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After Jesus' resurrection, it seems that he knew his disciples would need some time to get used to the idea. The Gospels of Matthew, Luke and John all give us stories like the one we heard today, what is often referred to as the story of Doubting Thomas, when Jesus appears to the disciples to share peace with them or to share food with them or just to reassure them that he is indeed risen. There are 40 days, a holy number in our scriptures, when Jesus walks the earth in bodily form after his resurrection, before he ascends to be with God. This gives the disciples time to get past at least some of their fear of what happens next and to feel the power of his love for just a little bit longer.

Our Lectionary, however, is a little less kind to us modern-day Christians. Just a week after we celebrated the resurrection, we may technically still be in the season of Eastertide, which is why you can't judge me when you drive by my house and see that my Easter decorations are still up, but despite the whole 50 days of Easter, the Lectionary thrusts us into the next thing. We don't get time to revel in the glory of the resurrection. The Book of Acts, which we'll be reading from over the next weeks, moves us forward to the formation of the early church. Acts shows us how Jesus' small band of followers evolves into a movement that spreads all the way to Rome and eventually to the ends of the earth.

So rather than rejoicing in the resurrection for fifty days, we are called to consider the practical question: What does the resurrection of Jesus make possible?¹ The Book of Acts takes seriously that question, and it's one we'll be considering together over the next weeks. At least, that's what I will be preaching about. Do with it what you will.

Much of the Book of Acts tells of the heroics of Peter and Paul, star disciples to be sure. At least once Peter stops denying he even knew Jesus and Paul stops trying to kill the followers of Jesus. But the Acts account that we begin with today is about the community, not these individuals. This story shows us that even ordinary people are capable of being courageous witnesses to a life in Christ. And it reminds us that believing in the good news that Jesus shared, and becoming a follower, was not a solitary endeavor. It meant being welcomed into community and welcoming others.

This new community that we find in Acts was called to finish the work that Jesus started. The presence of Jesus will now be found among them. So what does this community look like?

Well, if we take the writer of Acts at his word, this community was pretty incredible. Let me just read you a line from the passage that we heard a few minutes ago. "There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned land or houses sold them and

¹ Matt Skinner in Working Preacher Commentary for Easter 2, 2021.

brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet and it was distributed to each as any had need."

In other words, those who had more gave from their abundance so that all might have enough to eat and live. This is the servant ministry that Jesus had called the disciples to when he fed them at the Last Supper.

Theologian, Willie James Jennings, writes that the abundance being shared within this community means that, "Money [in this situation] will be used to destroy what money is usually used to create: distance and boundaries between people."²

Money is so often used to delineate who is in and who is out. Who can afford to show up and participate. But this passage from Acts shows that sharing their was not only about mutual concern for those in the community, but about mutual identity. They shared an identity formed in Christ.³ Nobody needed money to be welcomed into that community. And if they *had* money or property, they used it to care for the well-being of all, particularly the most vulnerable. These acts of generosity and sharing from their abundance are the fruits of the new life made possible through Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit.⁴

If we want to understand how powerful and how counter-cultural this new community of believers really was, we can jump forward to the seventeenth chapter of Acts. Paul and Silas were passing through Greece and causing an uproar with their preaching about Jesus the Messiah. It seems that folks already knew about them and their message before they arrived, and a crowd shouted, "These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also." (Acts 17:6).

Turning the world upside down—that's how this new community was being described across the Mediterranean world. Those who were turning the world upside down.

So I see that there are two vital things going on in this earliest Christian community that we need to reclaim as the church two thousand years later.

The first is recognizing that our faith is a relational experience. We need to show up for others in this community and we need them to show up for us. Obviously, that has not been easy in this year of COVID, but we have found creative ways to stay connected and these opportunities will grow as the pandemic loosens its grip.

While I was waiting my 15 minutes for observation after my first COVID shot yesterday, I was reading a book about building spiritual community by John Pavlovitz. And this line stood out for me. "The simple act of sharing space with people is a sacred offering."⁵ The absence over the past year of that simple act of sharing space with one another

² Willie James Jennings,

³ Matt Skinner in *Working Preacher Commentary* for Easter 2, 2021.

⁴ Matt Skinner in *Working Preacher Commentary* for Easter 2, 2021.

⁵ John Pavlovitz, *A Bigger Table*, 2018

has made me aware of just how sacred it is. How we have missed the sacred space that we create when we gather together in this building to worship or to learn or to share fellowship or to feed people. We know how important all those things are to our sense of identity as a faith community.

We see in that earliest Christian community, their concern for the bonds they shared and so care for one another—extending love, compassion and mercy to those within our spiritual community and extending invitation to those outside of it—that’s a lesson we can learn from these earliest Christians.

The second, and equally important, thing we learn from the Acts community is to pay attention to how the world sees us. Would anyone describe us as turning the world upside down? Would they see in us the countercultural message of the good news in Christ? Or would they even know what we’re all about? Does the community outside our walls even know that we are here or what we believe?

Many people these days are distrustful of churches, and that is understandable. A lot of people have suffered at the hands of our religious institutions. And there are a lot of Christian communities, often the most vocal ones, who care a lot more about spewing judgment and hate than the love and welcome we find in Jesus. There’s a great hymn that says, “And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love, yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.” But do they? How have we made that known to the world—that we’re all about love? I think we can do better.

To close this morning, I want to get back to that question that I suggested would guide our reading of Acts over the next weeks during this season of Easter: What does the resurrection of Jesus make possible? We are a community formed in the hope and promise of resurrection. And we need to take that hope and promise seriously. What will the resurrection of Jesus make possible in our faith community and in the world outside our doors? How will we work together in love to turn the world upside down? Amen.