

Hope, Fresno
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Fourth Sunday in Easter
April 13, 2008

Acts 2:42-47
1 Peter 2: 19-25

Psalms 23
John 10: 1-10

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.

(Acts 2:42-47)

What a church! Oh to be a member of THAT congregation!

Here is a congregation with a wonderful Christian Education program! Parents didn't drag their kids to church merely out of habit or as a kind of insurance program to keep them out of trouble as they grow older. Everyone was there because they were *devoted to the apostles' teaching. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.*

They wanted to learn together what it meant to be followers of Jesus in a society where so many of the people around them could care less.

Not only that – this congregation had a wonderful time together! They didn't just gather on Sunday for an hour or two – they met daily and shared good times and life's struggles with one another.

They actively cared for each other! They shared all that they had in common. They put their money and their resources into a common pot and the decision about how their possessions would be used was handed over to the whole congregation. Their whole life was lived within that Christian community.

They prayed. They grew in numbers. They were well-respected by the community around them. Everyday new members, converts, were flocking to become members of this Spirit-filled community! *And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.*

Our news has been filled the past few weeks with stories from Texas about a closed community and the evil it had perpetuated in the lives of so many. It was controlled by one male leader and other males; it was not respected and a shining example of God's presence in the greater community. It was built on a corrupted, non-Christian religion built upon relations in all of its teachings and practices.

reality of today's religious groups, including some Christian congregations, we might say to our self: *Oh, I wish I could be in that church!*

You are!

You and I – all of us at Hope Lutheran – no less than the Disciples who walked with Jesus, live in the light and hope of Easter.

Easter was not just something that once happened to Jesus – a dead human resurrected by God's power to be the eternal Lord of life.

That same resurrecting, transforming power of God continues to happen and breaks out over and over again in the world today.

Like many of us, those first followers of Jesus did not possess great wealth; they came from different parts of town; different social and economic groups; different cultures with various first languages. Some were affluent, some poor, some professionals, some the humblest of laborers.

Something wonderful happened to them...and it continues to happen today. They, like us, gathered around the table, sharing with one another; celebrating Christ's presence in their midst; looking out for one another; joining together to reach out with support and Christ's love to the strangers around us who suffer and are alone and in need.

We work at being the kind of church we read about in Acts. What a joy it is to see young and old, the frazzled, hard-working, going-in-all-directions parent next to the relaxed, no-need-to-rush retiree, all just enjoying the fellowship and unity we share in our Risen Lord.

We can multiply that diversity by the 10,000-plus Evangelical Lutheran Church in America congregations across America and Puerto Rico. Beyond that are the nearly 60 million Lutheran around the world.

Thanks be to God that we live in an era when Christians of various traditions are learning to care about each other and willing to work together in many ways. In cities and villages around the world Christians pray and serve side by side in the name of Jesus Christ.

This is the power of Easter!

Creating and maintaining the unit of Christians, whether in a single congregation, or in a national church or a community coalition of Christian groups is not easy. It is a never ending challenge and task.

Jesus disciples had that problem even when they were with him in person.

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James and John wanted Jesus to select them to sit at his right and left hand as chief assistants. Mark's Gospel tells us that *When the ten heard this, they were angry with James and*

John. (Mark 10:35-45)

Peter argued with Jesus because he had dared to predict his ultimate rejection and death. ...*Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him...*; Jesus then rebuked Peter: *Get behind me, Satan!*
(Mark 8:31-33)

Saint Paul and other church leaders disagreed on how newcomers to the Christian faith should be treated and received. The debate raged and finally they all agreed to gather in Jerusalem to discuss and resolve it because it was dividing the church. (Acts 15)

We all face that same challenge and task to be the church, to be the followers of Christ in the world today. Each of us must answer for our self:

How do I welcome the stranger....the new comer in our midst?

How do I reach out to a sister or brother in the faith as they go through personal crises – divorce, death, injury?

How do I react to the person with mental problems, erratic behavior, drug/alcohol addiction, obesity?

Would I welcome a person recently out of prison, perhaps for child molestation or domestic violence, as a part of my congregation?

We at Hope carry the baggage of the past – decisions about Sunday worship, Sunday schedule, styles of music, the disappointments and pain of the last year. Am I willing and ready to work to bring peace and comfort to those whose spiritual lives and faith have been affected?
Can I work at the kinds of compromise and changes that may need to take place?

Can I move forward with God's will rather than my own personal likes and dislikes? God's will is not based upon winning a vote....it is based upon responding to each other with empathy and Christian love. It is our ability to finally lay aside our purely personal agenda and to work for peace and unity within the whole community.

The path before us awaits us. Will it be said of Hope Lutheran Church: *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 allwith glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people?*

The power of Easter and the Risen Christ promises us that this can happen!