

Sermon
Easter 7-B
St. Andrew's, Methuen
May 16, 2021
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Acts 1:15-17, 21-26
Psalm 1
1 John 5:9-13
John 17:6-19

This past Thursday was Ascension Day and it brought to mind my ordination to the priesthood on Ascension Day 1979. The service was at Our Saviour Lutheran Church in Peachtree City, Georgia because our new mission church was meeting in a too small building owned by the city. I remember being surrounded by family, friends, and colleagues—some of whom have passed on into the next life.

I remember after the service watching Bishop of Atlanta, Bennett Sims, pouring the leftover consecrated wine into the ground outside the back wall of the church singing "the Church's One Foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord."

And I remember Bill Pregnall, my professor at Virginia Seminary saying in his sermon that he wished me and my classmates, were not quite so arrogant.

At the time I took it as a strange insult, but later I would know it as a gift of truth. One day at the refectory I and a few friends were observing several tables of priests who were at the seminary for several weeks of continuing education: I'd never seen a sadder group of men—and in those days they were all men: they were first of all old! Many in their 50s—horror—and to a man they looked worn-out and burned-out. We called them "the retreads!"

Yes, we were arrogant: thinking our education, sophistication, and hard work would transform the Church and bring her and us from glory to glory. **When you are 27 it doesn't feel like arrogance, but confidence in the degree that said we were "Master's in Divinity"!**

What do we see when we look over at the 120 women and men gathered together in the Book of Acts?

Do we imagine they are people, just like us?

They are born, live, suffer, and die exactly like us, though on average they will suffer a lot more and die a lot younger than us.

But, on the other hand, we also see some differences.

There is not a high school or college diploma among them. Many are illiterate. Most are poor. There are no bishops, priests, or deacons, no one with a seminary education.

Not one of them is a Christian, because all of them are Jewish. So how is it that this mostly uneducated and poor community of Jews could change the world?

Well, they spent time with Jesus. They watched him heal the sick and love the outcasts. They listened to his strange stories about the mercy of God. They knew the sound of his voice and the touch of his hand and they lived 24/7 under the impact of his most compelling personality.

Then they watched him get arrested by their religious leaders and crucified by the empire—not the first and certainly not the last innocent person to be executed by a pompous government.

Then at Passover, they watch Jesus die in open surrender to God.

During those three years with Jesus their lives were altered, to be sure, but after such a searing end, we can imagine them returning to their former ways of being in the world, dealing with overwhelming PTSD and just trying to keep their heads down and out of trouble.

But then, on Sunday they experience Jesus, alive and glorified, and he brings them into an experience of the realm of Spirit that transforms them forever—transforms them into people compelled to bring the rest of the world into their experience of Jesus and the realm of Spirit.

Now they **KNOW** Jesus is in them, and they are in Jesus, and they are all together with Christ in the Cosmic Creator, who holds everything and everyone in being. They now experience in the present what John calls **"Eternal Life"**. That is, they experience **NOW** the eternal life of the **future** New Creation:

This is the miracle we are being called to step into: Jesus who transforms the world through that ordinary 120 women and men, is continuing that work of transformation through us.

First John says, "...this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.... I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, **so that you may know that you have eternal life.**

Now let's be clear: IN no way is he saying that we will always feel like we have eternal life, because many times we will just feel wretched.

But he is saying we have this gift of eternal life no matter how we feel and therefore, we should remember this truth at all times and in all places, and especially in the hard ones as well as in the easy ones.

 Those old worn-out priests at the seminary have eternal life, just as that new priest that I was has eternal life, just as each of you has eternal life of the New Creation here and now.

To move more deeply into our experience of Eternal Life our task is to surrender our story to Jesus's Story.

Surrender our pride to Jesus's humility.

Surrender our sins to Jesus's mercy.

Surrender our pain to Jesus's cross.

And as a church our task is to surrender our dreams of a friendly church to Jesus's dream of a faithful church.

And what is a faithful church? A faithful church is witness to Jesus and the resurrection. It's that simple and it is that hard.

Therefore, every Sunday we stand at the tomb of the church, just like Martha at the tomb of her long-dead brother Lazarus.

And Jesus says to us what he says to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷

And the faithful church responds, "Yes, Lord, we believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who brings Eternal Life into the world."