

April 12, 2015

“After the Dust Settles”

Sermon by Rev. Robert English



Acts 4:32-35

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

When reading scripture, context matters.

It's kind of like this one time I pulled out my old family photo album and I started thumbing through the pages when I came across a picture that at first I couldn't quite place. So I just stopped and stared at it trying to recreate the scene. And then I remembered: oh yeah that was my MC Hammer phase- which explains the pants and the flat top haircut. It must have been my away party which probably explains that look of excitement with a hint of sadness on my face. I think it was probably the last picture that I ever took with my best friend from childhood.

See, once you are able to put something into context the picture goes from being two dimensional to three dimensional. This is why a little context matters, when reading scripture, because nothing ever happens in a vacuum.

This morning we read from the 4th chapter of the book of Acts.

To give just a little context, the whole backdrop for the story of Jesus and the early church is the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire was this massive empire ruled by Caesar who was the most powerful human being on earth and Caesar's rule was one of coercive violence, fear and absolute authority. Caesar was believed to be both human and divine, he had titles like "Son of God," and "Caesar is Lord."

So, over in Galilee and Palestine, this man emerged from kind of a po-dunk town called Nazareth, a leader of a new small movement of fishermen, women, children, tax collectors and sinners. He began to gain attention from the powers that be, as he called people into a new way of being and he cast a vision of a new kingdom of grace and mercy where the least of these are served by the most of these and where the first are last and the last are first. His name was Jesus.

During Holy Week, we heard and experienced the betrayal, arrest of Jesus and his crucifixion on Good Friday. But then Sunday came, the tomb was empty and Jesus was resurrected and we said sin and death are no more. The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdom of our God and his Christ and he will reign for ever and ever, King of Kings, and wait for it, and Lord of Lords, because "Jesus is not only Lord but he is the Lord over all other Lords."

To paraphrase pastor and writer Rob Bell¹:

This gathering of early Christians made this radical proclamation in light of the resurrection, that "Jesus is Lord." They insisted that the resurrection of Jesus is God's vindication that the way of Jesus is better than the way of Caesar, that the way of humble, sacrificial love is better than the way of coercive violence, oppression and power.

See, the resurrection of Jesus shows us that that all the powers and structures and empires that bind or oppress us are temporary and that there is a new order, a new creation being ushered in by Jesus which is truth and love and abundant life for all people.

And so in the 4th chapter of Acts we read about the early church as they gathered together and lived into the resurrection of Jesus. The early church was a motley crew of people from all different walks of life. There were Jews, Romans, and Greeks, slaves, and the free. There were women, children, and men and they were poor and rich. They gathered together and they witnessed and testified to the power of the resurrection and

¹ Rob Bell inspired these ideas in his Rob CAST #12

the love of God was palpable among them. There was this great grace present in the midst of their gatherings, they were so in-tuned and in rhythm with the Holy Spirit that you could feel it. It would seep into your bones and they held everything together in common and cared for everyone's needs.

This picture, this snapshot of the early church is not just nostalgia but rooted in a story and reality which continues to shape and mold us today, as we strive to live in the beauty of this truth, that Christ has died, Christ is risen and Christ will come again.

What do we draw from this picture? What good news can we take and apply to our lives?

First, forgiveness. We've been talking about it over the last few weeks but we are reminded in today's text that in the season of Easter forgiveness is still relevant to our life together. The reading from 1 John says "if we say that we are without sin then we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." But if we strive to walk in the light then we have fellowship with God in Christ who shows us the path, the way to true forgiveness.

See, Jesus in his death and resurrection shows us the **way** of all-forgiving love as he suffers the worst form of injustice and violence and takes it onto himself. He takes the worst that we have to offer and he transforms it into new life and all-consuming grace.

So this coming week, the next time someone wrongs you, the next time they say that thing that just cuts to the core of who you are, the next time you experience a sense of injustice, whether big or small, live into the resurrection, insist on the way of Jesus Christ, the way of humble self-giving love, that confronts the injustice. Insist that a new order is possible, that a new life is possible, and that God has the power to offer grace and that forgiveness flows through you which can transform all of our relationships and heal our world.

Second, sharing. Jesus' resurrection affirms our life and the lives of others and that **they are in fact worth saving**. The resurrection says that with God everything is abundance and asks us to practice this by freely sharing of ourselves with others. This coming week, give a little bit of yourself- your time, your blood, your sweat and your tears. Carry the load, the burden of a person whose hurting, even if only for a moment so that they might find some sense of rest.

Give away the things that are starting to consume you. Offer those possessions, those gifts, to God as a holy and living sacrifice, **living a bit more simply so that others can simply live**.

Because when we forgive and share our life we live into the resurrection, we are reformed more fully into the image of our God whose mutual, self-giving love poured out continually for the healing of the world.

And so we gather around this table to share this meal, with bread and cup, body broken and blood poured out. We gather as a motley crew of people who insist in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and that in him we have life, and hope, and love beyond all imagining. And that if we allow it, this good news has the power to change our lives, our communities and our world.

In the name of Jesus Christ, Risen Savior and Lord of Lords.