

Acts 4:32-35, 5.1-11

Psalm 118: 1-4, 13-15, 22-24* [Merrill Version] R: "Your steadfast love conquers fear."

1 John 5:1-6

John 20:19-31

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From Fear and Loss to Peace, to Joy

By Jane Via

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Today's reading from Acts begins with a beautiful, idyllic picture of the earliest church in Jerusalem, a community in which everyone agreed on everything. There was no private property; everyone shared everything with everyone; no one was in need because the apostles distributed from the common property according to individual need. At least it was beautiful and idyllic for those who were poor. Perhaps not so idyllic for those who were rich. They had much more to lose, as the story of Ananias and Sapphira tells us.

The writer of Acts moves immediately from one passage to the next, from description of a perfect community to description of a real life community, one in which members hedge their bets. Ananias and Sapphira were part of the community and willing to give up much of their property, but not all of it...just in case. According to this story, breaching the rule of common property then lying about it, were equivalent to lying to God and the Spirit, and resulted in the death penalty for man and woman alike! The executioner? The apostles who rendered judgment? The Spirit of God? Disappointing if not terrible options! No hint that Ananias and Sapphira would experience resurrection! No wonder the writer says that these events inspired fear in the whole church!

Today, given our cultural bias about private property, we can't imagine belonging to a church which requires relinquishment of all of our property, everything we have, to our church community and its use. Historically, in our tradition, individuals made such commitments on entry into religious life; but certainly not married people, not families. And even if our cultural bias were toward sharing all property in common, who would want to be part of a community in which one "departure from the rule resulted in the death penalty??!"

Shocking as this story is, I suspect it's meant to convey the writer's point that, historically, the idyllic life of the earliest Christian community was short-lived. Although sharing all things in common became a monastic value, this value was not adopted by most of the church and most of its leaders. The reality of humanness, the humanity of believers, became evident early.

Today's other readings address resurrection and challenge us to make peace with the unexpected and seemingly impossible. In 1 John, the writer tells us that faith in the Jesus who was raised up, faith that Jesus is Messiah, overcomes fear. Faith leads us out of fear into love.

In the resurrection narrative from John 20, Jesus' first words to the disciples were "Peace be with you." When Jesus appeared, the doors were locked. After all, what happened to Jesus might happen to his followers. The disciples would have been fear-full. Jesus quieted their fear. "Peace be with you", he repeated, before he showed them his hands and side. Only then did they rejoice! On a separate occasion, Jesus wished peace to Thomas, not present for the first appearance, Thomas who wanted proof that the one who appeared to the disciples was, in fact, Jesus. Once in Jesus' presence, however, Thomas did believe. He didn't touch; but – like the other apostles – he saw Jesus. Jesus spoke to him.

So what happened on these occasions? Did Jesus literally appear to his disciples after his death? If so, why didn't they recognize him? In Luke and John, the disciples didn't recognize the risen Jesus until he identified himself. Not these disciples in the upper room. Not the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Not even Mary Magdalene. If Jesus didn't literally rise from the dead, have we built our faith on lies? Or is there another perspective?

Are these gospel passages metaphorical vehicles to convey the early disciples' experience that Jesus was not dead despite his death, that Jesus lived and was present among them? Does a literal resurrection even matter? *Something happened.* The disciples did feel Jesus' presence after his death. *Something happened.* The mostly uneducated group of working class disciples was transformed from people frozen in fear, grief and loss. *Something happened.* They were empowered. They became a community of powerful, articulate, courageous believers willing to die for their convictions. Whether Jesus was visibly and audibly present to the original disciples is irrelevant to their experience of his presence among them...and among us.

In the resurrection narratives, we eavesdrop on the original disciples' journey after Jesus' death from fear and loss to peace and joy, a journey made possible by their experience of Jesus' presence. A journey the church would make after them. A journey similar to our own. One we make over and over and over again at different times and stages in our lives, and yet simultaneously one lifelong journey: from fear and loss to peace and joy. Jesus is raised and we are raised, again and again, because we dare to hope and believe, open ourselves to possibility, that death isn't the end of life but another beginning, that death inaugurates the ultimate transcendence to which the Cosmic God calls us, the ultimate transformation of life into life. Alleluia!