

Resurrection Response  
Dr. Greg Smith  
April 19, 2009  
Acts 4:32-25 / John 20:19-31

Acts 4:32-35 (NRSV)

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

John 20:19-31 (NRSV)

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

I want to introduce you to Steve . . . Steve was a New York businessman and a MBA success story. After starting his career with Ford Motor Company, he launched his own import-export business. Life was good and so was business until a routine jog was interrupted by a group of youth who demanded his money. With great fear, Steve handed his money over and felt fortunate not to suffer any physical harm.

In the weeks and months that followed, he could not shake the image of those young people. The image that stuck with him was one of a group of aggressive, focused and goal oriented youth in need of alternatives to crime.

In 1987, Steve Mariotti founded NFTE – the National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship – a non-profit organization with a mission of providing entrepreneurship education programs to young people from low-income communities. 22 years later this organization has reached more 230,000 with its educational programs.

230,000 at risk young people have brighter futures because Steve Mariotti saw something that he knew demanded a response.

---

No matter who you are, if you see certain things, it is impossible to look and then walk away unchanged. For those who saw the Resurrected One, a response was required. Those closest to the Resurrection appearances understood this, even as they struggled to comprehend it. . . So, I invite you to walk in their sandals for a few moments.

John introduces us to Christ's Resurrection in the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter of his Gospel with the text we heard a week ago - on Easter Sunday. Let's retrace those steps...

Mary Madgalene approaches the tomb with sadness. What she sees makes no sense. The stone is rolled away and the tomb is open. She runs for backup. She returns to the tomb and confirms that Jesus' body is not there. Her friends leave, she remains alone and in tears. Angels appear and speak and yet her sadness persists.

It is only then that Jesus makes his first Resurrection appearance and Mary's initial response is . . . confusion. When Jesus looks her in the eyes and calls her by name then she can see more clearly – then she responds to the Resurrection with belief. Her belief leads her to share the good news with others.

---

It is a long day for the disciples before the Lord makes a 2<sup>nd</sup> Resurrection appearance that Easter evening. This time, he appears before a group of disciples in a locked room. After offering a traditional greeting, he reveals his hands and side. When they see the Risen Christ standing just a few feet in front of them, then they are able to respond with belief. Only after this does Jesus share the Holy Spirit and send them out to continue God's work.

---

Jesus disappears from the visual story for a week. He then returns to the same house and appears again to those gathered behind its locked doors. Jesus focuses on Thomas, who had been absent the week before and who has expressed doubt to his colleagues. Rather than condemning him for wanting verifiable proof, Jesus offers the proof he needs by inviting him to touch and to see. Like the other disciples a week earlier, Thomas needs to see for himself before making a Resurrection response of belief.

In a way way, his response is the most profound of all. Thomas is the only one to respond with a confession of personal faith when he says "my Lord and my God."

Thomas - the pessimist may refer to him as doubting while the optimist may prefer confessing. Regardless, it was a firsthand encounter that altered his Resurrection Response.

---

The 20<sup>th</sup> chapter of John offers  
3 appearances of the Risen Lord,  
3 opportunities for response.

And after the 3 responses come Jesus' words that frame these episodes: "Have you believed because you have seen me?" (v.29).

Well.... That's good for them, but what about us? As our eyes exit the pages of John's Gospel, our hearts must reply with our own Resurrection Response. What words will you speak? What do you really believe? There are many possible responses.

1. The Resurrection is a great hoax . . . because
  - a. The body was stolen
  - b. The body was eaten
2. The Resurrection is people seeing what they wanted to see not what was actually there
  - a. It was a vision - the disciples hallucinated
  - b. It was the wrong tomb
  - c. It was a sincere case of mistaken identity
  - d. There was no dead body
3. The Resurrection is a powerful myth  
The value of the Resurrection is not based on whether it actually happened, but rather upon its role as a formative story for the Christian tradition.
4. The Resurrection is the supreme event in history and happened literally as explained in the biblical accounts.

A week ago, in the midst of the crowd, we celebrated the Resurrection on Easter Day. Today the question becomes more personal - how will you respond to it?

For us, there will be no personal appearances of the Risen Lord.

For us, there are only the words of Jesus that both challenge and comfort - "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

---

The Resurrection demands a response.

Think back to the first appearance to the disciples in the locked room. The term used for disciples in this story is a term for all disciples, not a specific term for the 12. Those gathered represent all of us – the entire faith community. It is to them and therefore to us that Jesus speaks and offers an unexpected life changing gift.

Focusing on Jesus' response to the disciples – his breathing on them and giving to them the gift of the Holy Spirit along with a plea to continue his ministry - offers new perspective. And that perspective is enriched when we think back to Maundy Thursday and to the new mandate Jesus spoke then, which was fresh on their minds:

Remember his words?

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another. (John 13:34-35)

When we combine these two (Easter evening's gift of the Spirit and invitation to continue Christ's work with Maundy Thursday's command to love one another), a sense of the church's mission begins to take shape. In the words of Gail R. O'Day, a UCC theologian

. . . a possible picture of the church's mission emerges. By loving one another as Jesus loves, the faith community reveals God to the world; by revealing God to the world, the church makes it possible for the world to choose to enter into relationship with this God of limitless love.

In other words, we are invited in to this mission. We are welcomed to participate in a ministry that is bigger than we may expect.

We are called to follow the path of the first disciples and of disciples from all times and places by making a resurrection response – a response that is personal and a response that is also communal.

Our personal resurrection response should be informed by Maundy Thursday when Christ gave us a new mandate, empowered by the gift of the Holy Spirit, and challenged by Christ's sending us to continue his mission.

Our communal response - our faith community's resurrection response - should be something that transforms those who belong and challenges the perceptions of those who observe from the outside. This response should be more than countercultural,

it should be an enactment of the reign or kingdom of God by God's people.

---

We need look no further than the description of the practices of some early believers, which we heard read in this morning's First Reading. Those verses from the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts show that the disciples as a community embraced two practices - two rather radical Resurrection Responses - that spoke not only to their love but also their unity. They are practices that we may find odd, but ones we must consider.

First, they claimed no private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. This was a norm in the community.

Second, many felt led to sell the lands or homes they owned and to place those proceeds in the common account. This was a special step taken by some but not asked of all.

How did we get from this kind of response to the responses of today where

Doctrine divides and  
Sacrament separates?

Presbyterian Pastor and former moderator of the PCUSA, John M. Buchanan writes these words:

The everlasting shame of the church is that Christians reserve a particular meanness and hostility for each other. . . . Evangelical Christians target Roman Catholic Christians, and when their efforts are successful they call it "conversion." Southern Baptists refuse to sit down with other Baptists, and Missouri Synod Lutherans decline to participate in ecumenical worship services.

The Vatican releases a theological statement that declares that the Roman Catholic Church is the only agent of salvation. And some Presbyterians create a list of irreconcilable differences with other Presbyterians and invite them to leave. . . .

These battles are not helping the impressions that those outside of the Christian faith have of Christianity. Barna research found

that in a 10 year period from 1996 to 2006 the unfavorability rating of Christians almost doubled from 20% to 38%.

This troubling data led David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons to write a book which summarized their research about what non-Christian young adults think of Christianity today. The top 3 descriptive words they used to characterize us are hypocritical, antihomosexual and judgmental.

The world is watching. When they look at the church, they name our so-called resurrection response and it is not flattering. They describe us as a petty people and a religion of division. Some even characterize Christianity as a religion of hate – a far cry from Christ's command to love.

Maybe it is time for us to start rethinking our response. Perhaps we need to emphasize the way of Christ above all else – even above our personal or denominational preferences. Perhaps we need to look more like the premodern disciples in Acts 4 and less like the modern disciples in Naples.

We are called to a communal response focused on loving the world just as God in Jesus Christ did and does. This means joining hands with other Christians on the basis of that love.

Our congregation's engagement in these activities that transcend denominational bounds is broad and yet has room to be made broader still.

Around the start of this school year, Hurricane Ike struck the Texas Gulf Coast. In response, our congregation mobilized to create, fund and send a reconstruction team. We completed projects arranged for us by United Methodist and non-denominational groups even as we lived and worshipped in a Presbyterian parish. Our efforts were part of a larger effort that included work teams of churches from all over the country representing over a dozen denominations. This is a ministry that suggests unity – the sort that can begin to cause outsiders to reassess their unflattering views of Christianity.

Within the Naples community there are many people dealing with difficult life situations. One group of difference makers are Stephen Ministers – trained lay people who work one-on-one as



agents of care to help those in need. Did you know that a course to train Stephen Ministers here in Naples just finished and was conducted primarily in the classrooms of our church? This was possible only with a collaborative multi-denominational effort. As a result, we have a new group of Stephen Ministers – one from our own congregation and others who are members of local Episcopalian, Lutheran, Methodist, and United Church of Christ congregations.

The church is a resurrection community. We must focus on this if we seek to reverse the trend of the decline of the mainline church – both in numbers and in perception.

In the future, when outsiders look at the gathering of disciples who meet regularly for worship in this place may their impression of our radical resurrection response reflect awe that we are known as those who are united with Christ and partnering with others in Christ's service.

Not only is our engagement broader than we realize, but our diversity of religious denominations is greater than we recognize. As I close, I want to encourage each of you to think of your life of faith and the faith communities that have impacted you along the way. As I name a denomination, I encourage you to stand and to remain standing if you have ever been a part of a church in that denomination.

Baptist  
Church of Christ  
Disciples of Christ  
Episcopal

Lutheran  
Methodist  
Nazarene  
Orthodox

Pentecostal  
Roman Catholic  
United Church of Christ

Any denomination I did not name and that is NOT Presbyterian  
All Lifelong Presbyterians... (and all others)

We stand together because, regardless of our denominational heritage, we are united in Jesus.

My prayer today is that the world will be forever changed as the result of Christians who are known NOT for being divided and offering hate, but FOR being united and for serving others with love. Amen.