



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Easter 4 (A)
May 3, 2020

RCL: Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10

Acts 1:42-47

Have you ever imagined what it would have been like to be a member of the church in its foundational stages, as described here in the Book of Acts? The stories you would hear would not be ones that had been handed down across millennia, but they would be stories told by people who had actually been with Jesus, seen the miracles, heard his voice. The church wasn't an institution yet; it didn't have its liturgies or doctrine figured out. There were no dioceses or deaneries holding together groups of people. It was something much more basic: People were in awe of the risen Christ and the miracles worked in his name, and they felt drawn to gather together in celebration of this.

- Have you ever experienced this awe because of Christ and wanted to share this experience with other people?

Now before we allow our imaginations to run wistfully wild, imagining how much better it must have been in the early church, let's take a moment to imagine some of these gatherings. I mentioned that there were no liturgies or doctrines figured out. That may seem freeing, but it also means there was a lot to argue about! These were still opinionated human beings coming together at these gatherings. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translation used in the Episcopal lectionary says they "devoted themselves" to teaching and fellowship, but I actually like other translations better that say they "persevered in" teaching and fellowship, because I think it acknowledges that this was work. But the joy of the risen Lord was present among them and helped them persevere.

- How can the joy of Christ permeate and transform your life and your community?

Psalm 23

We encounter a familiar psalm in this morning's readings. I would wager that even if you never memorized scripture verses in Sunday school, many of you will have bits of this psalm rumbling around somewhere in your memory. We generally think of it as a comforting psalm – green pastures, still waters, dwelling in the Lord's house – and we imagine ourselves in the position of the speaker in the psalm. But have you ever noticed how much is demanded of us if we do so? Just as soon as we settle into our sunny patch of grass, we're hoisted up to walk along the water. We make our way onto pathways, which lead us through a terrifying valley, just to end up at a table with people we'd rather avoid. But we're not alone through any of it. The gentle shepherd is with

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us in the peaceful meadow and the dark valley, sitting next to us at the table, and eventually welcoming us into his home.

- Have you ever felt angry or frustrated when it seemed you were being forced out of a place of comfort into somewhere new and frightening?

1 Peter 2:19-25

This is a difficult passage of scripture, one that has been used to justify and glorify suffering. Yet this view is in direct conflict with the words of this morning's gospel reading: "I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10).

- How is it possible to reconcile encouragement to suffer with abundant life?

If you look at this passage in its context in 1 Peter, you'll see that the lectionary has actually removed the first verse of the passage, v. 18, which indicates that this passage is specifically addressed to servants and slaves. This is not a general appeal to all Christians that they should suffer, but a specific address to those who already find themselves in circumstances of extreme suffering. Thus, it is a reminder that God is with them in their suffering and a call to remain faithful despite their circumstances, not an instruction to seek out more suffering for themselves.

The passage reminds those who are suffering that Christ also suffered and died for their sins, reminds them that they have already been welcomed back into the fold under the care of the shepherd.

- Does awareness of Christ's suffering provide solace in our times of suffering? How does a call to alleviate the suffering of others fit with this perspective?

John 10:1-10

There is yet another shepherd in the gospel reading for today, one who enters by the gate and calls his sheep by name. The metaphor may seem clear in the first section of the text: Jesus is the shepherd who knows and tends to his sheep. But Jesus does not make that parallel in the passage before us. Jesus does identify himself as the Good Shepherd in verse 11, but our text stops at verse 10, leaving us with the identification: "I am the gate for the sheep." This requires us to suspend our automatic connection between Jesus and the shepherd to consider how Jesus might be the gate.

- How might you understand Jesus to be the gate in this passage?

We are not the first to ask this question, and numerous theories and approaches exist. One common interpretation is the idea of Jesus as the gate to salvation. For me, the most powerful meaning of Jesus as the gate is in connection with his will for all to have abundant life. Jesus as the gate stands between us and the thieves and bandits who would kill and destroy. But Jesus as the gate takes the full force of this threat, creating a safe pasture in which we might attain abundant life.

This Bible study, written by Charlotte LaForest, originally ran in 2014.