

Reading Acts 4:32-35

SERMON: 19 APRIL 2009

The text for the sermon:

³² All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. ³³ With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all.

Last week we celebrated the resurrection of Jesus. But what does the resurrection mean to followers of faith? Is it a doctrine or a way of life or both?

According to our Bible reading this morning it seems evident that it is a way of life. Luke who is the author of the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the apostles is telling us what happened in the communities of early Jesus followers. He does it in such a way that even Gentile readers would be fascinated by the message of the resurrection. Luke is the one author who included woman in his Gospel and who is not hostile to the Roman authorities. In this reading it is clear that he was a fine scholar who knew not only the Old Testament but also several other non biblical sources.

Let me explain. The Greek world believed that the ideal world would be where people share everything they had and where people were in one mind about everything. It seems as if verse 32 is reflecting these Greek ideals, particularly in such phrases as “one mind” and “a commonly sharing”. In Plato’s famous work *The Republic* the ideal Republican society is one without any private ownership. The early Christian fellowship that practiced these ideals must have been very attractive to any Gentile readers who knew and shared these views. They were thinking in one mind and sharing with one another. Jesus message of hope gave them the strength to live in unity.

But Luke also wants his listeners (the Jewish converts in particular) who are followers of Jesus to feel comfortable and at ease as well. In verses 33 & 34 he refers to the Old Testament ideal of God’s blessings. When Israel obeyed the commands of God according to Deuteronomy 15, He would bless them and there would be no poor among them. Luke says that because the early Christian community proclaimed the message of the resurrection to everyone they were blessed. And the result – there were no needy persons among them. The early Christian followers wanted to make this ideal a reality by sharing their goods voluntarily with everyone. There were no rules to command them to share their goods and property. They did it because they thought of themselves as the people of God of the final times who were experiencing blessings from God and were determined to meet the ideal of God’s people with no poor among them. The resurrection of Jesus gave them the hope of the new future that was now part of their

reality. Luke tells us that some of them sold property and laid their proceeds at the feet of the apostles as a sign of authority and trust. They entrusted their proceedings to the apostles to make it available to the needy.

In verses 36–37 Luke concludes his depiction of the early Christian fellowship by providing an example of someone in particular who sold his land and gave the proceedings to the apostles. The man's name was Barnabas. It is remarkable that Luke gives us almost no details of this Barnabas although he would later play an important role in the rest of the Acts of the Apostles. Barnabas was his nickname. His real name was Joseph. In those days nicknames was often seen as a sign of respect. Luke interprets the name Barnabas to mean *Son of Encouragement* which of course is not a true translation of the Aramaic. I am convinced that Luke really wanted to show that Barnabas was indeed a person of encouragement without going in to the details of how he derived the meaning from the Aramaic. When the Christians in Jerusalem did not want to accept Paul after his conversion, Barnabas interceded and introduced him to them. When Paul refused to take Mark on his second missionary journey, Barnabas was firm to take Mark along with him. Luke says in Acts 11:24 that Barnabas "was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith."

We also learn that Barnabas was a Levite from Cyprus. I think it is no coincidence that Cyprus was also the island where Paul and Barnabas's mission work as a team began. Maybe Luke was preparing his readers to this fact. Levites were officials in the temple cult, subordinate in rank to the priests. Since they were prohibited from offering sacrifices and barred entrance to the holy place, they served by policing the temple grounds, keeping the gates, and providing the music at sacrifices and on ceremonial occasions.

In short; Barnabas was not untouched by the Good News of Jesus' resurrection. He did not stop after he gave away his piece of land. He continued to proclaim the message of Jesus' resurrection with words and deeds.

And this Luke really wants to tell us. We have to proclaim the Good news of Jesus' resurrection with words and deeds. The resurrection of Jesus must mean something to us. We cannot be untouched by the reality of the new future that was made possible by Jesus' resurrection. We have to live the hope of Jesus' victory over sin and death in everything we do and say. We are all one new community of believers!

This passage does not mean that we must or are obliged to start selling our homes and giving everything away. It has a far deeper, somewhat far richer meaning. This passage challenges you and me with only one question: What does the hope of Jesus' resurrection really mean to us?

Does it mean that we will talk about it with everyone we see or meet?

Does it mean that we will start by mending all the broken relationships in our lives?

Does it mean that we will look out for the needy and the poor among us?

Does it mean that we will share with love and compassion our lives with others?

Does it mean that we will stop talking negatively of other and see everyone as part of the new community of believers?

Does it mean that we will strive as Christians to proclaim the Good News as One body with different voices?

Does it mean that we will end any division that might exist in our houses, relations, congregation or workplace?

Whatever we do, we must remember that the early Christian community set an example of Christ's love in the world by their unity in mind and heart (v. 32a), their sharing of their possessions (v. 32b), the power and witness of the apostles (v. 33a), and the grace of God, which rested upon them.

But we also have to be cautious. Unity does not mean that we all have to be the same. We may have differences which are a good thing, we may have different tastes, and we may have different opinions. We are individuals that come together as a unity in proclaiming the message of Jesus' resurrection with different voices. In the end all our different voices will come together in a beautiful symphony of sound that will glorify God.

Speaking of different voices. I think everyone has seen Susan Boyle's performance on "Britain's Got Talent". When this 47 YEAR old lady from Blackburn walked on the stage and started speaking to the judges – you could see the dislike on their faces, you could almost feel the hostility of the audience. But then when she opened her mouth her voice transformed everyone from dislike to amazement, from hostility to respect. Maybe this is what we as Christians must do. We must stop worrying how we look to our world and just open our mouths to proclaim the good news of Jesus' hope for the sinners, open our hearts in order for the world to see the love and compassion of Christ and get our trainers on our feet to start the race of telling everyone about Jesus!

May we all proclaim the One message with our different and sometimes broken voices. May we proclaim it by our deeds of love and compassion! In the end it will be by the power of God's Holy Spirit transform people's disbelief into faith, hope and love!

Amen

Readings for the week

Acts 4:32-35 (taken from the website of www.rootsontheweb.com)

This interesting passage describes the holding of goods in common among the early Christians. Some scholars suggest that the Christians learned this habit from the Essenes (a Jewish sect somewhat resembling the Pharisees). In any event, and at the

risk of being over-reductionist, the passage shows the change provoked among the Christians by the resurrection of Jesus. There is no suggestion that the Christians gave up their own homes and lived together. Perhaps Luke is overstating the situation when he states that they share everything. It seems as though it was only surplus things that were disposed of in order to provide for the needy. It is important to remember that any Christian understanding of the resurrection has ethical consequences. In seeking to apply the doctrine today we should ask both how we react to the doctrine of the resurrection and what changes it should, and does, provoke in us. The resurrection certainly demands a response from us as believers. Are we going to confirm the resurrection with our lives of hope or are we going to surrender to any challenge without hope!

Other readings: Psalm 133: 1, John 1.1 —2.2; John 20: 19-31.