

## ***“Evidence of Easter”***

Acts 4:32-35 (NRSV); Psalm 40:5-20 (NRSV)

Broadly speaking, “evidence,” is anything that proves or indicates that a belief or proposition is true.

The burden of proof for evidence in a criminal case lies with the prosecution. If you’re like me, you’ve seen enough crime shows or read enough murder mysteries to know that *good* evidence, *effective* evidence, is hard to find. There are so many ways that evidence can be tainted or thrown out in a case; if there is even the smallest flaw in the way a piece of evidence is obtained, then it’s rendered unusable. But – if you can find it – a fingerprint, a strand of hair – it only takes one good piece of evidence, no matter how small, to make or break a case.

Scientific evidence, on the other hand, consists of observations and experimental results that support, refute, or modify a hypothesis or theory. Simply put, in the scientific method, you make an observation, ask a question, form a hypothesis, conduct an experiment, then accept the hypothesis or reject it, and then usually start that process all over again. I remember from a grade

school science experiment of trying to grow mold on a piece of bread, a strawberry, a rock, and some fourth object that I can’t recall, that it can be fairly tedious when your experiments don’t prove the hypothesis you were hoping they would. But that’s science, right? (I’m sure my parents loved that mold experiment; I think I lasted for several months in our darkened pantry.) Proof is essential in science, just as it is in law.

But what about faith?

I would argue that evidence is essential in faith, but not in the ways we think of it legally or scientifically. When it comes to faith, evidence is more of a verb than a noun.

Because as a noun, evidence means: “facts or information indicating whether a belief or proposition is true or valid.”

But as a verb, evidence means: “to make clear or to manifest, to show evidence of.”<sup>1</sup>

When it comes to faith, evidence is not about finding the missing piece to a puzzle you’re trying to solve. Let’s face it, the resurrection will always be puzzling! And there’s no physical piece of evidence that can “prove” it happened. Likewise, when it comes to faith, evidence is not really about setting out to prove or disprove a theory by experiments. You can try to do that, but no matter your method, someone will find a flaw in it.

And that’s because, when it comes to finding evidence for faith, we can’t look outside of ourselves for it. *We* are the evidence. Like it or not, our lives, our actions – that is the only “Evidence of Easter” we’ll ever have. With faith, evidence is a verb. How are our lives “showing forth” or “making clear” that Christ is Risen? That Death is no more? That Darkness is no more? Because everything around us is going to seem like evidence that Death and Darkness are stronger than ever. So *we* have to be the Light and Life and Love that proves otherwise.

In our text today, the community in Acts shows evidence of Easter in their lives: <sup>32-33</sup> *The whole congregation of believers was united as one—one heart, one mind! They didn’t even claim ownership of their own possessions. No one said, “That’s mine; you can’t have it.” They shared everything.* <sup>34-35</sup> *And so it turned out that not a person among them was needy. Those who owned fields or houses sold them and brought the price of the sale to the apostles and...the apostles then distributed it according to each person’s need.<sup>2</sup> [And this is why they did this: To give powerful witness to the resurrection of Jesus, because grace was on all of them.]*

How did Christ's resurrection motivate such a unified, generous community? Or, conversely, how did the practice of sharing communal goods inform the early church's understanding of the living Christ?<sup>3</sup>

You see, at first, the miracle of the resurrection might have motivated them to share their wealth, but such one-off miraculous moments don’t normally sustain long term action. Something in this lifestyle

---

<sup>1</sup> Definitions accessed on April 8, 2018 at <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/evidence>.

<sup>2</sup> Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of the Bible, *The Message*.

<sup>3</sup> F. Scott Spencer, “Commentary on Acts 4:32-35”

*WorkingPreacher.org* (April 19, 2009), accessed on April 8,

2018 at

[http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=294](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=294).

of sharing everything with one another must have kept reminding them of the good news of the Risen Christ; it must have helped it be “real” for them in their lives. This way of life *must* have made a difference for them; otherwise, they would have stopped living this way. Of course, when the novelty of any inspiration wears off, the *real work* of sustaining that inspiration (with perspiration) begins.

The book of Acts, written by the gospel writer Luke, presents a remarkably different world from the one in the gospels, and the difference is – the resurrection. It changes everything for them.

Instead of opposing or misunderstanding Jesus’ intentions, as had been the case earlier, in Acts, the disciples now have clarity and insight (retroactively) about what Jesus was doing while he was with them, as well as Spirit-filled discernment as to what they should do next, now that he’s no longer with them.<sup>4</sup>

Today’s text describes in tangible terms the transformation which has taken hold within the life of the community of Jesus’ followers.

---

· Timothy F. Simpson, “The Politics of Acts 4:32-35,” *Political Theology Network* (April 10, 2012), accessed on April 8, 2018 at <https://politicaltheology.com/the-politics-of-acts-432-35/>.

These followers would have included not just the holdovers from the gospel accounts but also the new converts who had joined this new movement.<sup>5</sup>

The text describes two themes of this newly transformed community, the first of which is “unity.” Which is amazing given that it includes not just the original followers of Jesus who had been huddled in fear in the Upper Room (post-Resurrection/pre-Pentecost), but also about the thousands of new arrivals who seemingly have already been integrated into the community within this short period of time. This unity relates to the second theme of the passage, which is that all possessions were held in common. Unity of mission leads to and supports a common shared action – sharing wealth and equally distributing it with those in need.<sup>6</sup>

What do we make of this for our lives today?

New Testament Scholar Luke Timothy Johnson has spent decades researching and reflecting on the meaning of wealth and possessions in Luke-Acts. No other biblical writer in either testament places greater emphasis

· Simpson, *ibid.*  
· Simpson, *ibid.*

on the “stuff” people have, what they do with it, and how God thinks about it than the writer of Luke-Acts. Johnson says that while many of us go searching through the scriptures looking for rules which will tell us what to do, what we find instead, particularly in Luke-Acts, is what he calls a “diversity of mandates” rather than a unified field theory of stewardship which would explain everything and provide a check list for what to do with every possible item we might possess in whatever setting we might come to acquire it.<sup>7</sup>

The reason we don’t get something like this unified field theory in the Bible, Johnson argues, is because Christianity isn’t an ethical system that tells you what you’re supposed to do all of the time. Instead, it tells you **who you are** and through the shaping of **that identity** you then grow to discern, by the power of the Spirit, which mandate (of the many mandates given in scripture) is the best one to be followed at a given moment.

Now the pathetic thing about our own generation, he says, is that despite the “diversity of mandates” on the subject of wealth in Luke-Acts, to say nothing of others elsewhere in scripture, our current

understanding of wealth and possessions bears little-to-no resemblance to anything the Bible commends.<sup>8</sup> The closest some of us get is tithing on our income, ideally our gross income, but hey – if you’re tithing on your net income – I’m happy. Perhaps this is just one of those pastor things, but when people tell me a tithe (giving 10%) is too much, I think...well at least we’re using the standard set out in Numbers and Deuteronomy and not in the book of Acts! Perspective is everything isn’t it?

Modern thinking about wealth, even within the Christian faith, has come untethered from Jesus’ teachings. We have utterly secularized economics, instead of realizing that in the gospels, you could argue that economics is the primary way evidence of faith is given. Economics is evidence of loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself.

Jesus talked about money more than anything else. I think he knew it could hold our hearts captive; and perhaps that’s the freedom the early disciples realized post-resurrection...that to be untied to wealth is to be free to wake up to the needs around us. And that’s what happens here. It’s not that the

---

<sup>7</sup> Simpson, *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Simpson, *ibid.*

wealth is gone...it's still there. But it's used to meet the needs of the poor, and not just to fulfill the wants of the rich. Money is not bad; but our managing of it sure can be.

But humans are humans, right? No matter what age or era we live in. And so all of this begs the question – was it really true that this earliest Christian community really shared everything?

Well, even the Book of Acts itself testifies to the fact that from the earliest days of the Christian church, disagreement and strife and conflict were present. Acts is remarkable for many reasons, not the least of which is its honesty in admitting that sometimes the apostles disagreed and had to call special councils to hammer out their understanding of grace. Sometimes some of the apostles disagreed so sharply with one another that they had to continue their work for the Lord down separate paths.<sup>9</sup>

So yes, it is good and pleasant when brothers and sisters in the Lord get along. And yes, it is good and pleasant when Christian believers can share things in common and cling to the

resurrection witness of the gospel. But it's also sadly true that complete unity and utter harmony across all boundaries, times, and places, is rare and unusual.

However, there's hope for us yet, because the spiritual key to Acts 4 is not the presence of air-tight Christian unity. The key is that we still have a Christian community after all these centuries *after* the resurrection. Despite all that divides us and all that's changed in the church, there remains this good news that unites us and give us purpose: "*On the third day he rose from the dead.*"<sup>10</sup> We don't just proclaim "Christ is Risen" on Easter morning because it sounds good and we like to re-enact an ancient story. *Christ is Risen* is the heart of our faith. This is where Hope, Life, Love, and Grace get their meaning.

The Resurrection was a relational event! God resurrected Jesus; Jesus did not resurrect himself. And because of what God did for Jesus, we believe God can resurrect us from our own psychological pain and our spiritual pain and our emotional pain and our physical pain and every other situation that pulls us down and away from life. God

---

<sup>9</sup> Scott Hoezee, "Acts 4:32-35" *Calvin Seminary: Center for Excellence in Preaching* (April 2, 2018), accessed on April 8,

2018 at [http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/easter-2b-2/?type=old\\_testament\\_lectionary](http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/easter-2b-2/?type=old_testament_lectionary).

<sup>10</sup> Hoezee, *ibid.*

"resurrects" us. And God doesn't just resurrect *us*, God resurrects everybody.<sup>11</sup> If we have been given Life and Breath today, then we must use it to make sure others still have Life and Breath tomorrow. There's no way around it. And Acts is evidence of that Easter truth.

The resurrection of Jesus made all the difference. The resurrection created a community among disparate people from all different backgrounds and perspectives. And despite all the tug-o-wars in Acts and throughout the rest of the New Testament, that core conviction that Jesus lives and that he is the resurrected Lord of Life, persisted then and persists today.<sup>12</sup>

As Pastor Scott Hoezee says, "Our unity is never perfect. We have a hard time sharing all things in common. And yet, the Church is still here. In a million places and ways every single day believers [must] continue to witness to the power of Christ's resurrection. And even though we cannot agree on what happens to the bread at the Lord's Supper or whether it's OK to ask the Virgin Mary to pray for us or whether babies should be baptized or whether the Bible says the earth is 10,000 years old or

allows for it being millions of years old: despite it all, the Christian community exists to be a testament to the truth that "*Jesus lives and so do we.*"<sup>13</sup>

In John 20, Jesus tells Thomas that lots of people who were not an eyewitness to the resurrected Christ the way Thomas was would be blessed for their faith anyway. Today, we are here as living proof that Jesus was right. And maybe that is proof enough. But we can't just keep that proof to ourselves. The world desperately needs the Easter Evidence of our lives.

Think about it this way:

If you're in love and committed to someone, in our culture, the evidence of that love is often that you will wear a wedding band or an engagement ring on your left hand. Can you be in love or engaged or married and not wear a ring? Of course. But if you're wearing a ring, you're probably taken. A ring is evidence of your commitment.

If you work out all the time, the evidence of your super fit lifestyle will be that you are completely ripped with your bulging biceps and six-pack abs. Can you work

---

<sup>11</sup> Mitzi J. Smith, "Commentary on Acts 4:32-35" *WorkingPreacher.org* (April 15, 2012), accessed on April 8, 2018 at

[http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1234](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1234).

<sup>12</sup> Hoezee, *ibid.*  
<sup>13</sup> Hoezee, *ibid.*

out and not be completely ripped? Of course. But if you're one of those people with rippling muscles, you *must* be working out. It's evidence of a strict diet, hours at the gym, and a lot of discipline.

If you're a great cook, then evidence of your skill might be that when you throw a dinner party, people clean their plates and ask for the recipe. Could people just be forcing down your food to be polite? Perhaps. But if you consistently have clean plates around your dinner table, that's evidence that you're probably a pretty good cook.

So make the parallel to your life of faith. What is the evidence that your life shows the hope of the resurrection?

We can look at these early believers and clearly see the evidence of their faith in the Risen Christ by their *actions*. They believed that the Life, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus had literally brought about a new world order, one in which they worked together and cared for each other in ways that feel extreme and unattainable now. I imagine it felt extreme to them at the time too. I imagine they feared how they would get along without their individual possessions. Society has changed; our systems are different. We

aren't set-up, at least right now, for us all to bring all of our stuff to the church today and start distributing it equally. Lori Grohskopf would not be a happy camper if I told you all to rent U-hauls and dump your stuff in the church parking lot this afternoon.

But we are not off the hook. Just because our world looks different today than the world of the early church, we have to figure out what our call is within our systems and society. We have to figure out what the Evidence of Easter looks like in our lives today. And here's the key...if our evidence only benefits *ourselves*, and *not the lives of others*, then it's not going to hold up in court. It'll get thrown out. No one will believe us; our testimony will ring false.

The Psalmist writes in Psalm 40:10: "*I have not hidden your saving help within my heart, I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation; I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the great congregation.*" Are we concealing God's love or are we giving evidence of it with our lives?

The *message* of Easter is clear: Christ is Risen! Death is no more. Life and Hope and New Beginnings are possible – today and forever.

But without evidence of that Easter message, how will the world know that Christ still lives?

The case for the Risen Christ has been made 2,000+ years ago.

Let's go prove that it's still true today.

Amen.