

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER | MAY 3, 2020

ACTS 2:42-47 | PSALM 23 | 1 PETER 2:19-25 | JOHN 10:1-10

For the past few months, our church council has been reading this book together called *Canoeing the Mountains*. Every month they get a chapter from me to reflect on with a few notes scribbled in the margins. The title of the book comes from the story of Lewis and Clark who set out to survey the American West by canoe. They were great at canoeing. And canoeing worked really well while they went through modern-day Nebraska, the Dakotas, and eastern Montana. But then they hit the Rocky Mountains. And the thing that they were good at, the thing that got them to where they were, wasn't going to work anymore. And the book uses that as a framing device to explore how we as the church confront new challenges.

There's one theme in the book that I wanted to explore today to help us think about our reading from Acts. Which is the idea of Christendom. Christendom refers to a society in which Christianity and the church are given a place of privilege. Sometimes that privilege is an official legal status. State churches in Europe that are supported by public funding are a good example of this.

But Christendom can also be a kind of cultural thing, too. You can probably think of some examples of this from your own life. It could just be that you're expected to be a member of a church. Kids soccer games not being scheduled for Sunday mornings because that's when people go to church. Clergy being invited to say a prayer before a meeting at town hall. Babies being baptized not long after they're born. Lots of people getting married in churches (and not just because their parents want them to). Even the invocation of people's church attendance as a sign of their moral character. *I'm a good person. After all, I go to church.*

But Christendom is essentially over. You can still find vestigial examples of it floating around, but more and more our culture is post-Christendom. For some of us, I would include myself in this category, this post-Christendom culture feels normal. In some ways, it's better. But for others of us, that loss of privilege feels like decline. We used to feel needed. We used to feel important. We used to feel relevant. And now we don't. The story we tell about ourselves is that things used to be really good but now we're in decline and trying to preserve as much as we can.

And that sense of decline and preservation takes us right into today's reading from Acts. Acts tells the story of the early church in the years after Christ's death and resurrection. It is a church that looks very different from our own. They don't have sanctuaries or denominations or creeds or hymnals or anything like that. But they do have something in common with us. Neither of us are living in Christendom anymore. If we are living in a post-Christendom world, they are living in a pre-Christendom world. In some ways, we have much more in common with this community of early believers two thousand years ago than with the people who built this church six or seven decades ago.

The early church was a long way off from being perfect. They had arguments. They had egos. They had inequality. But according to St. Luke, they had one very central thing right. They didn't view or evaluate their mission terms of decline and preservation. And there's a very specific reason for that. They believed in Jesus's resurrection.

This story from Acts probably feels like a weird story to tell about the resurrection. After all, we're in the season of Easter. So shouldn't we be hearing stories about the risen Christ appearing to his disciples? Why are we getting into church stuff?

Luke's answer is that this story of the early church *is* a resurrection story. It is not a story about the risen Christ appearing to his disciples and saying, "Put your hand in my side." But it is a story about how the resurrection manifests itself in the life of this community. Without an

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experience of the resurrection, the experience of the church would be all about preservation. It would be about preserving stories of Jesus. It would be about preserving the teachings of Jesus. It would be about preserving the practices of Jesus. And as time stretched on, things would only get worse. You would only get further away from the real stories, real teachings, and real practices. It would be all downhill. It would be managed decline.

In fact, when we read this story through our Christendom lens, that's the dynamic we tend to pick up on. The church is doing churchy stuff, teaching, meal, giving, whatever. But what comes at the end? "Day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved." New members! New givers! And our favorite golden calf, young families! We can hold off the decline for a little while longer.

But that's not what this group of people is doing. That all seems tertiary at best. The thing that is animating their mission is something completely different. In fact, St. Luke gives us a hint when he outlines what the church is actually involved in doing. They are proclaiming the gospel, baptizing people, sharing the holy meal, and engaging in acts of hospitality. Four things. But these are four actions where they believe Jesus to be alive and at work in their community through the power of the Holy Spirit. That Jesus's resurrection means that the kingdom of God, God's ways of being in the world are here. And they are manifested through these actions of teaching, bath, meal, and hospitality.

It's revealing how often our complaints and worries about a declining or dying church aren't really about church. They're about Christendom. No one has complained to me that we can't teach the gospel, that the sacraments are no longer efficacious, or that we don't have enough opportunities to serve people in need. What people do get anxious about is losing their sense of feeling important.

That distinction between seeking Christendom and seeking the kingdom is hugely important. Christendom says that the truest version of the church is one that's somewhere in the past. Christendom tells us that we exist mostly to bless people's life passages and provide a religious sheen to whatever is going on in the world. Christendom tells us that the most important thing in the world is to be needed. But the kingdom of God tells us something else. It tells us that the truest version of the church is the one God is calling us to be. It tells us that we exist to help one another form our lives around Jesus's death and resurrection. And it tells us that the most important thing in the world is to know that we are loved.

That understanding of church is a real shift for most of us. Not an institution to be managed. Not a club to be supported. Not an idea to be maintained. But a communion of people whose common life is animated by the ongoing faithfulness of God. Who meets us through these seemingly simple acts of teaching, bath, meal, and hospitality.

Christendom is dead. Christ is alive.

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