

Resurrection People
Acts 4:32-35
Second Baptist Church
April 23, 2006
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It is the second Sunday in Easter and the question now is this:
In the light of Jesus' death, burial and resurrection -- how shall we now conduct our lives?

In one of Flannery O'Connor's most famous short stories, entitled *A Good Man Is Hard To Find*, she sketches the character of an escaped convict known as The Misfit. The Misfit is on a crime spree. He accosts a family that is out for a drive and one by one he has one of his two sons take each of them out into the woods and shoot them. First he kills the father and son, then the little girl, the mother and the baby. Finally only the grandmother is left.

The grandmother puts forth every argument she can think of to save her life. She first calls upon his sense of chivalry: *You wouldn't shoot a lady, would you?*

I would hate to have to, he replies.

She then appeals to what she thinks must be The Misfit's better nature: *I just know you're a good man*, she tells him.

Nome, he says, *I ain't a good man*.

Grasping at straws she encourages him to pray to Jesus for help. *I don't want no help*, he says. *I'm doing all right by myself*.

Every attempt to dissuade him fails. And in reality she knew all along that her arguments, her pleadings would not succeed. How did she know? Because of something he had said earlier. He had told her before that he believed in a world *where the lame don't walk, the blind don't see, and what's dead stays dead*. And in the end the Misfit kills her too.

A gruesome story, as are many of Flannery O'Connor's. But there is a very important truth buried under the gruesomeness. The grandmother in the story knew that because that man believed in a world *where the lame don't walk, the blind don't see, and what's dead stays dead*, that belief in a world without hope would determine how he behaved.

Because he had no hope, he had no reason she could appeal to for him to act right and have compassion. And certainly we see that scenario acted out in places in our city where people without hope act without conscience or compassion. Behaving as people without hope.

If that is the case, then you would think the reverse is also true. Because we do have hope, you would expect that would impact how we live and how we treat each other.

Here on the Sunday after Easter when we proclaimed the resurrection of Christ, we who know ourselves to be resurrection people, we who believe in the life-giving, transformative power of Christ alive in the world, we who believe in a world where what's dead does not stay dead—those beliefs and that hope ought to show up in our behavior, in our compassion, in how we act, in what kind of people we are.

If we are people of the resurrection, you would expect that we would live a different kind of life together. Behaving as a people with hope.

You would expect that, but for Christians today that has too often not been the case. Marcus Borg, a professor at Oregon State University, has often lectured here in Memphis, and many of you have heard him.

In his book [*The Heart of Christianity*](#) (2003) Professor Borg describes how his university students who grew up outside the church have a uniformly negative stereotype of Christianity.

When I ask them (non church students) to write a short essay on their impression of Christianity, says Borg, they consistently use five adjectives: Christians are literalistic, anti-intellectual, self-righteous, judgmental, and bigoted.

We could have an interesting conversation about why those negative stereotypes exist and the degree to which they are deserved. But the important fact that is without question is that those negative stereotypes do exist today for too many people.

And the other thing we know without question is that when you look back in the book of Acts at the emerging community of Christians, the early Christian church, they enjoyed a far different, a far more positive reputation. Acts 2:47 says that *they enjoyed the favor of all people.*

[Dan Clendenin, www.journeywithjesus.net, April 17, 2006]

Those early followers of Jesus, after they experienced his resurrection, it really did impact how they lived and how they treated each other.

They really were a resurrection people; they were living the life-giving and transformative power of Christ alive in the world; they were a group of people who believed in a world where what's dead does not stay dead. And it showed up in how they lived.

That they were a people of hope showed up in their behavior and in their compassion, in how they acted and in what kind of people they were. They lived a different kind of life after that first Easter. In other words, Easter faith came to expression in the community of faith. They behaved as a people with hope.

After a period of confusion, doubt and disbelief following the gruesome execution of Jesus, and despite threats from the religious and government authorities, his followers became convinced that God really had raised Jesus to new life. And to the shock of almost everyone, these unschooled and ordinary Jesus followers proclaimed their message with great courage and boldness.

In Jerusalem converts joined the movement *en masse*, first 3,000 people, then increasing to 5,000 (2:41, 4:4). And here in our passage today, Luke gives us a snapshot of this vibrant Jesus-community that helps to explain the appeal of their message and its consequent expansion:

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 with them all. There were no needy persons among them. 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 (Acts 4:32–35).

So here is a group of people, living in the power of Easter faith, who came together in great unity—*the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul*.

And they shared their possessions—*No one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common*. In other words, Christian unity was translated into Christian charity. They didn't just say *We are one in the bond of love*. They acted it out. Their willingness to share their possessions gave concrete expression to their unity in heart and soul.

They held everything in common. They put all their money and things into a common pool and shared everything. This type of “Christian communism” that's described here is a portrait of one of several different ways that the early Christians related to their possessions. Holding all possessions in common is not the only way for us to function—it might be the right thing in the right time and circumstance. But it's not the only way.

The important thing to note here and the ideal that does apply to all of us even today, I think, is the line that follows in verse 34: *there was not a needy person among them*. That was the point of holding all things in common. They ensured that there was not a needy person among them.

And there may be other ways to do that than holding all possessions in common—I'm not advocating that for us right now—, but that ideal that there was not a needy person among

them still exists for us—that no one is hungry among us unless all of us are hungry.

You know that Latin phrase—*E Pluribus Unum*. We live in a time, as Arthur Schlesinger once said, with too much *Pluribus* and not enough *Unum*. The world has a desperate need for a church like that early Christian fellowship described in Acts—a church that is so unified and so compassionate that there is not a needy person among them.

I think the selfishness that we are all prone to, is typically born of fear—fear that if I start sharing soon there won't be enough for me, if I start sharing, there won't be enough to go around.

I think of the tragedy of the Titanic. When that great ship went down those who made it into the life boats rowed as far from their drowning shipmates as they possibly could. Even worse, most of the boats were only half full.

Those in life boats rowed away for fear that the people in the water would swamp the boats in an attempt to save themselves and in the process bring everyone down. The fear that if they started sharing there wouldn't be enough to go around.

We operate like this a lot in our world. And yet we know that God doesn't work that way. We know that we shouldn't work that way. We know that there is such a huge need in our world, in East Memphis, for a group of people to be so full of the Spirit, so full of hope, so unified and so compassionate that there is not a needy person among us.

And not just for our own sake. You might read this passage from Acts this morning and think, *This sounds like some kind*

of commune like the Branch Davidians or Jim Jones. Or it sounds like some kind of insular Christian community where all the saints huddle together to get away from the world. To live apart from the world until ultimately we are privileged to leave it. To wall ourselves off in the corner to pray and take care of ourselves. A commune for saints apart from the world.

I don't think so. Not at all.

There's a book called *St. George and the Dragon*, in which a man in the throes of his mid-life crisis decides to go on a quest. He meets a large red dragon who accompanies him as he makes his journey.

The dragon decides that George's name is much too plain, and he says to George, *We will have to give you a proper title if you wish to go on a quest.* The dragon draws himself to full height and in a deep voice says, *I, the Celestial Dragon, dub thee with the title of 'ST.'*

George is taken aback and protests. He says, *Only the Pope can make somebody a saint!*

The dragon replies, *'ST.' doesn't mean saint. It is an abbreviation for 'sent.' You have to be sent, George, before you can be a saint.*

We are people of hope. We have an Easter faith. We are people of the resurrection. Not called to huddle together in a corner. We are the ST's of the world. Sent to proclaim the resurrection by our words and by the way we live out our faith together. Sent to proclaim the resurrection by our unity and by our compassion.

Proclaiming the resurrection by word and by the way we live out our hope, by the remarkable way we live our lives together—to the point that there is not a needy person among us.

Can you imagine if all of us who celebrated Easter last Sunday in all of the hundreds of churches in Memphis lived out our Easter faith like that? If we were sent out into the world living our faith in such a way that adjectives like literalistic, anti-intellectual, self-righteous, judgmental, and bigoted were the last words that people outside the church thought of when they thought about Christianity.

Can you imagine if we lived out our Easter faith in such a way that when you asked non-Christians about their impressions of Christianity they uniformly employed adjectives like generous, compassionate, sharing, giving, loving, unselfish?

The world has a desperate need for a church like that early Christian fellowship described in Acts—a church that is so unified and so compassionate and so unselfish that there is not a needy person among them.

I read this week [*in a sermon preached at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church on November 6, 2003 by Jana Childers, Dean and Professor of Homiletics, San Francisco Theological Seminary*] a poem that was popular in the early 20th century. It's by that prolific author, "Unknown." It's a poem that speaks to that need for union and community and watching out for each other that is so strong in all of us.

*I think oft times as night draws nigh of an old house on the hill,
Of a yard all wide where blossoms bloomed and children*

played at will. And when at last the night came down, hushing the merry din, Mother would look around and ask, "Are all the children in?"

It's many and many a year since then, and the old house on the hill no longer echoes the children's feet, and the yard is still -- so still. But I see it all as shadows creep through many years since then. I can hear Mother ask, as she did before, "Are all the children in?"

I wonder if, when the shadows fall on that last short earthly day, When we say goodbye to the world outside, all tired with our children's play, When we step out into that other land where Mother has long been, Will we hear her ask, just as of old, "Are all the children in?"

A church that is empowered by an Easter faith, a church that is a resurrection people, a church that is a people of hope, is a church that asks the question: Are all the children in? Are the weakest and most vulnerable among us accounted for? Is there a needy person among us? Are all the children in?

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