

“Life after Easter”  
April 11, 2021  
Scripture: Acts 4:32-35; I John 1:1-2:2

I’ve been thinking a lot, and a few of us from North held a conversation during Lent, about life after Covid. Part of me is still hoping, futilely I know, a switch will be flipped and we’ll suddenly return to the way things were in 2019. But the reality is we’ll probably always be living with this to some degree. That’s not a happy prospect. It means making some serious changes to our behaviors, giving up cherished gestures like shaking hands or hugging recklessly, huddling close to plan and share and learn. This experience is leaving a deep impression on us. It’s revealed the value of so many things we always took for granted, and it’s forced us to be far more intentional, if we’re concerned about one another’s safety, than ever before.

Not all of that is bad, I think. Becoming more mindful of our actions and their impact on the people around us is mostly a good thing. But it can be exhausting. When I read about the early church’s newfound commitment to an egalitarian existence, holding everything in common, looking after everyone’s welfare, I can’t help but wonder how long that lasted. The description in Acts is idyllic and possibly mythical. But there may have been a period of time when that arrangement was followed.

It was a recognition that life after Easter could not be as it was before. This good news of Jesus’ resurrection, opening the door to new life for everyone, means the old life is over. It’s not possible to go back to hopelessness. But what does this embrace of hope look like concretely? It looks like people abandoning class and status differences, divesting their possessions and redistributing wealth so everyone has what they need. If that sounds like socialism to you, you’re right. In fact, there’s a history of Christian socialist preaching in the Black church based largely on this description.

If we’re committed to the good news that Christ is risen and death is defeated, then shouldn’t that affect how we live? How can we hold that earth-shattering belief without shattering some of our social patterns? The early Christians understood the world was changed with the empty tomb. And if the world has changed, then we have to change, too.

But some changes can be hard to sustain. If we read just a little further in Acts we discover it wasn’t long before issues began to arise. Do you know what led to the invention of deacons? A group of Greek widows in that early community pointed out that their Judean counterparts were receiving better treatment and more support. The apostles were more interested in evangelizing than caring, so they appointed a group they called deacons, made up of both Greek and Judean folks, to oversee the distribution of aid to widows and orphans in the community. Even in those early years, so close to the event that brought them all together, the old world sneaked in and started chewing away at their new life.

Over time it’s hard to resist the influence of old habits and beliefs. I think the writer of John’s letter found that out. Probably written a generation or so after the setting of Acts, almost certainly not written by the author of John’s gospel but heavily influenced by it, this letter that

reads like a sermon tackles the realities that can set in on a community over time. There's a concern with complacency, with a relaxing of mindfulness, with the threat of arrogance. They're risking being plunged into darkness.

For this writer life after Easter, now decades after I suspect, means living in the light of God's presence. "We declare to you...what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands..." This audible, tactile faith is experienced within a community where humility and compassion are the defining qualities. There is no room for arrogance, for self-satisfaction in this place. It sounds to me like an addiction recovery group. They're all there because they know who they are and how powerless they are over their darker selves. They've taken fearless moral inventory of themselves and are no longer living in self-deception.

The writer of this letter wants to impress on the community their need to be self-aware and mindful of the needs around them. While they probably don't have communal ownership of all their possessions, they're living intentionally; they're taking stock of their actions and examining their motives. It's a way of acknowledging the new reality they live in after Easter. They can no longer live for themselves alone or be unaware of how their actions affect others.

Years ago in Bay City, Michigan, the bishop of the Saginaw Catholic Diocese directed all the congregations in their committee meetings to include one question in their deliberations, this was for all committees—education, worship, property, finance—all of them were to ask: how will what we do help the poor? That one question had a deep effect on their orientation. Instead of meeting to address inward concerns—maintaining their building, meeting their budget, educating their kids—they were always oriented outward. That kind of a practice, over time, can move a congregation away from self-preservation and toward self-sacrifice, an "after Easter" way of living.

I don't know if they've continued to do that. That bishop died years ago and someone else with other priorities replaced him. But for a while it was a helpful practice; it helped them experience life after Easter. How we live together, the questions we ask ourselves about our actions and motives, are expressions of the impact the good news of Jesus' resurrection has made on us. We live in a new world, if we're willing to own it. Because death is transformed, defeated in Christ, everything about us that contributes to death and darkness has the potential to be transformed, too. We are no longer bound to the ways of the old world with all its fears and hatreds and suspicions.

One of my favorite Easter hymns is the one we're closing with today. It's not very traditional, at least I didn't grow up with it, but it says so well what I've come to understand the message of Easter to be all about. "In the bulb there is a flower; in the seed an apple tree; in cocoons, a hidden promise: butterflies will soon be free! In the cold and snow of winter there's a spring that waits to be, unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see." Easter is about the potential for new life that lies within every moment; the potential that lies within every one of us, if we're willing to listen, to look, to touch; if we're open to the possibility of a new world emerging through our actions. Because Easter is not just about what God has done in Jesus, it's not confined to a moment in time, an event. Easter is a way of living; it's a continuing reality we

must commit ourselves to reveal through how we live together and how we act in the world. We may not always get it right and we will disagree at times over what “getting it right” means, but if there’s to be any life after Easter, it’s up to us to make it.

So, this morning as we continue our celebration of Easter, as we give thanks for new leadership by ordaining and installing a group of elders and deacons, we’re challenged to look deeply within ourselves and take stock of our actions and motives. For like those early Christians we live in a new world; everything has changed, and it’s time to live in a new way. It’s time to start living life after Easter.

Alleluia! Amen