

Faith Mennonite Church  
April 15, 2012 - 2nd Sunday of Easter  
Joetta Schlabach

**Signs of the Resurrection: One heart, one soul, one peace  
(and some ongoing questions!)**

*Acts 4:32-35; Psalm 133; John 20:19-31*

Thank you for coming today on "low" Sunday. It's always a bit hard to come down from the "high" of Easter. In the church year we actually have six Sundays to explore the theme of resurrection, between now and Pentecost at the end of May. We depend on the fuel of Easter's high to help carry us as we look for signs of resurrection, even when they are not entirely clear or unambiguous.

Perhaps you noticed some of that ambiguity and felt unease as we listened to the scripture readings this morning. "How very good and pleasant it is," we affirmed in the call to worship, "for God's people to live in unity!" Now that's something we can applaud. And then we moved to the description of the resurrection community in Acts 4: "the whole group of believers was of one heart and soul, not claiming private ownership but holding everything in common, sharing so that there was not a needy person among them." I want to say "Yes! Amen" but then I get this lump in my throat, a pit in my stomach and feel a bit like Thomas in the reading from John 20: "show me the goods...how does this work?...can it really be?"

I think you all know that church unity is near and dear to my heart. I was glad to take part in the work of the Unity Task Group in Central Plains Conference several years ago, and I've been grateful for the annual Mennonite-Catholic conversations at Bridgefolk meetings. In most of the discussions about church unity we focus on theology, doctrine and belief. Indeed, as we're well aware, the most difficult issue in church unity today--across the denominational spectrum--is around sexuality.

But the resurrection unity, the oneness that we read about in Acts 4 startles us. Here the oneness is not in belief or doctrine. Rather being "one in heart and soul" was about economics. This unity manifested itself in the sharing of material resources so that "there was not a needy person among them." I have yet, in all my 55 years, to be part of a worshipping community that can in all honesty hang that banner over its door. And I would be disingenuous if I shared with you this morning in any other manner than confession and uncertainty. Thanks be to God, our scripture texts hold both of those before us today.

To be sure, there are more than a number of ways that Christians have responded to the picture presented in Acts 4. First, there's the pragmatic response: this is an ideal picture, but we have no proof that the early church sustained such a radical practice beyond the first generation if even that. In fact, later in the book of Acts we learn of Greek widows who complain about not getting a fair share as goods are distributed. Then, there's the "that was then, this is now" response: their economy was naturally more communal and reciprocal. They didn't live in a highly mobile, market economy. And, of course there's the "but we need to be responsible" response: Won't we just create dependency if we practice redistributive sharing?

Each of these are understandable responses, but they don't entirely satisfy. Luke, the author of Acts, certainly had a reason for including this picture, even if it is stylized and idyllic. The gospel of Luke and the book of Acts were written in parallel form, as Phil Stoltzfus highlighted in a sermon several summers ago. If we turn to the parallel chapter in Luke 4 we find Jesus at the outset of his ministry defining his call as a fulfillment of a prophetic writing from Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. ” (Luke 4:18-19)

Indeed that is what Jesus announced and what he did: he healed, he set people free, and he called for release of debts--jubilee. In Acts, Luke expects that the church, the resurrection community of Christ, will continue this expression of Jesus' life in their life and ministry.

I'm glad that one of the current adult classes is grappling with this theme in their discussion of Sabbath Economics. I hope they can lead all of us in a sustained conversation, and perhaps in exploring some new jubilee practices. I know we share a deep commitment to responsible and just living, and that we do very well in extending generosity. Yet, I wonder, is there a place for something more communal, more reciprocal or distributive?

As we ask these questions, the reading from John provides a sense of hope and direction. We might identify more quickly with this story: we find the disciples locked up in fear, even after news of the resurrection has leaked out. But no matter, Jesus came into their safe house. He didn't send a message saying, "I'll only come to you if you prove your courage and faith in the resurrection. Come on out! Trust me!" No, instead he went into their place of fear. And he will come to us as well, when we have those difficult conversations about money and property and ways to work toward a reality in which no one among us has need.

The passage provides hope in showing that change happens incrementally. When Jesus returned a second time, the doors are still shut, but it no longer says that they were locked. The community was making progress. Most important in this account, however, is the message that Jesus brings, the blessing he bestows: "Peace be with you." He repeated these words twice in his first appearance, and again, when he returned. Three times in all. This was no schmaltzy peace greeting. It was accompanied by the signs of his suffering, the nail marks on his hand, the piercing on his side. Jesus' offer of peace doesn't release us from difficult situations, difficult conversations, difficult decisions. Rather Jesus offers us peace as we enter places of uncertainty, as we learn to trust without guaranteed outcomes, as we're willing to reach out and touch the wound of another, and come to understand in some way what life is like in their wounded world.

The commonality in both of these passages (Acts 4 and John 20) is the recognition that resurrection life is a communal endeavor. We don't need to and we don't get to work it out on our own. Acts 4 begins by speaking of "the whole group" and ends with "they laid it at the apostles' feet." There is a working together. There is a trusting of the whole. In a similar way, in John, the disciples are together in their fear. They didn't scatter, they didn't go their separate ways to work things out. Jesus didn't go off looking for Thomas in another location, but returned to the group again when Thomas was present. We *have* to hang together, we have to discern together, and we make a special place for those, like Thomas, who may take longer or work out the questions in a different way.

Sticking together and being one in heart and soul *is* more complex today than it was for that early band of Christians in Jerusalem. Modern travel and communication and a globalized economy, not to mention political and military endeavors by our government, connect us directly with people around the world. Will it ever be enough to say there are no needy ones among us here at Faith Mennonite Church? Absolutely not! As long as we purchase goods made in China from resources mined in the Congo and pay taxes that are used to carry out foreign policy in other parts of the world, we have to think global community! And thank God we have opportunities through Mennonite Central Committee, our mission

network, Christian Peacemaker Teams, and many other collaborations to learn about, to share resources, and to pray with and for our global family of faith.

The quilt we have displayed this morning is a symbol of one such collaboration, between Mennonites in Colombia, Ecuador and our Central Plains Mennonite Conference. The quilt's color scheme is a bit out of season with its winter colors, and yet, juxtaposed with our spring-colored Easter visuals it portrays the tension of today's texts. The wool fabric of this quilt was made in Ecuador. The quilt was created here in Central Plains Conference and has been traveling to churches throughout the conference to highlight the partnership. The Mennonite Church in Ecuador is closely linked with the Colombian Mennonite Church, due to the large number of refugees who have fled Colombia and settled in Ecuador.

Today Mennonite Churches across the U.S. are joining in the annual day of Prayer and Action for Colombia, at the request of the the Colombian Mennonite Church. Because of the enormity of US aid that has gone to Colombia in recent years, and by many accounts has aggravated the situation, Colombian Christians call on us to pray and to plead on their behalf for a changed policy. Colombia continues to face one of the world's largest humanitarian crises and is home to the largest population of internally displaced persons in the world--over 5 million people have been forced from their lands and homes by the armed conflict.

David Shenk, a Mennonite Mission Network volunteer who works with Colombian refugees in Ecuador, spent time in Colombia last August with a Christian Peacemaker Team delegation. He met a family that had been displaced by the violence and was living in a safe house. The father, Juan, was the first to flee when a paramilitary group occupied their town. The paramilitaries moved into the home with Juan's wife and children, waiting for his return. In desperation the wife fled with her children and they were able to join Juan. Their story is typical of how people have lost access to land. Although the U.S. has given over \$6 billion in aid for Plan Colombia, to inhibit drug trafficking and fight guerrilla groups, families like Juan's have not seem improvements and wonder if they will ever be able to return to their land.

When Juan spoke to the CPT group he asked them to speak on his behalf, on behalf of all the voiceless and displaced people of Colombia. Today we listen to their call and pray in resurrection hope on their behalf, in the words of a Colombian Christian:

You, God of the poor and the oppressed,  
God of those without roof and without land,  
Rescue us.

Lord, you who suffer with those who cry and those who are displaced,  
With those who have to leave their homes.  
Rescue us.

You who see the heart of the corrupt and the assassin,  
the heart of those in the midst of war and confrontations,  
Rescue us.

Rescue your people, Lord  
Don't forget about our pain.  
Look at us, surrounded by disappointment.  
We need your understanding and your Love. Amen.

-Adaia Bernal