new life!!!

Here's the thing. I think we spend an awful lot of time getting bogged down by the details of Christ's physical resurrection. Some chase the historical Jesus. Others seek scientific explanations to explain the unexplainable. Still others cling unabashedly to the text, and play it just as it lies. Some faith it. Others are so overwhelmed or disappointed in the mystery that they turn their attention to less-complicated, less-old-world things, perhaps even abandon organized religion altogether.

Well, I don't want to tell you what to believe, or even how to believe. But I do think that the story of Christ's resurrection is much more significant than our ability to recount or surmise its specifics. I've said the same to you about the Transfiguration and the burning bush and the virgin birth, and many other stories. The Easter story simply reminds us of God's possibilities.

God works in ways that are beyond our comprehension. But God is working. And in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God found a way to breath new life into the world. And if you want to know the fruits of that resurrection, you can't be content to simply ask about Sunday evening, or wait until you see Jesus walking along the lakeshore in the horizon. You have to look to the acts of God's people.

Empowered by the teachings of Jesus, God's people gave the Temple new life.

Empowered by the love of Jesus, God's people gave each other new life.

Empowered by the spirit of Jesus, God's people gave God's works new life.

What is the resurrection? It's the potential of each of us to be Jesus to one another. And it's the choosing of each of us to grasp such potential.

Long ago, inspired by the Holy Spirit, a group of determined believers did just that. And this morning, and indeed every morning, that same opportunity for resurrection waits for each of us.

We sit in a temple. Let's help give it new life.

We are surrounded by people we love. Let's help give each other new life.

We have been made aware of God's ways. Let's use our lives to give those ways new life.

Friends, it's time to resurrect a new chapter: The Acts of Sardis. May it be so. And may it be written soon. And may it be full of new life. Amen.