

Ways of Life

Acts 2:14a, 22-32

Welcome to the Second Sunday of Easter. On last Sunday we heard Mary Magdalene give the first gospel sermon by telling the gathered and frightened disciples that she had seen the risen Lord and that he told her to tell them: “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” Today the sermon in our scripture was delivered 50 days later and is the first recorded extended gospel sermon. This time it is delivered by Peter, a student and disciple of Jesus. Last Sunday the disciples were confused, but in this scripture the twelve disciples are clear about what they have seen and now understand. Now they know the ways of life and the path which is belief in the Risen Lord.

The resurrection of Jesus is the foundation of Christian faith. Paul says that without the resurrection, both his preaching and our faith are in vain (1 Cor. 15:14). For the early Christian community, everything depended on the resurrection, for it was the foundation of their proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ. So, as Paul says, if he was not raised from the dead, then our faith is in vain.

The disciples understood that there is a distinction that must be made between resuscitation and resurrection. Lazarus was resuscitated; his body was reanimated for a period of time, only to die again. However, Jesus was resurrected and still lives! Jesus was raised from the dead; and his resurrection becomes for Christians the opportunity for a new and transformed life in God, and life in the age to come.

The Gospels tell us that there were some questions as to what really happened to the body of Jesus; the crowds had heard these questions also. Some even suggested that it was stolen (see Matt. 28:11-15). The shorter ending of Mark

leaves the whole story in question, not only because we do not know what happened after the resurrection, but also because those who were at the tomb fled in fear and terror.

Peter, however, asserts that it was God who raised Jesus from the dead (v. 24). This assertion by Peter becomes the proclamation of the community and foundation of Christian faith. Jesus was handed over to those who were outside of the law (the Romans) and crucified, "But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power" (v. 24).

That God raised Jesus from the dead is essential to the community's proclamation because it stresses a continuity of events. The Jesus who was from Nazareth, who lived and taught in the region of Galilee, and who was crucified and buried in Jerusalem, is the same Jesus who was resurrected and appeared to the community. It was important for the community to show that there was continuity between the pre-Easter Jesus of Galilee and the post-Easter Jesus, because there were those who charged otherwise. In fact, some later thinkers argued that Jesus did not have a physical body and could not have actually died, that his death was merely an appearance, a kind of first-century bodily illusion.

However, the Gospels are clear that Jesus was a physical human being; in fact, it was precisely his humanness that brought contention among the Pharisees who that Jesus ate and drank with sinners. John makes a point that the resurrected Jesus not just appear to the community, but eat and break bread with them. This is to show that the Jesus who was physically with the community pre-Easter is the same Jesus who is with the community post-Easter; Jesus whom God raised from the dead. Because God raised Jesus from the dead, Jesus' resurrection becomes the confirmation of his earthly life. In Jesus' resurrection from the dead, God confirmed Jesus' earthly ministry: his works and deeds, his teaching and authority.

In raising Jesus from the dead, God confirmed that Jesus was sent by God to perform miracles—to heal the sick, give sight to the blind, raise the dead—and to teach with authority.

God also vindicated Jesus' innocence of the charges against him. The Pharisees said that Jesus cast out demons by the ruler of demons (Matt. 9:34). Jesus was charged at trial with blasphemy and was executed by the Romans as a state criminal. By raising Jesus from the dead, God proved that these and other charges were false. God also proved that Jesus was not just a prophet (a good man, a kind of noble teacher) but was indeed the Christ, the anointed of God.

Because God raised Jesus from the dead, we begin to see the movement from the pre-Easter Jesus of Nazareth to the post-Easter Christ. Prior to the event of the crucifixion, Jesus was a Galilean who preached, taught, and performed miracles. After the resurrection, he is referred to in the Acts and the Epistles as the Christ. The early community saw in Jesus the fulfillment of the promises of the Old Testament and the fulfillment of Israel's calling by God to be a holy people wherein God would establish God's reign forever. Thus the proclamation of Jesus as the Christ is the church's own assertion that Jesus is the promised of God, the one in whom these promises are fulfilled, and the one in whom resides the promise of a new age to come.

In this sermon of Peter we can also see the early formulations of what would become the church's early statements of faith or creeds. Peter says that David had spoken of Jesus and that Jesus is the fulfillment of the promise that the Messiah would be a descendent of David and sit upon his throne. Thus Jesus' death and resurrection fulfilled the Scriptures.

We see the same in the preaching of Paul. He taught that Jesus was the seed of David, died and resurrected according to the Scriptures, and exalted at the right

hand of God. Ignatius of Antioch and Justin Martyr taught the same, and so did those who wrote the familiar Apostles' and Nicene creeds. These affirmations have their origins in the sermon of Peter and the early proclamations of the community.

Reginald D. Broadnax

All that is nice, but what does this have to do with us? "When did God become more than a name to you?" This is one of the "Quaker Questions" often used as an icebreaker in church groups. A corollary question would be, "When did Jesus become more than just a name to you?" The name may be one you grew up hearing as part of your daily life, or perhaps it was only mentioned in the midst of all the secular festivities of Christmas and Easter. Whether by gradual understanding or a lightning-bolt moment, somewhere along the way your spirit awakened to the truth that Jesus is more than the name of someone who lived a couple thousand years ago. It is one thing to hear the names bandied about in conversation, but quite another to understand that God and Jesus are far more than just names. Indeed, when Moses asked God to provide a name, God was hesitant. God did not wish to be condensed into one small word. In truth, God *cannot* be defined merely by a few consonants and vowels. At some point in our lives, God becomes personal.

In our scripture, Peter speaks to a crowd of people gathered in the holy city of Jerusalem. It is the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit that Jesus had promised before his death arrives full-force in tongues of fire and in the tongues of all the languages represented by the multitude of folks in earshot and beyond.

Pentecost was one of the pilgrimage festivals, so Jews from many nations had gathered from as far away as 1,000 miles. Many of the Jews to whom Peter spoke had not been eyewitnesses to Jesus' life and death. They may never have even heard of Jesus of Nazareth. Others had been in Jerusalem at the time of Christ's

crucifixion, death, and resurrection, but they struggled with the consequences of these life-altering events. To them, Jesus was a name, but so far, no more than that.

"All of you listen up!" Peter says. "This Jesus, whom you crucified, is more than just a name. He is more than a prophet and a good man. He is the Messiah, the Holy One proclaimed by David and our other prophets. This is the Savior for whom we have been waiting for generations. Every single one of you is a witness to this truth. Whether you saw Jesus with your own eyes or are now hearing the good news for the very first time, you are a witness to what I am telling you today." Let Jesus be more than just a name to you, Peter says. Let Christ be your Savior. Hear with your heart as well as with your ears. Then you can proclaim Jesus as Lord and know the joy of Christ's amazing, saving grace.

For multitudes gathered in that Pentecost crowd, it was like seeing a sunrise for the very first time—not just *seeing* the sun rise but *feeling* the sun's warm, glorious beams break through the chill darkness of the night. The people were stirred to the depths of their souls. The Bible says that "Peter's words pierced their hearts" ([Acts 2:37](#) ESV). The good news broke through the barriers of language and culture and religion and social stature and pierced the people to their very hearts, just as the good news is meant to do. Three thousand people were baptized that day. We do not know the exact count of the crowd, but the percentage of folks whose lives were changed forever was enormous. The number of new believers was more than enough to slow the flow of the Jordan River and make everyone around stop and take notice.

Peter's impromptu sermon is the first of nearly thirty such speeches found in the book of Acts. It kicks off the church like a bottle of fine champagne cracking the stern of a ship on its inaugural launch. Full steam ahead! There is no going back now, at least not without this good news to share. The Jews from Egypt and

Mesopotamia and Crete and Arabia and Rome and many other far-off places took the message of Christ with them when they left Jerusalem to return to their homes. So the church began, not confined to one city but spreading far and wide with a message that startled everyone who heard it. Who knows how many lives were changed along the way and how many more once the word got out?

One of the greatest gifts children give us is the ability to see the world through fresh eyes. Everyday wonders we have long since taken for granted become fresh and new again. A dandelion is no longer a weed; it is a cluster of fairies we can send dancing on a breeze with one quick puff. A crack in the sidewalk is not a nuisance plotting to trip us: it is a whole world waiting to be discovered. The gentle lick of a puppy's tongue on our cheek is not disgusting; it is cause for giggles of delight. The wonder and joy of every experience is not diminished by repetition, as many parents are reminded when their child utters the words "read it again" for the hundredth time. Unfortunately, as we grow up, we lose that sense of wonder and awe. Even our faith is at risk of becoming ho-hum. Perhaps Peter's pronouncement in Acts is not only a "listen up" call to the people in that crowd, but a "wake up" call to those of us hearing the good news for the first, tenth, one-thousandth time. Every time we hear and receive the good news of Jesus Christ, it is Pentecost, all over again. We are set on fire with the thrill of it, just as the disciples were lit up by the flame of the Holy Spirit on that very first Pentecost celebration.

The question to ask, therefore, is not simply, "When did God become more than just a name to you?" but rather, "How is God more than just a name to you now, in this moment, at this time in your life?" It is a timeless question that bears asking time and time again. **Kathleen Long Bostrom**

We need to share the good news with others, so they can answer this question. We need to use the tools of our day to announce the power and wonder of Jesus' resurrected life that has changed everything about us. In our world of death-dealing violence, of haves and have-nots, of those in and those out, the pretty people and the nobodies, we need to announce the fact that death holds no sway over us anymore. That means that hierarchies have no meaning, those who would dominate others have lost their power; in Jesus all things are truly made new and therefore we can have a new way of life. **John C. Holbert**

This is the foundation of our faith and our ministry. I have attended two trainings recently. One was the Women's spring event where we heard about using social media to get the word out about God's love. On yesterday I attended the Festival of Faith at Edgewood Church where we talked about music and preaching and art and humor and dance and how all of these help us to worship and experience God.

My prayer for you and me is that we will learn to walk in the ways of our God through music, song, dance, the preaching of the word, through service and even silence. Mary and Peter had an encounter with the risen Jesus and they told others...Jesus is risen...go and share the good news!

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