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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
4/15/2012, Easter 2B
Acts 4:32-35, John 20:19-31

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

²⁹Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have *not seen* and yet believe.” (John 20:29, RSV)

The church on earth is getting on in years now, by the time it reaches you and me. But it is our high privilege to be part of the same church as the early church. We are one big communion of saints. So, we are in unity with those early believers. We have not had the blessing of seeing the resurrected Jesus with our own eyes, yet our Lord has sent a blessing to us: Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe. That’s us. You and I have the right to take this blessing to heart and to apply it to ourselves. Late-born though we are, still our risen Lord Jesus blesses us. Thomas of old was able to see the risen Jesus plain as day right there before his eyes. He could see the wounds in the blessed body of our Lord. He was invited to touch them. You and I have not yet seen such a sight. We will, and, for any one of us, perhaps err long we will see Jesus face-to-face, sooner than we expect. Still, for now, we are blessed precisely because we have not seen Jesus, yet we believe in him.

THE EARLY CHURCH

When the holy women visited the tomb of Jesus, they did not find a cold, dead body as they had expected, but rather a message that has warmed many a heart since then: the good news of our Lord’s resurrection. Thus was set loose on earth the blessed rumor that has changed, encouraged, and improved many lives ever since then.

Along with that Gospel rumor was also set loose on earth the early church. That is what I want to talk about this morning. Let’s consider the beginning days of the church and the early believers in Jesus. In particular, let me tell you about our brothers-in-the Lord, Peter and John. I am proud of them, and glad to be part of the vast Communion of Saints with them. With the eyes of faith, I imagine them to be sitting with us in a pew here at Immanuel. I am quite sure they are here, because where Christ is, there are his people, and he has promised to be with us here in Church. So, I hope I tell their story right. I hope what I say about them rings true in their ears. I figure that not only will I see Jesus face-

to-face one day, but I am also going to be able to see them, and I hope I do not need to be scolded by them for getting things wrong or missing the point.

This morning's First Lesson, which is from Acts 4, is set in the context of a great wonder performed by Peter and John. They were able to say to a beggar what I would love to be able to say. They looked upon the poor man, lame from birth. He expected to receive money from them. Instead, Peter and John were able to give him something better than money. The great lines go this way:

⁴And Peter, fastening his eyes upon him with John, said, Look on us.
⁵And he gave heed unto them, expecting to receive something of them. ⁶Then Peter said, Silver and gold have I none; but such as I have give I thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk.
(Acts 3:4-6, KJV)

Strength, then, came into the man, and he sprang forward. The victorious verse goes thus:

And he leaping up stood, and walked, and entered with them into the temple, walking, and leaping, and praising God. (Acts 3:8, KJV)

Beggars knocking on the door here at Immanuel are a daily part of life for Parish Secretary Karen Rombey and me. Sometimes it feels that I cannot think two thoughts in a row because of the door bell ringing. And Karen and I do what we can. We are not trained Social Workers. We do not always know whether we are helping or hurting by the alms we give, but we do what we can. Still, in the back of my mind, I wish I could give to the beggar exactly what the beggar needs -- not silver or gold, but a full human life given in the name of Jesus.

So, our brothers Peter and John did this thing. Naturally, it created quite a stir. People gathered round, "filled with wonder and amazement at that which had happened" unto the lame man (Acts 3:10 KJV). Peter, then, preached a fine sermon to the crowds, with the result that he and John were arrested and put in the hold overnight. The next day, they were brought before the authorities, and Peter, bless him -- that man who had wilted before the questions of a maid -- now gives bold testimony to the risen Jesus. The authorities are rather befuddled what to do. They cannot deny that the lame man has been healed. They are impressed by the boldness of Peter and somewhat intimidated by the enthusiastic crowds, so they simply release Peter and John, warning them not to go on teaching about Jesus.

Peter and John then go to the company of believers and report all that has happened to them. They are mindful of the threats against them, and so they pray for boldness to continue their witness to Jesus. Their prayer goes like this:

And now, Lord, behold their threatenings: and grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word, (Acts 4:29, KJV)

Notice that they do not pray for the destruction of their enemies. They do not pray even so much that they should get a cold or lose a night's sleep. They simply pray that, however fierce their opponents might be, the Lord would nonetheless grant them courage for their witness.

Now we come to the immediate context for this morning's reading. In answer to the prayer of the apostles, the Lord grants a shaking up of things, both physical and spiritual. The text reads thus:

³¹And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness.

In the wonderful words of Chrysostom,

“The place was shaken,” and that made them all the more unshaken.

And now we come to this morning's text:

³²And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common.

MUTUAL GOODWILL AND CHARITY

Our text speaks of the mutual goodwill and charity within that early community. No wonder, in a way. If you and I had only recently met our resurrected Lord Jesus, performed miracles in his name, and had the place shaken in answer to our prayers, I think that we too would be thrilled and inspired toward good deeds.

Now, I am not claiming that the church is the only good community on earth. Certainly not. I know a man who was born and raised in the church, who long ago deliberately dismissed Jesus and his ways as a bunch of nonsense, committed himself to a vague yoga/Buddhist spirituality, and has lived a good

life ever since. I believe that his friends who share his faith or even boast of having no faith are fine people and a credit to the land and so on.

No, it is not the charity or the lovingkindness of the early church that I want to lift up. Such charity can be found in other communities too. It is not the charity of which I brag, but the Shepherd of the charity. It is not the love I want to lift up, but rather the Man of love who inspired, guided, and saved our brothers Peter and John, and will inspire, guide, and save us too if we are willing.

This past Sunday, Easter Sunday, I asked us to imagine what kind of evidence we could trust when it comes to our faith in the resurrected Lord. I suggested that the evidence we seek is not so much a matter of mathematics or logic, but rather more personal. I invited us to listen to our own hearts. When we hear the Easter acclamation, "Christ is risen!" do we not find ourselves saying "Amen. I simply believe. I stand at the grave, for example, and have a hope for my loved ones that goes beyond science or mathematics or any ordinary reckoning of things." Furthermore, I suggested that there is a kind of honor, even rationality, in taking our place at the side of tens of millions of good folks who have also believe in Jesus and lived for him.

Now, on this second Sunday of Easter, I want to shift the focus a little. This time, I do not ask, "What kind of evidence is important *to us* for our faith," but rather, "What kind of evidence is going to count in the eyes *of the world?*" I mean people looking on at the church: what is going to catch their eye? What is going to make it *plausible to them* that we are a bunch of folk who actually believe in Jesus and try to live for him?

I think the answer to that brings us back to this morning's text about the mutual goodwill and charity within the early church. Onlookers to that community should be charmed by it. They should say what was so often said in the early days of the church, "My! See how they love one another." That is, there should be a kind of goodness about the church community that best can be accounted for by the notion that these people actually believe in Jesus and try to live for him." Our Lord Jesus loved others to the very end. Ought not we who bear his name be like him, at least in some true measure?

And I think that many churches are like that. Let me give you some quick examples. My wife Carol remains indebted to our first church, little St. John Sadlers down in central Pennsylvania, because when Carol's mother was dying, and we did not have two nickels to rub together, that congregation took up a love offering and gave to Carol so that she could fly home to be with her mother. Likewise, in our congregation, we have an Almoner's Fund for the poor and I have a Discretionary Fund precisely because our congregation wants us to be able to take care of one another and of others in need. And pause for a moment simply to ponder our Coffee Hour or our pot-luck suppers. Churches all over the land have things like this, and everywhere they are, they are

wonderful! We make up a rather motley crew in our Coffee Hours and Potluck Suppers. They are not like ordinary dinner parties, which tend to be rather homogeneous. No, fellowship in the church includes the rich and the poor, the powerful and the weak, the well-educated and the unschooled, people of various tongues and colors: we mingle together and hardly even notice the ordinary distinctions among us.

Again, think of the earnest prayers in our congregation for our sister-in-the-Lord Georgia Lind, who fell into the well. She is making steady progress toward full consciousness. She is blinking and trying to talk. Carol and I mean to visit her later this evening at the rehab center in New Jersey. It has been moving to me the way the people of our congregation sympathize and pray for Georgia as if we were praying for a member of our family, or even for ourselves.

Let such mutual goodwill and charity continue! It helped the early church to grow. When the early church was but a speck of sand in otherwise rich spiritual world, the church grew because the world could detect signs of holiness in that early church – holiness that reflects the One we adore, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.