

The Easter Community
Acts 2:42-47
Second Baptist Church, Memphis
Third Sunday of Easter
April 6, 2008
Dr. Brent Beasley

During this season of Easter, these Sundays after Easter, we are looking at a series of scriptures from the book of Acts. The scriptures from Acts come from early church sermons and events that describe the people's response to the fresh news of resurrection.

The question we are asking is, How did they respond to the resurrection? How did they move from witnessing the day of Easter to becoming the people of Easter? From hearing about the resurrection event to living a resurrection life?

Peter preached this sermon here in Acts 2 about Jesus' life and his death and his resurrection. And when he had finished preaching, we're told in verse 37 that the people who heard this message were cut to the heart. And the people said to Peter and others, *What should we do?*

And Peter responded, *Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*

And about 3,000 people responded to the message of Jesus and were baptized. 3,000 individuals had a personal experience with Christ. And now we see in these verses starting with verse 42 what happened next. And what happened next shows us that the personal experience is necessary but not enough. The private experience is not sufficient.

Joey Dorsey is of course one of the star players for the Memphis Tigers. He is huge. He is 6'9", and his arms and shoulders are so big he almost looks like a cartoon character superhero. But the thing about him, and I think it's the reason he has endeared himself to so many Tiger fans, is that he shows his vulnerability.

Unlike most star athletes, Joey Dorsey lets you see when he's upset or nervous or uncomfortable. Remember in the tournament games against Mississippi State he stepped up to the free throw line and somebody opened a curtain in the arena and the sun got in his eyes. He squinted, stepped back, shielded his eyes with his hands. He was clearly a little rattled by it.

For some reason I was really struck by the little story Geoff Calkins had in his column Friday. After the Texas game a reporter from the Los Angeles Times asked Joey Dorsey about playing against a young guy like UCLA's Kevin Love. *He's a freshman*, the reporter said, *he's 19. How old are you?*

I'm a senior, said Dorsey, *I'm 22, 23.*

Twenty-two, twenty-three? Who answers the question, How old are you?, with two numbers? And, by the way, he's 24. The thing was, he was embarrassed of his age. He was embarrassed to be a 24 year old college student.

The point about Joey Dorsey that I'm trying to get to, though, is the story of his absentee father. Did you read about this this week? When Dorsey was two years old his father moved away and had no more contact with him.

His mother, Charlene, remarried, but Joey was just 10 when his stepfather died because of kidney failure. Left once more without a male role model, he started asking more questions about his real father.

When Joey was 13, Charlene took him to meet one of his father's brothers. She inquired about the boy's father, as she had done several times before without reply. This time, she was told that his father *would rather just leave things the way they are.*

You can imagine what that did to my son. It crushed him, Charlene said. *It crushed him.* Around that time, Joey was sent to New Foundations, an alternative school in Baltimore for children with behavioral issues.

A little more than two years ago, Charlene received a phone call. The newspaper clippings she'd been sending had apparently worked: Reginald Griffin wanted to be reunited

with his son. What's more, he wanted Joey to meet a boy named Joshua Griffin, the half-brother he didn't know he had. *He was so excited,* Charlene said. *He was gonna meet his father and brother for the first time.*

The Griffins were living on Long Island in November 2005 when the Tigers came to New York's Madison Square Garden for the NIT Season Tip-off. Memphis officials, having been apprised of the planned reunion, made ticketing arrangements. Dorsey, having waited so long for this moment, was about to burst.

And then ..nothing.

No show, Charlene said. *He was devastated. I think (Tigers coach John Calipari) was devastated with him. Joey said at that point, "I don't even want to meet him."*

This fall, when the Tigers went back to New York to play, he did meet his father. They hugged, but Dorsey didn't really have much to say. He remains a little suspicious of his father's motives and timing.

Joey Dorsey is a big basketball star in Memphis. He's a crowd favorite who always gets big cheers. He's in the Final Four—the championship game. He's on top of the world. But it's not enough. He craves that connection with his father.

We all of us need deep connections with other people. It's not enough to go it alone, no matter how successful we may be. Like basketball, life is a team sport.

The proof of that is in our own longings. When I hear that story about Joey Dorsey, I feel that longing and that hurt with him. We all do. Look at what happens in our scripture today. 3,000 people responded to the message of Jesus and were baptized. 3,000 individuals had a personal experience with Christ. 3,000 people responded individually to the Easter story. 3,000 people were on top of the world.

And now we see what happened next. And what happened next shows us that the personal is necessary but not enough. The private is not sufficient.

What happened next was the Easter story became the Easter community. These people became followers of Christ and were baptized, and immediately what follows is the story of how they came together as a people—not how they all went their separate ways but how they came together. Their experience with the risen Christ led them to come together in a remarkable way.

What did they do? Listen again to Luke's description.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe

came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.

Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and giving the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

They had their encounter with Christ in the Easter story, and then they became immersed in the teaching of the apostles.

They had regular fellowship—they spent time together in social and religious settings.

They took care of each other—they shared with one another “as any had need.”

There was a spirit of unity—“all who believed were together.” Later, in Acts 4:32 we're told that they were “of one heart and soul.”

They were devoted to prayer.

They demonstrated a proper sense of awe before God.

They grew. They flourished—“day by day the Lord added to their number.”

It got started with 3,000 people being baptized. And then, as they taught and prayed and worshiped and shared, we’re told that day by day the Lord was adding daily to their number.

There is no mistake about what is going on here in the emerging Christian church. All the love and care and sharing, and praying and worship that this text describes could not be contained within those who were already a part of the Christian community. It spilled over outside and caught other people up in it.

When Christ was raised from the dead, God once and for all showed that evil and death and loss are never irreversible. And so instead of living lives of fear and selfishness and anger and violence, his followers began to live big, open, generous, risk-taking lives.

And when we look at those early disciples we see how this new faith began to spread. A handful of people began to live a different way. And it took off.

Rodney Stark is a sociologist at Baylor University. He has studied carefully just how it was the church grew so fast in its early years from a handful of defeated followers to, within 300 years, being the religion of the Roman Empire.

After sifting through all the evidence, he figures that for Christianity to have swept the Roman Empire in three hundred years, it would have had to grow at a rate of 40% per decade, which would have meant small growth at first, but eventually a vast expansion.

And how did it happen? he asks. To sum up a vast amount of information, he says that it happened because Christians were more compassionate than the culture around them.

In a world entirely lacking in social services, Christians were their brothers' keepers. At the end of the second century, Tertullian wrote that while pagan temples spent their donations *on feasts and drinking bouts*, Christians spent theirs *to support and bury poor people, to supply the wants of boys and girls destitute of means and parents, and of old persons confined to the house.*

In a letter to the bishop of Antioch in 251, the bishop of Rome mentioned that *more than 1,500 widows and distressed persons* were in the care of his congregation. This charity was confirmed by pagan observers, too. *The impious Galileans support not only their poor*, noted the emperor Julian, *but ours as well.*

When two great plagues swept the empire in 165 and 251, mortality rates climbed higher than 30 percent. Most people tried to avoid all contact with the afflicted, often casting the still living into the gutters.

Those early Christians nursed the sick, even though some of them died doing so. We now know that basic nursing – simply giving victims food and water without any drugs – reduces mortality in epidemics by as much as two-thirds. Consequently, because those Christians took care of each other, Christians were more likely than non-Christians to recover.

In times of great social unrest, fear and disease in cities, and brutal pagan practices, Christians lived in communities that cared for each other, that welcomed the stranger, honored women, and protected children. In short, people experienced the presence of Christ in the ways Christians lived their lives together. Slowly at first, but in less than 300 years Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire.

[Rodney Stark, The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries, 1996]

You see the way the Memphis Tigers play as a team: unselfishly, everybody has a role, they try to make each other better, and they don't worry about who gets the most points or the most credit. Christianity is a team sport.

Eagle Lake, Texas, where I was pastor before we came to Memphis, is proclaimed to be the goose hunting capital, not of the county, not of the state, not of the country, but the *Goose Hunting Capital of the World*.

The Goose Hunting Capital of the World.

Several million spend the winters there every year feasting on the rice fields.

One of the things you notice about geese is that they fly in formation. They fly along in this “V” formation. Do you know what scientists have discovered as to why they fly that way? As each bird flaps its wings, it creates an uplift for the bird immediately following it in formation.

By flying in this “V” formation with each bird following another, the whole flock is able to fly at least 71 percent farther than if each bird flew on its own. In other words, if one goose was able to fly 100 miles by itself, all the geese flying together would be able to fly 171 miles.

One of the things I learned from the geese is that if you can work together with a group of people who share a common direction and sense of togetherness, you can get where you want to go faster and easier, because you are traveling on the power of each other.

Working together. Helping each other. Being a team player. You can do so much more together than you can do apart.

When a goose falls out of formation, it all of a sudden feels the drag and resistance of trying to go it alone. And-- real quick-- it gets back into formation to take advantage of the lifting power of the bird in front.

The other thing I learned about geese-- and this is important-- is that when a goose gets sick or is wounded or hurt in some way and falls out of formation, two other geese-- they say-- fall out with that goose and follow it down to give help and protection.

And they stay there with that fallen goose until it is able to fly again or until it dies. And only then do they launch out again on their own to catch up with their group.

Think of what kind of a people it is, who work together like that, when you see one of your flock hurting, when you see one who has fallen out of formation with the flock, when you see one who doesn't fit in, when you see one who has fallen down and is alone, when you see one who's wounded and weak-- think of what kind of a people it is when-- like a goose-- you drop out of formation for awhile and go down to the one who has fallen out alone to give help and reach out and to stand by and to lead him or her back into the flock.

What kind of a people is that?

It's called a church.