

SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER | APRIL 11, 2021

ACTS 4:32-35 | PSALM 133 | 1 JOHNS 1:1-2:2 | JOHN 20:19-31

In the season of Easter, we start to hear stories from the book of Acts. Acts was written by St. Luke, and it's a sort of sequel to his gospel. The story of Jesus doesn't end with the resurrection and ascension, it keeps going on in this new community of believers who are sent out into the world. If the primary question in Luke's gospel is *How is God acting in the life of Jesus?*, the primary question in Luke's Acts is *How does the resurrection change things? What is possible now that wasn't possible before?*

One of the things the resurrection changes are people's beliefs. *We used to think X, but Christ is risen so now we think Y. We used to believe A, but Christ is risen so now we believe B.* If you read St. Paul's letters, there's a lot of that. We're probably used to thinking of faith in those terms. We understand a group or a community or a tradition by what people believe.

But that's not the only way to understand a community. The other way you could understand a community is to ask *What do you do?* You don't just learn about a community by reading a statement of belief. You learn by actually watching how their corporate life operates. People who study religion call these "practices." And you might think, *Well, I don't really engage in religious practices.* But you do. You just don't notice them. You put ashes on your forehead. You engage in acts of service. You mark yourself with the sign of the cross. The way you understand the community isn't just by knowing what they claim to believe, but by understanding the norms and rituals and actions that form their life together.

Part of what makes the book of Acts so interesting is that it's unpacking the relationship between beliefs and practices. And it's exploring not simply how the resurrection changes what we believe, but also how it changes our practices. And, if you want to get really fun, it's about how the practices we engage in shape what we believe.

The reading that we heard from today is quite obviously about practices. You probably heard this reading and focused in on the part about selling possessions and distributing wealth. That's a pretty clear sort of practice. It's about a community doing something. But don't skip over the belief, too. Because the belief is the foundation of the whole thing.

The belief is right there in the first verse. It even uses the word "belief" in it. Those "who believed were of one heart and soul." So already we have one answer to the question *What does the resurrection change?* It changes who we consider ourselves to be. It brings us together with other people and creates new connections that are so deep and so profound that it's as if they're in our hearts. They're a part of us. One heart and one soul.

The Greek word for this is *koinonia*.¹ We would translate as "fellowship" or "unity." But it's not just unity like agreeing to get along or passing a vague agreement on paper. It actually suggests that, as fellow members of the body of Christ, we actually share in one another's experiences. Our lives are wrapped up with one another. That your joys are my joys, and when I see you suffering, it hurts me, too. When we are joined to the body of Christ, we aren't just joined with people who live in our town or go to our church or exist in our social circles. The body of Christ that we are joined to is bigger than our own experience of life.

So the resurrection changes what we consider to be in our self-interest. And it does that, here's the fun part, not by just slightly improving our interests, but by radically changing our sense of self. Of who we consider ourselves to be. And whose experiences affect us. There's a card I keep

¹ There's a good introduction to this concept in Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, *Pray Without Ceasing: Revitalizing Pastoral Care* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2006).

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in my desk from James Martin who is a Jesuit priest and a friend of Father Stephen's. And on the front it says, "There is no them. There is only us." And that's sort of the point here. That because of the resurrection, we never encounter a story as something that's happening to *them*, but always as something that's happening to *us*.

Let me give you an example of this. The other day I was watching the news and there was a story about migrants fleeing gang violence in Guatemala.² And they're interviewing these families living in a park in Mexico near the U.S. border. And as you watch the report, you have all these identities that are being activated in your head. I'm an American. I'm a consumer. I'm a voter. I have my own political agenda. All that stuff is front of mind when you're thinking about how we relate to them. But then they show a Mexican pastor praying with the families. And it sort of snaps you out of it. *Oh, right.* That's not them. This is us.

This isn't to say that the only people we should care about are people who are like us in some way. But it is to say that the things that are the most important often aren't the most readily apparent, and that the body of Christ isn't constrained by own designs and imaginations. And whenever I try to ignore or write off the salvation of others, I'm really cutting myself off from Christ. That's what unity, what *koinonia*, is all about.

That belief is really key if you want to understand the practice in the story. Sometimes we summarize this story as *Wealthy people in the early church gave away all their possessions*. But that's not quite right. They didn't give them *away*. After all, when you buy food for your child or medicine for your parent, you don't say that you gave your money *away*. We only use that language for people we have no real stake in. Whose lives don't really affect ours. You give your money away when you want the tax write off.

But because this community believes in *koinonia*, they understand that giving things away isn't a possibility anymore. They didn't give it away because, in the light of the resurrection, they understood that they were giving it to their fellow members of the body of Christ. They used their possessions to bring people closer. To make their community more reflective of the kingdom of God.

Willie Jennings, who's a really excellent theologian, puts it this way. The church uses money to "destroy what money normally is used to create: distance and boundaries between people."³ That's the key point. It's not giving money away. You don't need the resurrection to give money away. It's bringing people together. That's what the resurrection changes. That's what *koinonia* is all about.

So is *koinonia* a belief or a practice? The answer, of course, is both. It's a belief about our relationships with other people. That our stories and futures are all wrapped up with one another's. And we practice *koinonia* whenever we build up the body of Christ beyond our narrow self-interest. *Koinonia* a belief and a practice but more important than either, it's a gift. That in all times and in all places, we are being formed and reformed into the body of the risen Christ.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

² I think this is the story? It's this or one from a couple days prior. "Why Thousands of Immigrant Children Have Spent More Time than Legally Allowed at Border," PBS NewsHour, March 22, 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/why-thousands-of-immigrant-children-have-spent-more-time-than-legally-allowed-at-border>.

³ Willie James Jennings, *Acts: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 50.