

Annotated Readings for Easter 2

April 7, 2024

A Word about Easter Numbering... We are used to counting Sundays as the “Sunday after,” as we do in Pentecost. That would mean that this Sunday should be Easter 1, not Easter 2. The Sundays in Easter, however, are not numbered as Sundays “after,” but as Sundays “in.” Easter is more than a single event; it is called “Eastertide,” and the entire fifty days is considered Easter. Thus, today is the second Sunday IN or OF Easter, not the first Sunday AFTER Easter.

Acts 4:32-35

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

Context. One thing about the Acts of the Apostles: Although Luke (the author) tells Theophilus that he is presenting “an orderly account” (Luke 1:3; compare to Acts 1:1), the books are books of theology, not history. That is to say, Luke is writing more about God’s activity than about human history. This was a widely accepted genre, but it’s good for us to keep in mind that for Luke, theology trumps history every time, especially when Luke’s “history” contradicts the historian Josephus or Paul’s own letters.

This general description of the life of the early Church takes place shortly after Pentecost, when the Apostles were just beginning to organize themselves for the work of spreading the Gospel. The idea of shared property and resources was quite radical at the time; ancient Rome (and Jerusalem was then part of the Roman Empire) placed a high value on personal wealth; it represented the favor of the gods.

Questions for Consideration/Discussion

- 1. How do you begin to balance the needs of the community with your own personal needs? In the Church? At your home?*
- 2. Monastic communities (monks, nuns, etc.) in both the Roman and Anglican traditions use the model of Acts 4 to pool their resources, which is where the traditional vow of poverty originated. Could such a vow – and practice – be adapted for use in the Church? In your home?*
- 3. What is your position on the “Theology of Wealth?” Is personal wealth a sign of God’s favor and blessing today?*

Psalm 133

Ecce, quam bonum!

- 1 Oh, how good and pleasant it is, *
when brethren live together in unity!
- 2 It is like fine oil upon the head *
that runs down upon the beard,
- 3 Upon the beard of Aaron, *
and runs down upon the collar of his robe.
- 4 It is like the dew of Hermon *
that falls upon the hills of Zion.
- 5 For there the LORD has ordained the blessing: *
life for evermore.

Context. *This little Psalm defies classification: it is neither purely praise, nor a Psalm of Ascent. It seems to be a brief meditation on the joys of community harmony, possibly written in response to some disagreement within the circle of the author. In any event, it goes quite well with the passage from Acts.*

Questions for Consideration/Discussion

1. *Verses 2 and 3 do not sound at all “good and pleasant.” What image do you think the Psalmist is trying to convey here?*
2. *Can you think of a time or event in your life where something that looked unpleasant on the surface was actually a transmitter of God’s grace?
(Example from Pete: I noticed Debi’s tire pressure light was on, so I checked the tires and found one was low. Wawa’s air pump was out of order, and I had no idea who else had air, so I called my local and trusty mechanic and asked if I could fill her tire there. He thought it might be a puncture; they found it (grace!) but couldn’t patch or plug it because of its location (not grace!). The other three tires were old, but not ancient, but really should be replaced if I replace one. (REALLY not grace!). So a 10-pound loss in pressure led to the purchase of 4 new tires, BUT... imagine if Debi had gotten a flat or worse, a blow-out on I-95? Definitely grace, but it kinda felt like oil dribbling down my chin and under my collar!)*
2. *If you were with us last week on Easter Day, you’ll recall that “life for evermore” was a foreign concept for Jews. The best they could hope for was to “sleep with their ancestors” in Shaol, the land of the dead, as opposed to Gehenna, the land of eternal torment for sins. What do you think the Psalmist was trying to say in verse 5?*

1 John 1:1-2:2

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life-- this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us-- we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

Context. Didn't we talk some about the Johannine [John's] Beloved Community last week? Its primary purpose was to fulfill the mandate (mandatum/maundy) from Jesus to love one another. We certainly see that here, but we also see something else that makes John stand apart. He was a major opponent of the Gnostic heresy, which is probably worth knowing something about. In a nutshell, Gnostics believed that anything of the flesh was bad and anything of the spirit was good. They also believed that each of us is born with a "divine spark" and that our task on earth is to tend that spark until it grows into a flame, which then provides us with "secret knowledge;" hence the name Gnostic: Greek for knowledge. (An agnostic is not someone who doesn't believe, it's someone who doesn't know.) The first paragraph of 1 John, then, is all about the physicality of the relationship between the disciples and Jesus. Second paragraph mocks the "Gnostic light," and the third paragraph echoes John 12, "When I am high and lifted up I will draw the whole world to Myself."

Questions for Consideration/Discussion

1. How do you feel about the dualism of body and spirit? Do they work together for you, or are they working against each other? If they sometimes seem to oppose one another, is bringing them together under one "head" something you'd like to do? How might you begin?

2. How does saying we have no sin make God a liar?

3. The atonement (at-one-ment) purported to restore a fallen and sinful creation to a holy God. Does the Atonement really apply to "the sins of the whole world?" Are they all forgiven?

John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

***Context.** This story takes place on the evening of the Resurrection, Easter Day. Notice how this is John's "Pentecost," where the Disciples (John dislikes the word "Apostle") received the Holy Spirit and authority to forgive sins. Notice also how Jesus' first word to His Disciples since they scattered like cockroaches at His arrest is "Shalom," the Hebrew word for peace. Shalom has to do with a right relationship between and among people; the Latin peace, Pax, has to do with peace from warfare. Notice how three times Jesus extends His shalom to the disciples; could that be in reference to the three times Peter denied knowing Jesus? Next, I won't say too much about Thomas, because I think everyone's views of Thomas are pretty much cast in stone by now. I will say that it's John's last attack against the Gnostics: Jesus doesn't rebuke Thomas; He invites Thomas to see and touch... things that would make the Gnostics cringe. And finally, John is miraculously forward-looking when he uses the words of Jesus to speak to us: Blessed are we who have not seen and yet have come to believe."*

Questions for Consideration/Discussion

1. Throughout John's Gospel, Jesus and other people like to say, "Come and see." It's in there a lot. How can today's Church say the same thing, "Come and see?"
2. The word "you" appears twice in the final paragraph. Who is the "you?" How does your answer affect the way you might read John's Gospel in the future?
3. Okay, let's do Thomas. Doubter or searcher? When you're finished with Thomas, this question: What does it take to bring yourself to belief? (Where "belief" is Greek πιστος [pistos]: trust, faith)