

Weekly Reading – Monday, April 13, 2009

Well, that's done. Easter is over. Or is it? Actually not as Easter is not a day, but a season. This Sunday is the Second Sunday of Easter. There are seven Sundays of Easter altogether. The season ends with the Day of Pentecost which, this year, falls on May 31. Saying that Easter continues is not to say we need to continue with more bells and whistles, or as the case may be, with brass and hot-cross buns. But the Easter story continues to shimmer and to haunt us, as it did the first disciples. It took time, and the coming of the Holy Spirit, for them to "get it." We too need time to let Easter's meaning and implications take hold in us and of us. Of course, the flurry of graduations, school endings, confirmations, Mother's Day and what not is a challenge to engagement with the Easter message and season. It's never easy, is it?

Acts 4: 32 - 35

One of the features of the Eastertide season is that it is the one time of the year when we have a series of readings from the Acts of the Apostles. Preachers may want to consider a series of sermons from Acts. If you do, you might want to get my book (co authored with Rob Wall) on Acts, "Called to be Church: the Book of Acts for a New Day" (Eerdmans, 2006). End of commercial. This brief passage is one of several points at which Luke provides us a snapshot of the life of the emerging Christian community. It is, as we say in our book, "a community of shared goods." Possessions are shared, worship/ prayer are shared, and the Holy Spirit is a shared good, poured out upon all believers. Given our economic patterns the verse that arrests attention reads, "No one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common." Though we tend to seize on this verse, whether in delight or horror, we certainly need to keep it in context and notice that this is less an economic program than it is a response to God's working among them and to their experience of community. "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul." Even if one makes allowance for overstatement, the point is that the sharing of possessions was not a planned program but a response to God's presence and an expression of real community and common life. So, if one desires less fixation on private ownership or wealth, the place to start may be by attending to community, or lack of same, among us. Embraced in community, we can relax our grip on things and money. Luke also wants us to understand that this new community was a sign of the presence of the Kingdom of God as Jesus had announced it in Luke 4: 16 - 21. The new age has arrived and Luke gives us a snapshot of it.

I John 1:1 - 2: 2

I John presents quite a contrast to the tangible and specific nature and tone of Acts. And yet, despite the world of difference in vocabulary and tone, there is a common theme: community or life together. Those who walk in the light manifest that by their love for others. "If we walk in the light as he himself is the light, we have fellowship with one another." A bit further on in this epistle the point will be made even more sharply as John will say that those who claim to love God whom they cannot see but do not love the brother or sister they can see are kidding themselves. Here John moves into a brief but pointed discussion of sin. "If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins,

he who is faithful and just will cleanse us from all unrighteousness." In other words, the fellowship we can enjoy with one another in the church is the fellowship of sinners, forgiven sinners. While John often seems to be rather ethereal, there is nothing far and away about this theme. When we base our fellowship in the church on the idea that these people I love are good and righteous folks (not sinful), we run the risk of disillusionment. If, on the other hand, we understand that our fellowship is the fellowship of forgiven sinners, we may manage to actually hang in there with one another and find our identity less in our shared virtue and more in God's grace.

John 20: 19 - 31

This is the second half of John's Easter story, a fully symmetrical complement to last week's alternate gospel text, John 20: 1 - 18. There, in 1 - 18, we had two scenes, one with several of the disciples/ followers: Mary, Peter, and the Beloved Disciple. That scene gave way to a high focus encounter between Jesus and Mary. So, this week, we have a first scene in which Jesus visits a group of the disciples from whom one, Thomas, is missing. The second scene is the extended encounter with Thomas. That encounter between Jesus and Thomas is vivid and has certainly captured the church's imagination with countless references to "Doubting Thomas." While there is much to savor and ponder in this encounter, preachers ought not overlook the first scene, where Jesus comes to the disciples as they huddle inside locked doors in fear. This is, by the way, John's Pentecost story, here on Easter Day, not fifty days later as in Luke/ Acts. Jesus breathes new life into the dispirited group. A verse before breathing upon them, he "charged" them. This is an important verse for any church seriously considering its purpose/ mission. "As the Father has sent me, so I have sent you." As Jesus goes, the Spirit comes, and it comes to guide and support the followers of Jesus now sent into the world to be about God's working of redeeming God's creation. There's another note that merits attention here, as well as in the Thomas part of the story. The risen Lord is the crucified Lord. He comes to them bearing his wounds. Recently we saw the one woman play, "Shirley Valentine," in which a middle-aged housewife faces into her fears of breaking out of the box her life has become. She is much aware of her sagging flesh, its stretch-marks and its lines. Part of Shirley's transformation is to claim her stretch-marks and lines as signs that she has "lived." Instead of being embarrassed and wishing them gone, she sallies forth bearing these marks of suffering as badges of honor, of life lived. So Jesus does not come after "nip and tuck" or Botox, but bearing the wounds of living life fully and faithfully.