



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Easter 4 (C)
May 12, 2019

[RCL] Acts 9:36-43; Psalm 23; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

Acts 9:36-43

One of the true joys of the Easter season is dwelling in the Book of Acts and seeing the immediate effects of the Resurrection upon the community of Jesus' followers. We hear of people, at least men, who are filled with the Holy Spirit, and how they evangelize, prophesy, and build a community centered around the Holy Spirit. In this community, poverty is confronted with the sharing of wealth, hunger with the sharing of food, and death with resurrection. Those who are marginalized, like widows and orphans, are tended to by disciples like Tabitha. As we continue to reflect upon the Resurrection and how it might transform us and our communities, these stories help us to see where our own communities can be led more fully by the Holy Spirit.

However, this passage also encourages us to be more critical of both the text of Acts and of our own society, particularly around gender roles. A close reading of Acts shows that men and women are treated differently from each other, which would be expected, given the culture in which it was produced. The men are filled with the Holy Spirit and consistently do the “public” work of ministry by preaching, healing, and teaching; these are not roles that we see being held by women in this text. While we may react to that with frustration, anger, or acceptance, this text could also be an opportunity for us to ask where in our communities gender roles are deeply entrenched and how we might be called to begin the hard work of building communities where gender roles are more equal. The message of Easter, particularly as exemplified in Acts, encourages us to look deeply at not only our individual lives but at our communities and how we might live more fully into a life filled with the Holy Spirit and to address—and dismantle—the cultural systems that hinder that journey.

- Who is marginalized in your community? How do you already serve them? Does that service feed you spiritually? Does that service build those who are served up and treat them with dignity?
- Are there defined gender roles in your community, whether explicitly or implicitly defined? How would you start to address them to bring equality?

Psalm 23

This is one of the most famous passages of scripture in both the Christian and Hebraic traditions, and many have dwelt in it and have been comforted by it over the centuries. As we dwell in it, we are

comforted by the pastoral images and the feeling and knowledge that God will be with us in our most desperate hours.

When we encounter a passage that we know very well, it can be easy to simply hear it as we have always heard it, especially with this passage because the imagery is so comforting. In order to hear this passage anew, one might focus on one particular image or think of a very difficult situation where you want to be assured that God is with you. Picture the scenery of this psalm—the pastures, the still waters, or the table spread before us—and meditate simply on how you have experienced God in that particular place in your own life. Another option would be to follow the text as a journey, specifically a journey accompanied by God through meditation. Read the passage aloud slowly and picture yourself walking through the images outlined in this text. As you journey through these scenes, take note of the landscape in detail and explore it. You can do this once or over a period of time as an exercise to simply experience God in the moment or deepen your relationship over time.

- What do you see, smell, and hear as you walk?
- What else is on the path, or just off the path, and what feelings do these evoke for you?
- Where or how do you experience God on this path/journey?
- Does this practice change how you hear this psalm or deepen your experience of it?

Revelation 7:9-17

This section of Revelation, which is also heard on the feast of All Saints and very often at funerals, provides, like Psalm 23, hope that despite the struggles and difficulties of our lives, God is faithful and will see us through those times. Salvation will come through Jesus, who is both the lamb and the shepherd, and through the diverse multitude of saints that we encounter in this vision.

This text draws from the riches of the Hebrew Bible with palms, God as shelter invoking the tabernacle, and references to the call home and the wiping away of tears from Isaiah. These images evoke the stories of the Israelites being delivered from Egypt and from Babylon and bring them into the context of the people oppressed by the Roman Empire. While it can be very difficult for our modern ears to hear the language of this text from that context and culture, we are reminded that the communities that heard this text were hearing a message of hope in the midst of their despair. The same God who ensured that the Israelites could leave their oppression in Egypt, return from cultural destruction and exile in Babylon, and survive the perilous journey through the wilderness, will ensure that we will be delivered from the wildernesses that we encounter. When we are baptized, washed in both water and the blood of the lamb, we are not only cleansed of our sins but welcomed into the fold of Jesus where, though we will experience turmoil and wilderness, we will do so with the assurance of salvation and deliverance. We will experience the shelter and love of God.

- Where have you experienced “wilderness”? How did you feel God’s presence in that time?
- What do you think of when you hear the words “deliverance” and “salvation”?

John 10:22-30

Who is Jesus of Nazareth? It is a question that is at the very heart of our faith as Christians. Is Jesus the Messiah? We can hear this passage and rest assured that we have heard the voice of Jesus and so we follow him and, therefore, experience eternal life and the safety that comes with it. Having heard his voice, we know ourselves to be his sheep. From that perspective, this passage can be one of comfort and solace.

However, we could also hear this with concern—how can I be sure that I am following Jesus' voice? In a world where things move so quickly and there are so many competing voices, how do we know that we are following Jesus? Jesus reminds his audience and us that they should know that he is the Messiah because of his works. His works are always about restoration, liberation, inclusion, healing, and justice; they are the works that create a just community. As we seek to live into the Resurrection and to follow the voice of the Good Shepherd Jesus, we will know that we are following his voice when we are also working towards restoration, liberation, inclusion, healing, and justice from which flow abundant life.

- What does abundant life mean to you?
- Have you ever been concerned or worried that you are not following Jesus' voice? Reflect upon that experience. At what point did you realize that you were or were not following Jesus? What was it that clarified it for you?

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