

“Lessons in the Aftermath”

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St Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage KY

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Last week, in the dim light of the empty tomb, we asked if fear and faith can coexist. We asked how the failures and the falling short of the first apostles can reflect the state of our own hearts, and what we might learn from the redemption God made possible in them. We wondered together what happens next, when the obstacle we expect is rolled away and a cavernous possibility is left in its wake. Today we are offered up one answer, one shining image of what becomes possible when God turns our hearts to resurrection joy. Our passage from the fourth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles paints a succinct but clear picture of community enlivened by the Holy Spirit, how people might encounter one another in the light of Easter morning.

What we heard today is a story of aftermath, of what happens AFTER the women fled in amazement, what happens after they broke their silence, what happens after the eleven have encountered the risen Christ, what happens after the Holy Spirit comes down as tongues of flame upon the heads of the believers and unites them in one voice to proclaim the Gospel. We’ve skipped ahead a bit in the sequence of events, but I think there is wisdom in hearing this particular text today.

This text is short, and we’ve heard a few more readings since we heard it, so I’ll bring it back to the front of our consciousness. “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."

This short passage from early in the Book of Acts feels a bit like a description of the peaceable kingdom, the image of the last day when all will be made right and all God's creatures will dwell together in harmony. It also feels a bit like our author might be glamorizing "the Good Old Days," as every generation is wont to do from time to time. Luke the Evangelist is presenting us with an ideal picture of a community of one heart and mind, even as we know from other passages of Acts and from the letters of Paul that the early Christian community was much as it is today, full of struggle and ego and disagreement about what is meet and right so to do. Perhaps we can chalk it up to nostalgia, or an ideal he hopes will inspire his readers, or maybe it's something else entirely. Maybe, just maybe, this picture perfect community is entirely within our reach.

The evangelist who compiled the Gospel of Luke also provides for us this narrative collection of stories, sermons, actions, and reactions of the early Church and its adversaries. Luke the Evangelist, like any storyteller, has a particular style and particular images that resonate across his works. For Luke, the best evidence of God's presence is an incidence of healing; someone who is ailing or isolated encounters Jesus or one of his servants, experiences a return to wholeness at their hand, and responds with praise to God and grateful testimony to all who will listen. It may not appear as such on the surface, but our passage from Acts this morning is a familiar Lukan healing narrative. Luke is showing us an injury which has been healed, a body that has been made whole. The whole group of one heart and soul? This is the congregation of the faithful, the community of the baptized, the body of Christ. What was shattered and broken

and left in shambles by the crucifixion has been healed, returned to wholeness, renewed by the presence of God's healing spirit. The apostles were afraid and alone and silent, until the resurrected Lord restored their faith and inspired their testimony by his eternal presence among them. Luke is telling us the same old story, of a broken people made new, and how that encounter with the Almighty can inspire unimaginable change.

And make no mistake, this unified egalitarian community we are presented with today required significant change and unimaginable sacrifice. Everything they owned was held in common. Sacrificing selfhood and private property for the common good is a challenge at best, countercultural and terrifying if we are to be truly honest with ourselves. As many as owned lands and property sold them and brought the proceeds to the feet of the apostles. In an era and part of the world where land meant not only status, but survival, and property was ultimately understood in terms of inheritance, such an action is nearly incomprehensible. Were someone to undertake such an action today, we would worry for their health, their sanity, the moral responsibility of the church in receiving such an exorbitant gift. And yet, this is what was done, at least enough times to ensure that no one among the early church was left hungry or in need. The majority of Jesus's early followers were poor laborers, widows, young men and women who left behind the family business to follow a nomadic preacher, so the needs must have been great. And so the few with means provided for the many, even when it meant giving up everything, if we are to believe the testimony of our Patron evangelist. Like the feeding of the five thousand with a measly five loaves and two fish, the lack and the scarcity and the emptiness of poverty and oppression are replaced by abundance and fullness within the community of believers. This degree of mutual aid, trust, and vulnerability can only be a sign of the Spirit's work, and for Luke it is an outward sign of the inward healing that is made possible by God's grace.

This healing grace is made available to us too, a fractured and restored Body of Christ united in baptism. We are not meant to stay at the tomb, or even at the foot of the bloody cross. We are called by the healing work that God has done within us to go and do likewise, to give ourselves over to one another in the gentle service and impassioned preaching of Jesus. The outcome of eternal life is to drastically change how we live and relate to one another in this one, not just with our words and with our actions but even with our money, our property, our privilege and our priorities. Just as the loaves and the fishes and the bread and wine become infinitely more filling when they have been offered up to God, every fiber of our being and every mundane aspect of our lives becomes abundant once these gifts have been given in service of God. We are already of one heart and one soul, because we are one body. With great power we too must give our testimony to the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus, because great grace has been poured out upon us all. We are being called like so many before us to tell anyone who will listen, to witness to the good work that God is doing in us, and to do God's work in the world. As long as there is one in need among us, our work is not done.