



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Power of Passion: Cut to the Heart
A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

April 6, 2008
Third Sunday of Easter
Acts 2:14a; 36-41

Two weeks ago—on Easter Sunday—we gathered to proclaim the news that Christ is risen. And with that announcement we realized that the whole world had been turned upside down. But now—two weeks later—what does Easter mean for the church's life together? The question in these weeks following Easter—these days when all creation is breaking forth in beauty and life—deals with how Easter touches human lives and makes a difference.

Throughout these next several weeks of the church's Easter season, our lectionary texts will expose a church that is struggling to see clearly in the new world unleashed by the resurrection. Things that had been so certain before the resurrection are suddenly not so certain. People who had been easy to exclude before the resurrection will soon be sitting beside them at the Lord's Table, waiting to be fed by the same God. And the boundaries that had been carefully built, stone by stone, will be steadily dismantled by the power of a grave-shattering, life-giving God.

In his Gospel, Luke tells us that he hopes to present an orderly account of the life of Jesus. He continues this story in the Book of Acts as he describes the church's encounters with their Risen Lord as experienced through the power of the Spirit. I wonder if Luke knew the enormity of his task. The God we meet in Jesus Christ is anything but orderly. Everywhere Jesus goes in the pages of Luke's Gospel or where the Spirit leads the church in the Book of Acts, the expected order is overturned and everything that we thought was pinned down is suddenly careening off the walls of what we assumed were the boundaries of our faith. It may be an orderly account that Luke provides, but it is an orderly account of a holy disorder—a lifting up of the lowly; a filling of the hungry with good things; a welcome of the stranger; an embrace of the enemy.

Between now and Pentecost, we will be looking at readings from the Book of Acts. What we will find are stories which will catapult us into a community struggling to make sense of this holy disorder of God, a community trying to determine where God is leading them, or really, to whom God is leading them. These stories will not only give us a glimpse of the early church, but they will also give us a chance to see the full ramifications of a life of faith in a world teeming with resurrection, a world in which anything can happen, a world where even the ends of the earth are not sheltered from the radical intrusion of our life-giving God.

Luke wants us to know that the risen Lord is present when the church participates in Word and Sacrament. We hear it echoed in our reading from Acts this morning, where we hear the initial emphasis is on the Word proclaimed and what happens as the Spirit of God engages that proclamation.

Peter preaches his Pentecost sermon and those listening are "cut to the heart." They

are not entertained, not enlightened, not moved by his eloquence nor convinced by his logic, all of those things which some today believe are the marks of great preaching. No, the hearers find themselves confronted squarely with the circumstances of their lives. They are addressed by the Word of God. It is not Peter's words that convict them, nor even their own self-assessment that what Peter is saying is true about them. It is nothing less than the power of God speaking through those spoken words. Luke wants us to know—we who are not among the inner circle—that there is power in our words when they focus on the truth, presence and purpose of the risen Lord—power to change lives. That's why they cry out, "What should we do?"

What should they do? "Repent," there are things that need to be left behind, "be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Having heard the Word, be joined to it. Having been touched by the Spirit of God once to give you perception, open yourselves more fully to it so that God's power can continue to reform your lives, forgive your sin, open you to new life, and empower you to live in it.

They do, some three thousand of them that day, and Luke tells us they devoted themselves to four things: the apostle's teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Here are the four marks of the church, not just in Jerusalem, but as the gospel spread throughout the empire. I will say more about those marks of the church next week as this reading from Acts continues. But for today let us first note that each time Christians came together, each time the church gathered for worship it was to participate in these four actions. Why? Because it was in these actions that they experienced the presence and power of the Risen Lord to change and sustain their lives.

This is why we do what we do in this place when we come to worship God in Christ's name. If you examine our order of worship, you will discover that everything here falls into one of these four categories, and that all four are central here each Lord's day. In the Word proclaimed we continue to hear the risen Christ speak just as surely as the three thousand in Jerusalem that day heard Christ claim their lives. And in the sacraments we discover as they discovered, death to the past and rebirth to new life, power to live into those promises, and bread for the journey, given to us as it was given to them, from the hand of the one who gave his life that we might have life.

At the height of the Reformation, when the raging question was "Where is the true church and how does one tell?" John Calvin answered, "Wherever the Word is rightly preached and the sacraments are rightly administered." For he understood that wherever that took place, regardless of the name on the door, regardless of the forms or orders of ministry—whether minister, pastor or priest—regardless of the systems of theology, there the risen Lord was present to speak, claim, remake and sustain those who welcomed him and bid him stay.

That is why for almost two thousand years Christians have been gathering somewhere throughout this world, some daily, others weekly, to experience Christ among them in this way, finding themselves being changed into none other than Christ himself. That is why we do what we do.

It seems to me that we Presbyterians are pretty good at gathering and listening.

And Lord knows we're good at eating. Where we need to be challenged, I think, is in the area of sending. What would it look like if we ran from this place with the same enthusiasm of those disciples who couldn't wait to share the news of all that they had seen and heard? What would it mean to be people who see themselves as witnesses to God's work in our own lives and in the broader world?

Heidi Neumark is a Lutheran pastor who took a call in the South Bronx straight out of seminary. She went to a church that few would want to pastor or attend. But amazing things began to happen as the people discovered what it meant to be part of God's larger story.

In her book, *Breathing Space* (Heidi Neumark, *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003)), she describes what happened during a drama during Holy Week. The drama began on the streets outside and ended in the sanctuary. The script called for a couple of people to respond to the news, "Christ is risen!" with words similar to these: "I know that he is risen because he's risen in me." And then they would share all of the ways that God had transformed their lives, how the risen Lord had been made known in their own experience.

Those assigned parts that day performed according to plan, but others in the congregation began an impromptu, unscripted witness. People kept popping up to declare, "I know that he's risen, because he's risen in me." And then they would describe their lives that had been changed by the power of God made real in them.

There is something magical about being so overcome by your experience that you have to share it. And you want to share it for the sake of the other person, not for yourself. You want them to get in on the excitement.

In his book *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, Tom Long captures the essence of what it means to be a witness. "When we talk to other people about God," he writes, "we should give what we say as a gift that expects nothing in return. When we talk about God, we do so because we believe that what we are saying is true and that it will ultimately be a needed and welcome truth for the person who hears it (Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2004), 119)."

Long then tells a story to illustrate his point: "Late one cold winter's afternoon, my wife and I stood on the Maryland shore of the Chesapeake Bay, looking westward and watching the sun go down. Sunsets on the bay can be breathtakingly beautiful, but this particular sunset was, quite honestly, nothing to write home about. It was nice, but not anything like some of the color-drenched splendors of light we had seen before. I would have rated it, say, 4 on a scale of 10."

"As the sun finally slipped completely beneath the gray waters of the bay, I turned around to watch our beagle lazily sniffing around the marsh grass behind us, my eye following his meandering in and out of the reeds. I jammed my hands into my jacket pockets against the cold, and I was about to walk back to the house when I became aware that my wife was tugging on my sleeve and trying to get my attention. 'Look, look!' she had been saying for I knew not how long. I turned around to the surprise that in the short moment I had looked away, the western sky had been transformed. This sunset had saved its

best for last, had waited for the sun to disappear before releasing its magic. Like the glowing coals of a dying fire whose flames have already vanished, the sunless sky had begun to burn with an array of vibrant oranges and yellows. This latecomer of a sunset was one of the most stunning we had seen yet. One of us wished aloud for a camera and then immediately whispered that no camera on earth could hold this luminous sight.”

“What did I learn from this? I suppose you could say I learned that it is a stupid thing to rate sunsets on a scale of 1 to 10, and maybe I also learned that Yogi Berra was right: ‘It ain’t over till it’s over.’ But mostly I learned something about gift-giving speech. When my wife urged me, ‘Look, look!’ this was for my sake, not hers. She could see the sunset; I couldn’t, and she did not want me to miss it. She was not seeking some form of validation, some sentimental cooing sound, ‘Oh baby, you are such a good judge of sunsets.’ She sought nothing for herself. She was just looking at this absolutely luscious and bodacious display of the glory of God, and I was facing in the wrong direction. So she wrapped it up in words and gave it to me as a gift.”

“So it is with testimony. We see the hand of God at work in life, and we don’t want other people to miss it. Our main concern is not to scold people for facing the wrong direction or to try to impress them with our piety. We don’t want anything from them in return. We just want to give them the same gift that has been given to us over and over. When life is ablaze with the glory of God, what else can we do but say, ‘Look, look!’” (Long, *Testimony*, 119-120)

That’s what we are sent to do and be in this last movement of worship. We do not simply go; we are sent. We are sent by God into the world that God loves to bear witness with words and actions to all that God is up to around us. We are sent to speak from our hearts—not as experts—but as those who have been overwhelmed again and again by God’s good gifts. We are sent to work for justice as we witness to God’s justice.

We have gathered because we are part of God’s story, companions together in this journey of faith. We have opened the scriptures, and all of us—preacher and congregation alike—have stood around to listen for what God is speaking to us at this point in our personal and congregational life. And, while we did not eat at the table today, this table sits in the center of us, reminding us of the simple hospitality extended in the giving and receiving, in the breaking and blessing, and the real ways that the Risen Christ is made known when we sit at table. And the beautiful thing is that every table becomes “the Lord’s Table” where we remember God’s gracious work every time we take bread in our hands.

And now we are sent. We are sent into the world. We will go there first in our prayers, remembering together all of the people and places crying out for God’s care. And then, with those prayers burning in our hearts, we will go as those sent by God to be witnesses to the end of the earth.