

LIVING IN THE NEW NORMAL

On Easter Sunday we pull out all the stops. We deck the platform with lilies and hang banners. Our worship arts community is at their creative best. Easter Sunday is huge, and rightly so. The resurrection of Jesus demands a response. We're always looking for fresh ways to express our joy at the resurrection.

But what do you do the week after Easter? How do you sustain the artistry and energy of Easter worship, especially when Spring break takes your personnel on vacation? In other words, what happens when the season passes and life returns to normal?

While Easter does require something special, we truly cannot sustain the intensity of high and holy days. We can't do it as a church family, and we can't do it in our own personal families. How do we maintain the balance in life's daily-ness between necessary routine and a resurrection-informed new normal? How does the resurrection of Jesus transform ordinary life?

One way to anticipate an answer is to look back at how the resurrection transformed the ordinary life of his followers. They had to adjust to a new normal.

Jesus' crucifixion unraveled their world. When Jesus was arrested in the garden, all his disciples abandoned him and scattered into the night. Peter, lingered on the edge of darkness near Jesus, but vehemently denied knowing him when threatened with exposure. He fled into his own shame of betrayal.

They huddled in locked rooms, terrified at the prospect of soldiers' tramping outside in the streets, and of pounding on doors that might signal their own arrest and possible execution. They were, one and all, prisoners of their fears, self-confessed cowards.

Until the resurrection.

The opening chapters of the Book of Acts tell us about Jesus' disciples adjusting to their new normal. We want to survey that this morning. And we have to be careful about how we do that. Luke records what happened when the church was launched publically. He *describes* what took place. That is very different from *prescribing* what should take place.

For instance, in Acts 2 the Holy Spirit fell on the disciples like tongues of fire. That unique event was, we believe, the birth of the church. Jesus immersed his followers in the Holy Spirit according to his promise. The disciples spilled into the streets with a powerful message delivered in languages they had never learned.

That event was not, however, a pattern for the church to seek or repeat throughout its history. In fact, it never happened again. What Luke wrote was descriptive—not prescriptive. Do you understand the difference?

So what we're looking for is more big picture. *Not so much what they did, but how they were.* As we watch the church birthed, the gospel proclaimed for the first time, thousands of new believers becoming followers of Jesus, and the first stirrings of life together in the church, what was different for them that is still different for us? How did they live into the new normal?

It's helpful for us to note that it took time for them to adjust. They still had much to absorb. Luke tells us that: "After his suffering, [Jesus] showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: 'Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit'" (Acts 1:3-5).

Jesus spent forty days helping them understand what had happened. All their meetings with him were in seclusion. After his resurrection, Jesus never showed himself to anyone but his own followers. Then, when he ascended back into heaven, he made them wait another ten days before going public with the message. Their personal enthusiasm would not be enough. They needed the energy of God's Spirit living in them to advance Christ's Gospel and Kingdom in this world.

The disciples stayed together and prayed together. You can almost sense Jesus hovering over his men, urging them, "Wait...wait. Not yet."—until the Day of Pentecost. The Spirit falls on them. A miracle of speech causes onlookers to ask, "What does this mean?" Peter, who had quailed and failed before a little girl at Christ's trial, stood up, explained from the Prophets what was happening, and preached Christ with power and conviction.

Three thousand people responded to the good news that day and were baptized. Luke tells us: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:42-47).

What they did is impressive, but what is really striking is their infectious boldness. They had a holy confidence energized in part by what they had witnessed and become convinced of. But it was also a confidence empowered by God's Holy Spirit resident within them. They knew that if God raised Jesus from the dead, anything was possible. They absolutely expected God to act. And they were absolutely courageous in what they did.

In Jesus' name they healed a man crippled from birth. That drew a crowd so Peter took the opportunity to preach about Jesus once again. The authorities threw them into jail. When challenged before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish highest ruling body, Peter said: "If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, *whom you crucified* but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. He is 'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone.' Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

The men in the Sanhedrin, including the high priest and his family, couldn't help being impressed by their courage. Peter and John should have been awed by the trappings of power. It was obvious that they had not been to the rabbinic schools. They were just ordinary Israelites, middle class tradesmen. The Sanhedrin "...took note that these men had been with Jesus." Impressive credentials indeed.

Israel's highest court ordered them not to talk about Jesus anymore. Peter and John said, "You've got to be kidding. We can't not talk about Jesus."

When they were released, Peter and John returned to the disciples, told what them happened, and prayed. And how they prayed. They prayed as if they really expected Jesus to do something. They didn't ask him to change their circumstances. They asked him to change them: "Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness."

Jesus did, and they did. And even more people got saved.

As the infant church grew, the authorities' alarm grew with it. This time they arrested all the apostles and brought them before the Sanhedrin. And this time the authorities upped the ante.

They had them beaten and again commanded them not to talk speak in the name of Jesus.

“The apostles left the Sanhedrin, *rejoicing* because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.”

Then Stephen was arrested and, once again, brought before the Sanhedrin. Empowered by God’s Spirit, Stephen gave a vigorous defense. The court found itself on trial and reacted in a rage, stoning him to death.

In the aftermath, they launched a furious persecution against the church, scattering Christians everywhere. It didn’t matter. Luke notes wryly: “Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.”

When Jesus was still with them he spoke of his determination to build his church. He added: “...the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Mt. 16:18). When Jesus spoke of Hades, he was describing the place where the spirits of the dead go after they die. He wasn’t talking about hell as the place of torment.

The “gates of Hades” was a metaphor for death itself. Jesus was saying that not even death would overpower the church Jesus would build. It didn’t. It couldn’t. Jesus had already conquered death. For his followers, not even death could stop them.

You see, that’s how it was in the new normal. Jesus’ resurrection redefined everything.

Much of what happened in those early days was not sustainable. People had homes to return to, jobs to resume and families to care for. Even the cluster of miracles that validated the emergent claims of the Gospel would not continue. The writer of Hebrews tells us that “God... testified to [the Gospel message] by signs, wonders, and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will” (Heb. 2:4).

Within a generation the church would be firmly established, and both the need for miracles and their frequency would fade.

But the boldness, the contagious joy, the fresh confidence of prayer, the expectation that anything is possible—these all marked life in the new normal, forever re-defined by the resurrection of Jesus.

We have lived with the resurrection for 2,000 years. It is part of our orthodoxy, our heritage of faith. We are heirs to the blessing Jesus pronounced on those of us with sight-impaired faith—those who have not seen yet believe. We are comfortable with its contours and adapted to its message.

Perhaps because of that, we are most in need of recovering the wonder of the new normal. Especially those of us who grew up never doubting. We had the privilege of coming to faith early. We are second, third, or fourth generation Christians, Christ-followers who have always accepted the Bible as true, who were schooled in it from birth. We are witnesses, not to the resurrection itself, but to its power in our own lives.

If you are at all like me, however, we identify more with the disciples before the resurrection, fearfully hiding out in our secure rooms, afraid to venture much in the wider world outside the safety of our church family. Our belief in the resurrection, while orthodox, has not entirely had the same transforming impact on us that it had on them.

But it’s really true. It defines our new normal. We are indwelt with the same Spirit, witnesses to the same transforming reality, privileged with the same access of prayer. We have received the same Spirit who empowers the same boldness, a boldness not dependant on how much or how little we know, the shape of our personality, or our facility with language.

That doesn’t mean we all rush out and get weird on everyone. This isn’t First Century Jerusalem and we aren’t apostles. We can’t necessarily do what they did, be we can be how they were: Spirit-empowered Christ-followers with a bold confidence about our faith.

Not arrogant. God deliver us from the overbearing presumption that sometimes passes for boldness! Boldness is a winsome confidence bathed in humility and expressed in love. It is both wise and safe, powerful and gentle.

But above all, it's for real. It speaks truth with clarity and without apology.

I have a friend who asks a challenging, disturbing question: "If you really believe what you say you believe, then what needs to be different?"

What indeed? What does it mean for you and me, when we walk out of this place, to live into the new normal introduced by the resurrection of Jesus?

May our confidence in Jesus' resurrection form in us an audacious boldness about following Jesus. And may God's good Spirit empower us with clarity and kindness when opportunities arise to talk about Jesus: what we have experienced and what we believe.