
“Together in Common”

A SERMON on Acts 2:42-47 for the 4th Sunday of Easter, Year A
*Preached 30 April 2023 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister
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Plenty of us spend far more time scrolling through various Internet feeds than we probably should. All right, I'll own my own “stuff” here rather than generalizing... I know that I myself waste far more time browsing social media than I think I should. You know, I have quite the backlog of books I want to read, but instead, in the early morning over coffee or late at night before going to bed, my thumb scrolls through the articles friends share on Facebook and double-taps on photos of cute cats and videos of mischievous beagles shared on Instagram.

One of the types of internet posts that often gets shared around is known as a “listicle”. A “listicle” is an article that takes a list as its overall thematic structure. The word is derived from mashing together list and article, but—at least according to Wikipedia—it has also been suggested that the word evokes “popsicle”, emphasizing the fun but “not too nutritious” nature of the listicle. Even if you didn't know the term, I imagine that many of you know the sort of thing I'm talking about: “21 Pictures That Will Restore Your Faith in Humanity,” “10 ways to have more money,” “27 Comfort Foods to get you through Uncertain Times”, and even “8 Tips for Writing a Listicle that will Get Published.”

There are a number of common themes you'll find explored in listicle form, including one of my favourites: the “you know you're from such-and-such if” or “18 signs you're from such-and-such.” For us here in this region, some of the things you'll find on those “you know you're from...” lists include: “If you have to go somewhere that involves going over a bridge, you just won't,” “You used to dress up when you went out, but now sneaks and lululemons seem so much more practical,” “You've discovered the difference between a skunk smell and a weed smell,” “You've spent hours, even days, of summer vacations in the BC Ferries line-up on a two or three sailing wait.,” or, one of my favourites, “You know there are actually no less than 15 words for rain..”

These good-natured and sometimes self-deprecating posts, in addition to being an effective way to waste some time while having more internet advertising delivered to you, they do serve as effective reminders that there are some things—some common experiences and shared ways of life—that even in all of our diversity nevertheless often bind us together as being from a particular place or being part of a particular group of people.

In a sense, just such a listicle is what we find as we delve into our scripture reading from the book of Acts this morning. The book of Acts, or “the Acts of the Apostles” as its full title is known, shares with us the history of the earliest Christians in those first weeks and months and years of the Christian church in the time right after Jesus was no longer among us physically. We Christians have often turned to the book of Acts in the season right after Easter because the stories in Acts give us a glimpse into the possibilities of life made possible by the resurrection, shown to us in what our earliest ancestors in the faith did, and how the early Church lived in the light of resurrection and the power of the Holy Spirit that flows forth from the resurrection.

It was, I can only imagine, a powerful time to be alive! As we heard in today's reading, “Great awe fell on everyone, and many remarkable deeds and signs were performed by the apostles.” Even more, in the verse immediately preceding the start of today's passage, the author tells us that those who welcomed the message that the apostle Peter preached were baptized, and “that day about three thousand persons were added” to their number. Three thousand! Can you imagine?

The crux of what we read this morning, though, lies in what it tells us about what those earliest Christians actually did. As in, “you know you were part of the Church if...” And for all of the amazing power of the Holy Spirit at work on and in and through them, the list we hear of the central things that marked their life together is pretty notable for how simple and ordinary the things are.

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

Sharing the stories and the Story of our faith. Being in community and connection with one another. Sharing meals and the Holy Meal—the Lord’s Supper. Praying and praising God. These were the things that signified Christian community. Doing these things was what made the Church the church. Doing these things was what created the magnetism within them that drew all who wondered if there was a different way—a way of purpose and blessing, a way of wonder and power.

In what our society went through over the last three years due to the pandemic, there was so much that seemed helter-skelter and out of order and “missing” from our lives. It was pretty easy to focus on all the things we could do through that time, whether in our own individual lives or in our life together as church. Going to the movies, visiting friends, having a spring fair or a book club meeting. And yet, the things that truly mark us as Christian community, as the church, still laid within our grasp. Even when we were physically isolated, we still found ways to gather, to hold our lives together in common, to care for one another. We still centred our lives in the Story of God, and the good news we proclaim of the love made known to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We still broke bread, even if we had to do it a bit differently, and in that breaking of the bread had the opportunity to hear Jesus say to us “this—my body, my life, my love—given for you.” We still were still welcomed into God’s presence with the deepest prayers and yearnings of our hearts, dwelling in the house of the Lord our whole lives long.

Indeed, the witness we hear in the book of Acts this morning is not only a description of what the earliest Christians did. It is our signpost pointing to what makes the Church the church in every age, including our own. They are the things that *we* post into the media feeds of the world, drawing the attention of all who yearn for a new and better kingdom, on this shore and on another shore. Most of all, they are the windows through which we, our eyes being cracked open by the Holy Spirit, get to glimpse the presence and power of God still standing beside us as we walk through green pastures and death’s dark vale alike.

In his poem “Signs and Wonders,” the contemporary poet and Lutheran pastor Michael Coffey writes,

They do not fall like a fireball from the western sky and boom
they do not announce themselves with brass and timpani rolls

while you wait for literal Merlins and alchemists to turn
the dull lead of your life into something prized and shiny

while you wonder if Jesus himself might spit in mud and
make you see or get you up off the invalid mat to dance

signs and wonders happen when people gather in memory
of the one who broke bread and shared it beyond frontiers

the poor are honored, gladness swells like full moon high tide
awe fills dumb-founded souls with mystery secreted in each hour

tears flow from all who are lost in it and cannot explain it
and do not have to, tears of exuberance,

tears of grief, tears for life itself,
this is our sign and our wonder, that we are here at all.