

Second Sunday in Easter

Acts 4:32-35

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.

John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

The passage we read from Acts is the earliest account of the church, the first description we have of what it was like when the church was shiny and new.

This is the baby picture of the church, the first expression of what it might mean to be the body of Christ after Jesus is resurrected and raised.

Maybe you have the only set of parents in human history who understand appropriate social boundaries, and have never even thought to use public occasions to display awkward pictures of your adolescent years. If so, you have received your blessing, go forth and sin no more.

But more than likely, each of us can tell a story about a parent dragging out the photo album to show a boyfriend or girlfriend. There you are, in some smocked outfit your mother made before she really knew how to smock, a snowy mountain scene behind you even though you grew up in Florida, and a facial expression that says, "Please send help."

As someone who now gets to be *behind* the camera as I document future embarrassment for my own children, I understand a little better why our parents do this to us.

They see things we cannot see in those photos, because they remember. Even now when they look at us, they see the familiar eyes, the tiny hands, they hear our first words all over again, and no matter how much we try and pretend to be something other than their child, in their eyes, we are the same as we have always been.

While you might be embarrassed by your baby pictures, the church doesn't have much to be ashamed of. In fact, comparing this church described in Acts to what we find on most street corners today seems like night and day.

The early Christians not only worship and pray together, they not only seek unity and peace with one another, they also bring everything they own to the feet of the apostles and give it away, so that there won't be anyone in need or poverty.

Some of you adults may feel as if the current economic recession is a dramatic attempt to recreate the feeling of giving up everything you own, but this is different.

The early Christians are not giving up their possessions out of a sense of duty, or obligation—this is not some guilt-driven offering. The early church gives of itself out of a joyful realization that they no longer need what they thought they did. Their experience of the risen Christ has convinced them that God is trustworthy, that they can depend on Him.

Anyone experiencing a likewise feeling this morning or any unexplained urge to relinquish your possessions is invited to talk with Jack Barner or any of his development staff.

This experience of trust, of dependency on God, is so strong that later on in the story, a couple joins the church and turns over a great deal of their money, but keeps quiet about some property they own, wanting to hedge their bets.

They want to be a part of the church, but they're not ready to give up their independence, just in case this doesn't work out. The book of Acts tells us that they die almost immediately after lying to the apostles, victims of their lack of trust in God.

Too often in the church we hear stories like that one and we assume that in order to trust God, we need to do "x."

In order to trust God, I need to give up my possessions. In order to trust God, I need to be in the pew every Sunday. In order to trust God, I need to read the Bible or pray more regularly or spend more time with the poor.

The problem with all these very good actions is that we end up doing them for the wrong reasons. Those things are meant to be the result of a deeper trust, they are the symptoms of faith, not its cause. Jesus tells us again and again that faith is not a matter of doing one particular thing and not doing another, it is a matter of the heart.

We spend too much time as Christians worrying about our outward gestures of faith and hardly any time concerned about our faith itself. We do a very good job of acting like people who trust in God without ever trying out what that might actually be like.

But the early church described in Acts has the benefit of *not knowing* what actions they should be imitating in order to be Christians, because they are the only Christians. There is no manual, no helpful 5 point sermons to show the way.

Jesus did not leave them any explicit instructions as to how to be the church, so they have to make it up as they go along. Their first question is not "How does a Christian act" but "What does the good news of Christ call me to do?"

It is a faith that is not memorized, but lived out. They express their Christian belief not in words or creeds, but in things like a shared meal, warm fellowship, and a deep trust that God will provide for their needs with or without their Roth IRA.

I am one of those people who eagerly anticipates opening the envelope from TIAA-CREF every few months, complete with a color pie graph that evidently represents my retirement account.

While my father is a banker, the understanding of financial matters is clearly not genetic, so when I look at this pie graph, I have no idea what it really means. This ignorance has paid off in spades over the last few months, because I really can't tell you whether or not I my retirement account is making money or not, I just like the colors.

What I do know is that I am nowhere near retirement, at least as far as the all-knowing pie graph is concerned, so I'm not sure why I am so concerned about it except that I've been told that's what responsible people should be concerned about.

And to be fair, the early Christians were convinced Jesus would be back for them soon, so there was no need to start a 401K, there was no need to get a 30 year fixed rate mortgage, all those things seemed silly in the light of Christ's return. Their job was just to wait, and to live each day as if Jesus might come back. To trust. To celebrate. To share.

But then, he didn't come back that day. Or the next one. Or the next year, or the next couple of thousand years, and the church started to look less and less like that baby picture and more and more like the rest of society. Uncomfortable with the notion of depending on God, the church became a responsible citizen like the rest of us, occasionally checking their color pie graph to see how their nest egg was doing, hedging their bets in case God didn't come through.

I can preach sermons like this because this is a college campus and most of you are still students and you have no money so you're not bothered by someone talking about it. But this is not about how much money you have or don't have, it never has been—it is about trust.

Jonathan Kozol is a sociologist who has done extensive work documenting the lives of poor children living in the United States. In one of his books, he describes a neighborhood in the South Bronx where spent hypodermic needles litter the streets, 84 murders occurred in just one year, and around a quarter of the children are born with HIV.

His first tour of the neighborhood is given by a seven year old boy named Cliffie, and as they walk through the streets littered with homeless men and women, drug deals, and prostitution, Cliffie pulls Kozol along by the hand, like any regular 7 year old boy might do.

But Kozol can't help but be shocked by what he sees, which makes this 7 year old boy all the more miraculous—while Kozol is overwhelmed by the suffering he sees, Cliffie knows no better.

He tells Kozol that his mother had sent him to the store to buy three slices of pizza, one for him and for each of his parents. On his way home that winter day, though, a homeless man who was too cold to even speak pointed to his pizza, and so Cliffie just gave it to him.

"Were your parents mad?" Kozol asked, looking at this skinny and obviously undernourished child.

"Why would they be mad?" Cliffie looked back at his new friend surprised, "God told us to share!"¹

What proof did that child even have that God existed in that neighborhood? What evidence did that child have that God was even worth his trust?

In the gospel of John, the story is told of Easter afternoon, when most of the disciples are in a locked up room, hiding from the authorities. They have no evidence yet that God is trustworthy.

In fact, all that they have seen testifies to the fact that God has nothing to do with them. Their friend and teacher has been executed, his body is missing, and they are scared out of their minds.

Then Jesus breaks in. "Peace be with you," he says, but he has to say it more than once before they will get out from underneath the table.

He spends enough time with them that afternoon for them to know that he is the real thing, that the world has changed. That God is worth their trust. And then he is gone.

Thomas is not with them when it happens. He is not hiding. Who knows where he is, but I imagine he is taking the death of Jesus even harder than the rest of them, because when they try and tell him what they've seen, what happened when he was gone, even with all of them telling the same story, he won't believe it.

"Unless I put my finger in his wounds, I won't believe any of it," he says.

A week goes by, and Jesus shows up again, and Thomas eats his words. "My Lord and My God!" he shouts. Like the rest of us, he trusts what he can see, what he can touch, what he knows to be real.

But Jesus asks him, "Do you believe because you have seen? Blessed are those who have not seen and believe it anyway."

Blessed are those who have not seen and believe it anyway. Blessed are seven year old boys in the South Bronx who have no business being generous and if they had any common sense would hold on fiercely to the little they have, and yet believe it anyway.

Blessed are those whose lives have come down around them, whose relationships are crumbling, whose finances are in shambles, who believe it anyway.

¹ Kozol, Jonathan. *Amazing Grace*. New York: Crown, 1995. Page 8.

Blessed are those whose lives are perfectly put together and have put away enough in their color pie graph to think they have no need for God, who believe only what they can see and touch—may they cry out with Thomas, "My Lord and My God!" and believe it anyway.

And blessed be the church, who most days looks nothing like her baby picture, but every blessed once in a while, you can see it in her eyes, you can see it in her hands, you can hear it in her voice, that underneath it all, she still trusts what she can't see.

Underneath it all, she is still that awkward child, the same as she has always been.