

Four characteristics of an Easter people

Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:32-35

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How many of you have ever been lost?

I know what it's like: it's a terrible feeling. Lost perhaps in driving. But what about in the woods? In the mountains?

I was once lost in the Pyrenees mountains of Spain. It was during a snowsquall, that turned into a cloud-covered night. No stars. We had a map but no compass.

There we were in a terrain we'd never seen before and we had no idea which was to go. If only we'd had a compass.

We Christians are an Easter people. We have left the land of Egypt, the land of our slavery, and are headed in freedom to a land promised to us. But, we've never seen that land before, nor do we know the land through which we now wander. The people of Israel were guided through the land by a pillar of cloud by night and a pillar of fire by night. For 40 days after Easter, we had the risen Jesus to guide us. When he was taken up, He sent the Holy spirit to lead us, not in a different direction from the one that we had followed, but to remind us of the direction that Jesus had taught during those first 40 days to his Easter followers. Following the Spirit's inspired leading, the early followers recorded a map of their wanderings.

But, one writer, Luke, also gave us the compass bearings that they were using to make sure that their map was right-side-up.

In Acts 2.42, Luke tells us that there are four things that made the early community of followers of Jesus who they were, an Easter people, a people who were living a completely new experience under the authority of God. It made them completely unique in their world, a world that they were slowly leaving behind to create a new one. They were:

- (1) adherence to the apostles' teaching,
- (2) commonality,
- (3) breaking of bread, and
- (4) prayer.

I want to suggest to you this morning that Luke noted these four elements because they were and still are the four cardinal points of the compass that enable the community of Christ that we call "church" to stay on course, with the map right-side-up.

But, Luke does more! He not only tells us what the compass points are, but how we are to understand them. For each of the compass points – apostles' teaching, commonality, breaking of bread, and prayer – Luke tells us in the very next verses of his text, vss. 43-47, what these mean. So, using Thomas Aquinas's great principle of allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture, I would like to look with you at what each of these compass points signifies as Luke himself tells us.

They are listed in the proper order, starting from the True North of the Christian compass, Apostolic Teaching, and moving around to the East, commonality, to the South, breaking of bread, and to the West, prayer.

Let's start with the SECOND cardinal point, East on our compass: commonality. Note what Luke says this means: *Acts 2.44-45: "And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need."* This is so important to Luke that when he comes to Acts 4.32-35, he says it again:

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.

Now, some readers of Acts have thought that what Luke was describing in the early church was "primitive communism". But, we know now that what Luke was describing is how the early community of followers of Jesus was like a family. In the first century, you shared all things in common, had everything in common with no claim to something for one's self, lent without expecting any repayment, only in a family. Everywhere else, if you were given something, you had to pay it back. Only family members were treated as equals, and one shared freely. Furthermore, it was what Israel, as an ethnically constituted tribe, claimed to be: the family of Jacob, also called Israel.

What happened with Jesus was that Jesus began to call all of those around him who had faith in Him His family. He began to consider all of those who were his followers and did his will his "brothers" and his "sisters", even his "mother"! This must have been striking. But, what was even more striking were the kinds of people that Jesus included in his family: the sick (he calls the woman with the hemorrhage "daughter"!), tax collectors, prostitutes, sinners, as well as the odd "good person". And worst of all: eventually the family begins to include Samaritans and, worst of all, Gentiles, non-Jews.

And here is where the problem begins. It is one thing for these early outcast, misfit Jews to gather together and call themselves a family, because, after all, they are still family, the family of Jacob, also known as Israel. They are just family members that have strayed, like the prodigal son. They can come back, and in Jesus, they do.

But, what happens when those who hitherto have not been family members want to enter and take their place at the family table. Will the family grow to include those who want to be part of the family of Jesus but who are not ethnically related, or will it exclude them and cling to fleshly, familial identities of the past?

This is the same question that has faced the Easter people throughout our history, when Irish Christians sought a place in the British Christian family, when Kosovar Christians sought a place in Serb churches, when Hutu Christians have sought to become part of the family in a Tutsi church, when Tamil Christians have sought to be part of the family in an Indian church, Black Christians in a white church, or, French Christians in anglophone churches, when Frisian Christians sought to sit at table with Dutch Christians? And vice versa. Of course it's difficult, because remember what the word is in Acts: commonality. Once they are members of the family, they can ask for anything that is yours and of course you can ask them for what they have: your wealth, your respect, their poverty, their suffering.

But, though it is difficult, according to Luke, it is one of the cardinal points of the church that all who claim Jesus as Lord also be able this as their home and us as their brothers and sisters, having a place at the family table.

Which leads to the next point.

The THIRD, cardinal point, is "breaking bread". As soon as some Christians hear this phrase, they immediately think: ah, yes, the Church is constituted by liturgy, focused on the Eucharist or breaking of bread. But, that is not what Luke means by it. He means people who regularly eat together: *Acts 2.46: "And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts."* The early church had the map right-side-up and was on course when the members of the family not only shared what they had outside, say, in a church, or a mission, or a ministry, but did so right in their homes, starting with eating together.

Where a family is most characteristically a family is at the meal table. It is the place where family stories are told, where the day's activities are gone over. It is also the place where, if there are problems, they surface as family members sit around the table, looking at each other, having to be in each other's presence.

Anyone who is part of a family knows that this is the case. If my kids or my wife or I have been having a good day, we share, we talk, we laugh, we eat with glad hearts. If we have been having a bad day, we can hide out in our corner of the house until supper time. Then, forced to sit down together, it all comes out. And if anyone at table has something against another at table, that, too, will come out.

I once lived in a house with 15 other Christian men. Meal times were the times of greatest joy and of greatest trial. Parties were great. But, if there was tension, meal times were the worst. In fact, in some cases, people were so upset with each other that they would simply eat out so as not to have sit down and face the other across the table. I'm sure that that happens in all of our families: meal times are the times when you really know how things are going in our families.

If the church is a family, then we share in a common meal together, not first of all in the form of the Eucharist but in our homes. What we need to be able to do is to sit down together as a family, share our daily joys together, work through problems that arise -- sometimes over the table --, knowing that there is always a place at the table for any family member. And, we must know that it takes time, lots of time, many meals together, if there are problems. Then, our Eucharist, whenever we celebrate it, will be a true proclamation of what we are already doing daily, not a substitute for it.

For Luke, the Kingdom of God was taking shape not in the church as a building but in the kitchens and dining rooms of the Easter people's homes! And today that continues to happen in Nigeria and Rwanda, East Timor and Sri Lanka, Britain and Ireland, and in Ottawa and Kanata: Easter happens on the Emmaus road again and again as the family of Christ sits down at table together in his presence, breaks bread, eats together in Jesus' name, and looks each other in the eye. Then the map is right-side-up.

The FOURTH compass point, West, is that the Easter people are a people who pray. Again, you and I probably think that we have a pretty good idea of what prayer is: intercession. We pour forth names and situations of people in need.

But, what does Luke mean when he says that prayer is a cardinal compass point? 2.46-47: "*And day by day, [they were] praising God and having favor with all the people.*" For Luke, prayer is first of all praise, not petition.

Prayer for Luke is praise for salvation and for the blessings of this life: that job that I just got, my marriage, my new car. Prayer is, above all, praise for those around who are finding new life in Christ and being added to the family: the Samaritans who have received the Word, the general of the armies of occupation Cornelius and his family. Why even when Peter and John are flogged for their faith, they praise the Lord. Praise is the constant refrain of the church in Acts because it is the constant refrain of a family that is rejoicing -- in spite of the difficulties -- to be together and to be growing as a family.

God knows our needs before we ask, but God delights in our praise. Why, then, is prayer today more about petition than praise? I wonder if praise is the last thing mentioned in Luke's list not because it is the least of the compass directions, but because it is the end result of all of the others: we can truly pray to God, that is, praise Him, when we are truly sharing family life together, Jew and Gentile, free and slave, male and female. When that happens, prayer is unending praise. But, where that doesn't happen, where the family begins to look more like a club and where family members look more alike in their skin colour and complexion than in their Christ-likeness, is it possible that Luke is warning us that our praise will dim and we will begin to sound more like beggars asking for more than like praisers whose lives are overflowing?

And this leads me back to the beginning, to the one direction on our compass that is still missing from this list, the FIRST point of the compass, true North: what characterizes us as an Easter people is "apostolic teaching".

Ah, you say, this I grasp: what makes the church is that it follows the teaching of the apostles, especially now as set forth in the Scriptures. Though there was no NT, no creeds, no bishops, no professors of theology, there were the apostles who had been with Jesus. They knew what he had said. Isn't all that Luke is saying is that we must stick to what they learned from Jesus?

That could be. But, if we follow the process that we have begun to understand the other cardinal points in vs. 42, that is, by looking at how Luke expands on them in vss. 43-47, then in fact we see that Luke is talking about something slightly different. For what Luke talks about in vs. 43, where we would expect him to talk about "apostolic teaching" is "signs and wonders" done by those who were sent out by Jesus as

witnesses to the world of this new Easter life in the risen Jesus: 2.43: *"many wonders and signs were done through the apostles"*.

So, it would appear that what Luke thinks of as apostolic teaching is in fact miracles, such as healing, deliverance from prison, miraculous events on roads. These are the things that provide irrefutable evidence of power, and that gives the faithful witness an opportunity to speak about where the power comes from, namely, Jesus, Lord and Saviour. It is a powerful, irrefutable witness to Jesus. For Luke, "apostolic teaching" is not just talk and it is certainly not just head-knowledge.

Today, what goes by the term teaching in our churches, even apostolic teaching, is a very, very weak substitute indeed. It is often at best helpful moral instruction or theological speculation; at worst, teaching in churches is simply the unhelpful opinions of those who cannot see beyond the horizon of their own, known world and, not knowing better, cannot keep their mouths shut. Worse still, what is often called apostolic teaching is simply just a veneer over long-held cultural and political prejudices and preferences. For that reason, there is sometimes no discernible difference between the voice of the church and the voice of the world.

It is the abandonment of apostolic teaching that has led so many of our young people to leave the church. They say: "What you are offering me is no different from what the world is already saying. So, why should I spend my valuable free Sunday hearing someone say what I can already hear others in the world telling me, and usually doing a better job?"

And they're right. What our young people are crying out for is what we should all be crying out for if we take what Luke says seriously: true, apostolic teaching, a teaching with a difference, teaching not as the scribes do, but in power, with the irrefutable and unimpeachable authority of Jesus. It is not a magic show but it will take your breath away.¹

My friends, what is the result of the Easter people getting the map right-side-up and following it? What happens where there is oneness in Christ that shows us to be and to function like a family, in good and in bad times, where there is a willingness to bring all our good and bad times to the meal table and over time (and a good wine) to work them through, where the family is characterized not by faint hope clauses and begging but by the sure and confident praise of God on our lips all the time, and where the family is grounded first of all on the unimpeachable evidence that points us and others to the power of Jesus' name? Luke tells us in the last verse, vs. 47: there the church will experience the Lord adding to their number daily those who are being saved. May that be the experience of this church, gathered here in Kanata, in the name and power of Jesus!

¹ "Apostolic teaching", though we normally think of it as instruction in the truth of the faith, is really more unimpeachable, irrefutable evidence **for** faith, faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. It is the kind of evidence for God's sovereignty that we associate with the miracles (i.e., "signs and wonders") of Moses to Pharaoh that left Pharaoh with no option other than to "let my people go" than it is with University or theological education. For that reason, the term "teaching" may not be the best term to translate the Greek word used here, since we associate "teaching" with didactic instruction. Perhaps a better word would be "apostolic testimony with a view to following and practicing it, rather than just acknowledging, it". The notion is that all Christians should become "apostolic" in being able to bear effectual and unimpeachable witness to the risen Lord Jesus Christ!