



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

On becoming the Church

By the Rev. Sharon Gracen

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In the four Gospels, there are less than a dozen stories of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances to his followers. In all of them the women are the first to hear the news and experience the risen Christ. He appears to the ten of them hiding in the upper room, then to the group plus Thomas. In Luke we read last week, about the walk along the road to Emmaus and Jesus breaking bread with two disciples who are not members of the eleven, for they went back to Jerusalem and talked to them. He appears to them in Jerusalem and in Galilee. Sometimes, he eats with them and sometimes he cooks for them – a barbeque of fish on the beach. There are other appearances about which we only hear. The Book of Acts says that he appeared to them throughout 40 days. And then they see him no longer.

At some point, Jesus' disciples overcame their fear and took their experiences and good news public. On Pentecost they received the power of the Holy Spirit and Peter, who was never an intellectual giant, begins to preach and tell the story with eloquence and power. And people began to gather around the powerful story. They were baptized and devoted themselves to what they were learning. A community developed as they prayed together and ate together. The spirit of love changed them as we heard in today's reading. They shared everything. They lived as a community, sharing goods and wealth according to need. Today, such an idea makes people swoon and hurl insults at one another for being socialists but it made the early church converts glad. This description is the purest expression of Christian community because it was a heart response to the Good News and the Spirit. And they had "the goodwill of all the people." I hear that as not just those within the new community but also those who saw how they were changed and how they were living. We have no idea how long that lasted but I'm guessing, not very long. That kind of happy behavior is just too threatening to the ways of the world but that's what the church was in the beginning – an example of a different way of living.

The Book of Acts continues with the various stories of those who helped to turn this spontaneous response to the story of Christ into a movement known as The Way and finally into the church. Not long after people gathered into that community of The Way, a community of love, questions of authority began to arise – who's in charge here? Who was the leader now that Jesus was no longer present? His brother James appears to have had some measure of leadership responsibility and expectation, after all, who knew Jesus better than his brother and might be expected to carry on in the same vein. The inner circle of Jesus disciples, the 12 were all empowered by the Spirit and had their experiences of leadership. There is some indication that the women also had a measure of authority by virtue of their role as Jesus defined it – evangelists of the resurrection. But the two that emerged as the architects of what would become the church were Peter and Paul.

The first task of the movement and its leaders was to continue to tell the story. But soon, the story needed explanation. The first questions developed around who could join. Jesus was Jewish, all the disciples were Jewish, all of the early converts were Jewish. Did you have to be Jewish to join and if you did, did that make you Jewish? What had more authority, the Torah or Jesus' interpretation of it? Early

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on, there were disagreements; James was the most conservative, trying to keep the followers of Jesus the Christ, firmly rooted within the confines of Judaism. Peter was more moderate, if you were Gentile, you could join without being circumcised – a relief to some, no doubt, but you still needed to observe the dietary laws. Sort of a y'all come, but keep Kosher faction. And then there was Paul, I know that this might sound shocking, but he was the very liberal interpretation of what it means to be the Body of Christ. He saw conversion as an event of the heart, not the marks of the flesh or menu choices. For Paul, it was all about continuing the radical community in which all were equal, all were worthy, all were empowered. The communities that he founded were meant to look like those early spirit driven socialists.

We are also reading from the 1st Letter of Peter which was written sometime after the destruction of Rome in 70. By then, there were small Christian communities spread all over the Middle East and Greece. But they were all in trouble. They'd all been started in the spirit of love and fellowship and welcome but they were being met with ferocious hostility by the surrounding world. The persecution of Christians had started early on, Paul himself had been persecutor of the followers of Christ. Now, however, the Empire had decided that these little pockets of radicalism were a threat. Anything that disturbed the social order and position of the Emperor as divine leader was put down and put down hard. But the church kept insisting that social position and status was unimportant, membership in the Body of Christ was as significant as Roman citizenship. Outcasts were embraced, non-citizens were accorded respect, welcome and status in the church, and women were leaders. Rome could not afford to let that kind of thing spread. The persecutions came in waves, beginning with Nero in the first century and culminating in the early 4th century under the Emperor Diocletian – the Great Persecution. The stories of the martyrs of the early church are witnesses to faith, perseverance and courage.

The first centuries of the church were tumultuous, spreading the Gospel, planting congregations and then trying to keep them together and alive. They were also a time of great intellectual work. The Greek culture was highly intellectual; knowledge was pursued for its own sake. Christian writers began the work of explaining the faith in terms that the Greek and Roman world could understand and respect. Answers to the big questions were formulated; things like the nature of Christ, was he human or divine. That question occupied many minds for a long time. The definition of the Trinity was a big issue. What did the incarnation really mean for us? What was the truth and what was heresy? Church councils were convened to discuss and decide some of these debates. If your side lost the argument, you were the heretics and the church was already showing itself as having learned the lessons of violence well. Heretics went on the run, into hiding or died.

What had happened? From those earliest days in which the followers of the Way came together as a joyous community committed to living the kingdom here on earth; loving as Christ loved us. Somewhere along the way, the church changed into an organization driven by power and using threats, intolerance, marginalization, and fear-mongering to keep people from straying. The focus of theology mutated into an obsession with Original Sin and the afterlife instead of life here and now as a joyous welcoming body. We forgot about heaven having come to earth.

But I am convinced that the reason we have these readings every Easter season is to draw us back to the original response to the Incarnation and the Resurrection. We can unwind two thousand years of doctrine and dogma and make it simple. We can remind the world that there is a better, gentler, more generous way. We can remember to walk in love as Christ loved us. Alleluia!

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