

“What Happened To Peter?”

- I. Introduction. What in the world has happened to Peter? And is the same thing happening to us? In our lectionary readings just one week ago Peter and the other apostles were hiding in fear for their lives. Their friend and leader had died a terrible death, and no doubt they were wondering if they would be next. Then the Resurrection. ~ Jesus rose from the dead and everything changed. The disciples' experience of the risen Jesus transformed them. Remember how after the Resurrection Jesus had an encounter with Peter on the shore of the Sea of Galilee? Three times Jesus had asked: “Simon, do you love me?” And three times Peter had answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” And each time Jesus called Peter to: “Feed my sheep.”

Peter was invited to affirm his love for Jesus the same number of times that he had denied him. Then, in spite of his past failures and his human limitations, Peter was given a very important mission. It is reassuring to me that, with Christ's help, we learn from our mistakes and move on beyond them.

And move on Peter did! We see that in today's reading from Acts through the apostles many signs and wonders were taking place. Consequently the religious authorities were very jealous and had Peter and the others thrown into jail. During the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and told them to go preach the Gospel at the Temple. Again the authorities took the apostles into custody, chastising them for continuing to tell the story of Jesus. The apostles' response? “We must obey God rather than any human authority.”

What had happened to Peter and the others? To put it simply, they had become empowered through the Holy Spirit and consequently had become more clearly focused on their mission and less preoccupied with their circumstances.

- II. The power in empowerment. Peter, for one, had left the tomb of his past failures and become more courageous, more articulate about Jesus Christ, and more obedient to the command of the Great Commission. Peter was empowered. But it wasn't Peter alone; the same thing happened to many others who had followed Christ, and in fact, it is still happening to many Christians today. Empowerment is not limited to

the leaders of the church. An empowered church is an empowered community. The second chapter of Acts gives us a specific picture of what an empowered church looks like. Immediately after Pentecost, Peter preached his first sermon. The listeners were “cut to the heart” and as a result 3,000 were converted. Acts 2.42-47 describes what happened next: They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

First, the Christian community experienced spiritual growth and spiritual power. Then their numbers grew in direct correlation with this increase in spiritual power.

- III. There are several important things we need to understand about this power! First, the very same power that was available to the first generation of Christians is available to us here and now. There is no magic about this power only the question of whether we are willing to ask for and to accept the full power that the Spirit will give us. Second, Acts documents the key ingredients to seeking and acquiring this power: Prayer, worship and teaching, fellowship, and generosity . . . prayer, worship and teaching, fellowship and generosity. Let’s focus for a few minutes on each of these.
 - A. **Prayer.** Before the Holy Spirit came to the New Testament church, those first Christians went to the Upper Room and prayed. The Book of Acts refers specifically to the early church praying 26 times. They prayed when they needed help, they prayed to thank God, and they prayed to praise God. They prayed for healing, and people were healed. They prayed for Peter and John to be released from prison, and even while they were praying, Peter and John rejoined them. Now lest you think that this only happened 2000 years ago, read the story of the founding of the Brooklyn Tabernacle and its growth from a poor storefront with a handful of people to a massive church ministering to the extensive needs in that part of New York City (Fresh Faith, Break Through Prayer). Or read the little book *The Church On Its Knees*, the story of Holy Trinity Brompton and its transformation from a church of almost no corporate prayer to one that prays together and experiences powerful answers, such as the growth of the Alpha Program, which that church began. There is power in praying together as a community.
 - B. **Worship and Teaching:** There is also power in worship and teaching. The church in Acts worshiped with enthusiasm. Acts says that they came together each day in the temple and one another’s homes and were engaged in the

Apostles' teachings. Their worship was filled with awe for who God was and how God had blessed them. Their worship was also filled with signs and wonders and new learning.

- C. And lastly, Fellowship and Generosity. The kind of fellowship I am referring to is called "koinonia." Koinonia is a Greek term that means deep fellowship characterized by the sincere loving closeness that can develop in a Christian community. Koinonia includes the kind of love and generous sharing that we read about in Acts.

It is a love that goes deeper than our own affection would allow us to experience. Koinonia love comes out of our ability to see Christ in one another. This happens when we are transformed by the resurrected Christ. We begin to be aware of what others need and to willingly share what we have, without being asked and without a need for something in return. Koinonia involves a new way of seeing each other as sacred beings who God has created.

The author Anne Lamott tells a story about koinonia and love in her book *Traveling Mercies* (1999). She started going to St. Andrews Presbyterian Church in San Francisco early in her pregnancy. She was at the end of her rope, and would later say that the people at St. Andrews tied a knot in her rope and helped her hang on. One Sunday at the end of the service she stood up and told the congregation that she was pregnant and people cheered. She was not married and she did not expect that reaction. The people of that church reached out their arms and adopted her. They brought clothes and blankets for the baby. They lugged in casseroles that she could freeze and use later. They kept telling her that this baby was going to be part of their church family. And they began to slip her money. A woman on Social Security slipped her tens and twenties. Ancient Mary Williams brought her baggies filled with dimes week after week. Anne brought her baby to that church when he was five days old. Church folk stood in line and called him "our baby" and "my baby." People in that little church kept her going. They cared, reached out, prayed, and loved her and saw her through some hard days. In that church Anne saw the face of God. Anne has written that the people of her church have changed her world forever.

These characteristics of the early church in Acts' prayer, worship and teaching, fellowship, and unconditional generosity have been lived out in the Christian church for 2000 years by millions of followers of Jesus Christ. Political parties and empires have come and gone, but the church and the Gospel it has proclaimed have lived on.

- IV. Conclusion: There is extraordinary spiritual power available to us as the Body of Christ when we are open to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. We open ourselves up

to God's Spirit through dynamic corporate prayer and worship. The Holy Spirit then empowers us to have deep, loving fellowship with our Christian brothers and sisters. In that love we see the face of Christ in one another. Our capacity for generosity, for caring for each other, increases dramatically. We want to be Christ to one another.

Between now and Pentecost on Sunday May 27, I ask you to enter with me into an intentional Easter season. First, I'd like to request that you pray for this parish each day, asking God's guidance for our lay and clergy leaders as we plan for the future. Second, I ask you to be here each Sunday morning during the Easter Season to join in corporate prayer, worship and teaching, and fellowship together. And third, I encourage you to invite at least one friend to come with you to share the worship and teaching, love, and fellowship here at the Church of the Ascension. I ask you to take these steps during the Easter Season as a part of our intentional process to know the resurrected Christ better and to share the resurrected Christ more fully with others. As we do so, we, like Peter and the early church, will find ourselves increasingly transformed into Christ's likeness. Others who watch us might well say, "What in the world is happening to the people of Ascension? At one point they seemed distracted or maybe worried. Now they seem filled with the joy of Christ's presence. What has happened to the people of Ascension?"

Thanks be to God. Alleluia. Amen.