

*Easter 2B*  
*April 11, 2021*

*Bishop Sue Briner*

*Acts 4:32-35*  
*1 John 1:1-2:2*  
*John 20:19-31*

Grace and peace to you in the name of the Risen Christ! Hopefully, your pastor or deacon or vicar or synod authorized minister, and perhaps even your musicians are taking a Sabbath rest today after an incredibly challenging year.

This is the first in our four-week sermon series. In the 50 days between Easter and Pentecost. The lectionary explores themes of what it means to be the church living in the reality of the resurrection through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The first readings from the book of Acts give some snapshots of what life in the early church, the community of believers, was like. Because here's the thing - our relationship with Jesus is personal, but it's not private. When we were baptized into Christ, we were baptized into a community of faith into the communion of saints that transcends time and space. The Holy Spirit keeps drawing us into relationship with Jesus and with one another. It's a lot of what has made this time of isolation so challenging - because a big part of how we live out our faith and how we get our spiritual batteries recharged is by being with one another. It's why we've been so eager to get back together, even if it means masks, distancing, sanitizing and skipping the food and the hugging - at least for now. We need one another, we need the Holy Spirit working through one another to continue to follow Jesus.

In today's gospel the resurrection has happened, Mary and another disciple have seen Jesus, they've told the others, but they're all acting like it didn't happen. They're hiding out in a locked room in fear for their lives. And Jesus appears to them (all except Thomas, who was out at the corner store picking up an energy drink when it happened). And Jesus says "Peace be with you" and he breathes the very breath of God the breath of the Holy Spirit into them. And he co-missions them - He says - you're part of God's mission now too - Get out there! And then, because he doesn't want to leave anyone out, Jesus returns a week later and goes through the same thing again just for Thomas. And at the end of the gospel, Jesus gives a bit more clarity on their mission. He is the good shepherd, and the disciples are to feed his sheep. Then we turn the page in the Bible, and there's the Acts of the Apostles, which might better be termed The Acts of the Holy Spirit. It begins with Jesus ascending to his father, and telling the disciples to wait until the Holy Spirit comes. And what do they do? They wait - not just twiddling their thumbs, but by devoting themselves to prayer.

Then comes the very familiar Pentecost story in Chapter 2; the Holy Spirit blows in mightily and gives the disciples power and courage, and they begin telling others

about Jesus. In one day they add 3,000 believers! (those must have been some fun baptisms!). What happens next? They devote themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship to the breaking of the bread and prayer (again). They share what they have, and there's enough for all. Then Peter and John go out healing and proclaiming boldly the good news of Jesus (no more locked room for them).

Now they eventually get in trouble with the religious leaders who haul these disciples into court. But they see the boldness of John and Peter's proclamation and they are afraid to do anything with them, so they let them go. These disciples run home and tell others and then what do they do? Pray again for more boldness. And when they pray, the place where they're gathered is shaken and they are again pumped full of the Holy Spirit and they continue to speak the word of God with boldness.

And then we come to today's lesson, where the disciples are again speaking with great power and boldness about the resurrection, and they are again sharing their possessions so that no one is in need. Now, we sometimes joke that the early church was promoting communism. And I've often remarked that this kind of idyllic life portrayed in the first few chapters of Acts doesn't last - before long there's fighting and hoarding and lying because that's how we humans tend to roll, isn't it?

But what we hear about in this reading is a glimpse of the experiences of this Christian community that has been enlivened and transformed by God's Spirit. They not only believe Jesus, and what he has taught them about God's abundance and what he has showed them about God's loving power but they are living expectantly, as if all this is actually true! They are embodying the gospel as they love abundantly, as they share this good news of Jesus and what he brings as they share whatever they have, in confidence that with God there is enough for all.

What must that be like, to live that expectantly? To love that abundantly? Well I want to say that this past year I have seen glimpses of that expectant living and that abundant loving through the words and deeds of many of you across the synod. When the pandemic began and we had to leave our church buildings behind, the Spirit blew in and enabled you all to worship in ways that many of you had never dreamed possible! You had less than a week's notice, of what was to come, and you pivoted to online worship. And many of you report that your attendance has grown, and that you are reaching people around the country or people you have not reached before!

During this pandemic, many of our congregations with food pantries have continued and even expanded their work in the community. While many of us feared that financial giving would drop significantly, through the generosity of people and congregations, there has been enough to meet our needs. And over the past year, as we've gathered rostered ministers, council presidents, faith formation leaders, music directors, preschool directors and more on zoom for mutual conversation and

consolation. Not only has the Holy Spirit showed up to strengthen us, but you all have shared your skills and experience with one another and there has been an abundance! After George Floyd's murder last year, as our country finally began to wake up to the realities of the ongoing sin of racism, many of you have engaged as individuals and as congregations in learning more about how those with more privilege and power can share this privilege and power for the sake of those with less. And when asylum seekers have continued to cross our borders fleeing violence and famine, you have assisted, in spite of the pandemic, in providing gracious welcome and care as they connect with sponsors around the country. And during February's "snowmeggedon" several of our congregations provided shelter, food and water to those around them who needed it.

Folks - this is the power of the Holy Spirit at work in and through you for the sake of others. And I'm sure you can name more instances! Now, as we are seeing glimmers of hope that this pandemic may soon be behind us, how do we stay connected with this life giving Spirit so that we may continue to proclaim Jesus Christ and his kingdom of justice, mercy and love even more boldly? How can we continue to live expectantly and love abundantly for the sake of the world God loves?

I invite you, in this season of Easter, into intentional prayer as individuals, as congregations, and as the synod. Pray that God would continue to stir up God's Holy Spirit BOLDLY in us. Pray that God would continue to work BOLDLY through us.

Now that we're going back in our buildings, we need to be careful that we don't just lock ourselves back into them as those disciples did after the resurrection. Instead, let us pray that God would continue to embolden us to continue to go out into the world to live expectantly and to love abundantly for the sake of the world God loves. May it be so. Amen.