

“Epilogue or Chapter One?”

Reading: 1 John 1:1-2:2; Acts 4:32-35

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It's pretty obvious that Jesus Christ is the focal point of Christian thinking, preaching, worship, and living. Everything we do, and especially everything we do in the life of the church, revolves around Him. If you've missed that fact, I'm not sure what to do for you. We've just celebrated Lent and Easter, when we once again tell the story of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, which is the focal point of our focal point. It is in this cross and empty tomb that the message of Jesus is most loudly proclaimed. Usually in our preaching and worship about the cross and empty tomb, we'll talk about a handful of things. We talk about the cross as it relates to the forgiveness of sins, and the point is that in some way, Jesus' death on the cross opens the way for you and me to approach God and be accepted by Him. There are a number of different analogies or explanations we might use to do that, but the direction is basically the same. And when we get to the empty tomb of Easter, we tend to talk about how Jesus conquered death and was resurrected to a glorified life, again, opening the way for us to follow Him.

But hopefully you've noticed by now that even though Easter is the focal point of our story, there are a few pages of the Bible after the Easter story. In fact, of course, the gospels are only the first few books of the New Testament. So we might ask, if the last part of the gospel story is really the core of our story as a church, what is all this stuff after it? If Easter is what we've been building up to all along, why is there so much after it? Today we're reading from the book of Acts, which tells some of the stories about the followers of Jesus in the years after Easter. And while most of the other New Testament books aren't narratives like the book of Acts, we can usually identify some sort of narrative underlying the text: there's usually some reason or problem or event motivating Paul or John or Peter to write to whatever church or group of churches they're writing to. So what are these other stories there for? If Easter is so important, are these other stories just a sort of an epilogue? You know, like that little chapter of a book after the story is really over that tells you what happened to some of your favorite characters later in life, or gives you an update since the book first came out, or gives you some final closing thoughts. The real story has already been told, but an epilogue ties things up with a neat little bow.

So is that really what we're dealing with when we get to the book of Acts? Is it basically just an add-on after the real story is over and done? Or are we instead looking at chapter one of a new story, in which the power of Easter propels us forward into something unexpected and ongoing? The answer might seem obvious when I put it like that, but I'm not sure it's really so obvious to all of us. It's a question that has a very real impact on our spiritual lives today. Lots of people live with Easter as their defining story. For some of them, though, everything that comes after Easter is just an epilogue, while for others, Easter is just chapter one.

What do I mean by that? Again, when we tell the story of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, usually we focus on the fact that the work of Jesus invites us to have our sins forgiven and to be included in the new hope of resurrection. And that's true, that's good, that's what we should focus on. But if that's the end of your spiritual story, and everything that comes after is just an epilogue, then the cross and the empty tomb of Jesus don't really change anything for you until you die. Yes, I've been forgiven of my sins, and I have hope after death, but the main work of Jesus was already

done on the cross. My sins are forgiven, so what else is there? It might mean that I'm a nice person who tries to do good things, and I go to church and read my Bible, but my spiritual story is already over. That's how a lot of folks live their lives.

On the other hand, if we look at the Easter event as the beginning of a much larger story, the moment when you come to Christ for the first time is the beginning of a much larger life, not the end. Your life today, and our life as a church, is writing yet another chapter in that ongoing story of Easter. If that's true, the work of Jesus doesn't just matter for us when we die, it also matters now and all throughout our lives. It doesn't just influence heaven, it influences the world today. Maybe we could put it another way: what exactly does the message of Jesus do? Once again, it forgives us of our sins and it conquers death. But what else does it do? We turn the page from the end of the gospel story, and we find yet more chapters as the message of Christ continues having an impact. That will be our focus during some of these weeks after Easter: learning how that message of Jesus continues writing chapters in our lives and impacting us not just after we die, but in the here and now.

The book of Acts in particular puts on display for us how our spiritual ancestors were impacted by the cross and empty tomb. The work of Jesus totally changed their lives, not just their afterlives. As we read their stories, we see what more the message of Jesus means, and we see the many ways that the cross of Christ transforms people. The first passage we're focusing on is in chapter 4, and it's just a few short summary statements that are packed with meaning. There aren't a lot of places in the gospels where we get much of a glimpse into how the movement surrounding Jesus was organized, which is a shame. We would love to know more about that first generation of Christians and how the early church operated. But here we see just a bit of how the very first church worked.

This really is crucial to seeing what the cross and the empty tomb do. Very early on, in these first paragraphs of this first chapter after the Easter event, those people who have encountered Jesus gather together in the name of Christ for the purpose of continuing the story. Their encounter with Jesus was not just a one-time thing; it shaped the entire way they lived for the rest of their lives. And more specifically, it brought them together with others who had likewise been marked by Jesus so that they could form an ongoing community of a certain character. Nowadays we call it the church, and we might take it for granted since there are church buildings all over the place in our world now. But when the church is living as it should, it exists as a unique gathering unlike anything else in the world.

The other day I was working at my computer in my office when I looked out into the back yard. It's a sign that spring really is on the way that we've been having flocks of various birds feeding in the yard, and they're often accompanied by our troupe of squirrels. This particular time when I looked out I watched while one of the squirrels started chasing one of the others relentlessly. For probably at least the next ten minutes, every time I looked out the window, these squirrels were running up and down and around. And I had to ask myself what on earth would a squirrel have to get so annoyed about? We have some large oak trees that give them plenty of food, there are plenty of other trees for shelter, and as long as they avoid the hawks the worst thing they have to worry about is getting barked at by my dog. What does a squirrel have to get so worked up over? I assume it was probably something to do with mating or with fighting over territory or something that was very serious to that squirrel, but it still looked pretty ridiculous from my vantage point.

I'm not suggesting that all human conflicts are nothing more than squirrels chasing one another in circles; there are certainly some things that are worth taking a stand on. However, I am saying that we could probably benefit from a good dose of perspective more often than we think. And here in this brief passage in Acts, we see what human community looks like when it's viewed from the perspective of Jesus Christ. We see what Jesus is calling us to in our interactions with others, what our community can be like, what our love toward others can be like, and what taking care of needs can be like. We see that one of the things that the cross does to us is that it gives us perspective on other people. It lets us see other people through the eyes of Jesus while we trust in Jesus' provision.

We see a group of people who "were one in heart and mind." That by itself is pretty remarkable; how often do you see a significant number of people who are one in heart and mind? And I think it's important for us to consider what that might mean, because we've had enough cults and brainwashing and authoritarian governments since then that we're rightly skittish about people who aren't allowed to think for themselves. I have to assume that this does not mean that everyone thought the same thing all the time and no one was allowed to deviate from the party line. I assume that it's more accurate to think that the emphasis is on the community being modeled: these are different people being united together in Christ, having a oneness of purpose and a true sharing of their lives in the community of Christ.

I say that because of what comes next. "No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had." "God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them." When there was a need, those who had property sold it and used the money to meet those needs. This is all taking place while the Apostles are testifying with great power to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. This is a community of people who are so powerfully united together by the work of Christ in their lives that they live as the expectant family of God. These are people transformed by Christ, brought together and united by the word of Christ, living by Christ's provision, and looking forward expectantly to the return of Christ. They are centered on the resurrection message of Jesus Christ, and that message is grounding them in a community of likewise-redeemed people.

So in other words, if the message of Easter is the beginning of your story and not its end, then the resurrection of Jesus does more than save you from sin and give you hope for after you die. In the here and now, the resurrection of Christ calls you into a resurrection community of people who are truly and deeply united in the name of Christ for the cause of Christ in the hope of Christ. It is not merely a cluster of like-minded people waiting out the end of the world, it is an active, giving, loving community founded on the message of Christ.

This is unique in our world. People gather for many reasons. We form communities around events, or ideas, or causes, or locations, or people, or bloodlines. But in the church we have a community called out of all the squirrel-chasing divisions of the world and into a family defined by those who have encountered and responded to the resurrected Jesus. And because He was resurrected and is Lord of all, we are not merely following in His footsteps or continuing to talk about His philosophies. No, we are literally continuing the mission of Jesus Himself as He continues to guide us and empower us as our Lord. We are proclaiming the kingdom as He does, we are giving of ourselves as He does, and we are embracing our world as He does.

So today as we continue writing another chapter in this post-Easter story, we do so as the church of Jesus Christ. We do so as people who have encountered and been marked by the resurrected Jesus, as people continuing on in His mission, as people living in the expectant hope of His return.



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