

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“Gathering”
The Resurrection Community, series.
2nd Sunday of Easter
Acts 2:41-47
April 3, 2016

It's the *second* week of Easter... which might come as a surprise to some of us. I don't know about you, but most of my life I always thought Easter was the one day you hunted for eggs, wore your new shirt to church, went to grandma's for lunch. Then it was done. Back to normal life.

But in the ancient wisdom of the church, Easter was never just one day. It's an entire season. A 50 day-long season of celebration... which is a bit refreshing after the 40 days of Lenten fasting, don't you think?

Of course Easter should be longer than Lent. Easter wasn't over last Sunday night. It was just starting. The celebration is just beginning. The joy that breaks the darkness was just announced. And here we are in the 2nd Sunday of Easter... just getting started ourselves.

Christ is risen! [He is risen indeed] – come on lets try that again.
That's more than a one-day party.
The resurrection changes everything for us and for our world,
and we're just starting to get a taste of that.

Now, I know that sometimes the 2nd Sunday of Easter doesn't feel that way. Sometimes in the life of Church the Sunday after Easter is a bit of a let down after all the extra bells and whistles of Easter morning.

And let's be honest, there are less people here today, aren't there. We have a lot of lookers on Easter morning. A lot of casual observers, and I'm glad that they come each year. We want them here Easter Sunday if they are going to come any Sunday.

But not everyone is going to stick around after the headline news changes, are they? As Jesus puts it, sometime seed is scattered in shallow dirt, and the plant springs up, but by the next day, it's withered because there was no rooting.

Easter catches the world's attention for about a day... but by now, the rest of the world has moved on... And here we are, gathering again... with Easter flowers still up and white fabric still up... Because the resurrection is something we need to celebrate for weeks... and the resurrection is something we're going to have to learn to live into.

So, that's what we're going to try to do for this season of Easter. And we're going to do it by looking at the stories in the Book of Acts.

Acts begins by reminding us that this is the second part of a 2-volume work. It's the "to be continued" episode following Luke's gospel... ***which makes it the story of what happened after the resurrection.*** So, we're going to spend several weeks here remembering how the post-resurrection community lived into the story of Easter.

If the church is the community of the Resurrected One, that makes the church uniquely the resurrection community. And I want to spend the next several weeks exploring exactly what that means for us now by looking at what that meant then.

We're starting with this reading from Acts 2. It's the first summery of what that resurrection community looked like. Our reading falls right on the heels of Pentecost and Peter's sermon in Jerusalem... which is often considered the birth of the church.

And then Acts sums up for us what this church was all about. In fact, it's the first summery of the life of the church we have. This is what Acts says the resurrection community did:

"They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."

Well, there you have it. **"They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."**

Got it? Go and do likewise.

Amen.

Ok, so just kidding. But it is pretty simple isn't it? This is what they focused on. This is what they gave themselves to as a community. You might say it was their mission statement. There was no long-range plan. They weren't focused on any particular goals they could achieve. Not yet anyway.

The church is born and this is what they do: – study and fellowship, the sacred meal and prayer..." ***Everything flowed from that. It was the central practice, the defining rhythm of their life together that made everything else possible.***

It doesn't sound like much... but it has amazing ripple affects. Before you know it, people are selling their things, and giving their finances, and taking care of each other, so that no one had any need.

It was beautiful and amazing thing that begins to happen among them...and ***they were*** amazed at what God was doing among them and in them... this beautiful and miraculous life that was bubbling up among them... all of it flowing from their simple commitment, their "devotion to studying the apostles teaching, and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."

I think sometimes we have a tendency to think... that we need to be a lot more slick than that. We need to be doing something that will have a better chance of making

the headlines, something that we can *do, something we can accomplish* that feels like it really matters.

That impulse isn't all bad, really. Jesus tells us to care for the least of these. And we need to be telling the world our story. And the more we move through Acts, the more we'll see the church doing just that. But we also have to be mindful of where the energy and the life for all that "doing" comes from. It's the simple practices of the resurrection community that happen as we gather together.

*You see, there is something profoundly **unique and beautiful at the heart of what the church is and does**... even at it's most basic.*

Where else do you go simply to be with other people, so you can remember our story together, and offer one another the Grace of God in something as simple as bread and cup and share your life in a community that's defined by grace and not judgment, in a community that values honesty over image.... That's not going to happen at the office or at city hall.

It's not going to be found at Wal-Mart or at Plaza Frontenac.

You're not going to find that in the basement of Blueberry Hill, or at Powel Hall.

You won't find it at the Ethics Society or at United Way.

As good as those things are... they will never be the ones that offer you the life of God simply by what you do in your gathering together.

But at its heart, this is what the church is really all about... and it's all we have to be. We don't have to have the best show in town. We don't have to have the most impressive programs, or the most slick marketing, or even the most effective justice ministries... as good as all those things are.

Ultimately all we need to be is the Gathering community...

devoting ourselves to the apostles teaching...

that is, to hearing our sacred story again...

and to fellowship...

this deep sharing our lives together,

and to the breaking of bread...

the sacred meal that happen around your dinner table

and around this communion table

and to prayer... to seeking God together.

This is what the church looks like when we are at our best. This is what the church is uniquely empowered to offer the world.

It's really not that complicated.

No, it's not showy, but it's what the world needs most from us.

Rachel Held Evens is a 30-something blogger and author who writes a lot about how younger generations are leaving the church and talks about why that is. Her most recent book title is *Searching for Sunday*, and in it she writes,

“Millennials aren’t looking for a *hipper* Christianity. We’re looking for a *truer* Christianity, a more authentic Christianity. Like every generation before ours and every generation after, we’re looking for Jesus—the same Jesus who can be found in the strange places he’s always been found:

in bread, in wine, in baptism, in the Word, in suffering, in community, and among the least of these.

No coffee shops or fog machines required.”¹ she says.

In other words, we’re probably not going to impress people to Jesus. ...or entertain people to Jesus. But what we can do is gather together to be a place that helps them find Jesus... We can gather and offer one another the very source of healing and compassion and love... the source of life.

It’s what happens in our gathering together, when our life together is **“devoted to the apostles teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”**

One of the stories from the Gospel of Mark that I didn’t get to preach these last few months is the story of the Gerasene Demoniac.

Jesus and the disciples cross the lake and land in the region of the Gerasenes. And when they get out of the boat, they are approach by this wild man... who has been living among the tombs... among the dead.

The people of his town had tried to restrain him, but he was possessed by all kind of things, and he always broke his chains. So, day and night, night and day, he would wonder among the tombs and in the hills, and he’d cry out and cut himself.

When he saw Jesus he ran up to him, and Jesus ask him his name. **“My name is Legion,”** he replied, **“for we are many.”** This man, is possessed by “many”... by all kinds of things controlling him. And really he’s a picture of the human condition... of us all. He isn’t the only one divided... scattered... controlled by all kinds of things.

We live these scattered lives, separate from our true self, from who we really are. The Garrison Demoniac is a picture of the human condition... of each of us as individuals. We are scattered. We leave here each week and we go our separate ways... with our countless different fears and pressures, and demands.

Someone is going back home, wondering how much longer she will be able to stay in her home, living by herself, afraid of what the future might bring.

Someone else leaves here and he works 80 hours/week, and still feels behind. He’s making up for the layoffs in his company, hoping he’s not next, trying to keep his head above water.

Another person gets the diagnosis they have been dreading,

Another thinks about divorce.

Another drinks too much.

¹ Rachel Held Evans, *Searchign for Sunday*, xvi.

Another watches her children self-destruct.

And the list could go on and on if we tried to finish it. The circumstances that control our lives are Legion... and so are the many things that are stirring on the inner recesses of each of our minds and hearts.

It's not just you, trust me. The demons we face may have different names, but ultimately they are Legion... countless. We're tugged... controlled... scattered... isolated.

But thanks be to God, another Sunday rolls around. And it may be hard to get ourselves here. But by God's grace we get out of bed, and on a good week we finish fighting with the kids by the time we're pulling out of the drive way.

But one way or another we get here... and we are "gathered" back together for worship... for studying the apostles teaching and fellowship, for the breaking of bread and for prayer."

One by one, we come to this place... We might come exhausted, or maybe bored... maybe afraid or fragile... maybe all too confident in ourselves. We come into this place spinning with anything and everything, from the roast in the oven, to the flight we have to catch, to the deep pain from our past, to the "to-do" list we've already started for Monday morning. Legion is the name and number of things we drag in here with us on a given day.

But when we gather... and give ourselves to this time... to one another, and to the One who is here among us... we are practicing resurrection. We're leaving the hills and tombs we've been roaming... and are brought back to Life.

We're set free from the Legion controlling us...
and re-centered in our true sovereign...

That's what worship is really about, by the way. **Worship is a complete and total orientation to the One True Sovereign God.** So, our gathering together is no small thing. We gather... and we're re-centered in the life of the Resurrected One.

It's the same thing that happened in our gospel reading from John, earlier. It's Easter night. The disciple have been hearing rumors from the women about resurrection, but they don't know what to think... after everything they've been through. **Legion is the thoughts and emotions pulsing through them.**

And so that night they gather together...

And it's in the gathering that the Resurrected One appears among them, and breathes new life into them.

This is what the Resurrected Community does... from the very beginning. So, I'll say it again. **Our gathering is no small thing. In fact, it is the central thing.**
...our gathering for worship

... our gathering together in one another homes
... our gathering around any table where we are remembering our sacred story,
and sharing a deep fellowship, and praying together.

Everything else, flows from that place.

So, Dayspring, no matter what else we do,
no matter what endeavors we take on,
May our ***gathering together*** always be central.
And whenever we gather... may we give ourselves to these simple things...to the
apostles teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Amen.

Reflection:

Churches are to be centers of welcome and of mutual help, where people may recover their energy in an atmosphere of beauty and loving-kindness. They must be restorative cells capable of neutralizing the cancers that are gnawing at our societies.

- Olivier Clement