

“Open Grave, Open Hearts”

Acts 4:32-35

Second Sunday of Easter, April 12, 2015

This past Wednesday evening when I stepped out of doors into the darkness of the night, my eyes were immediately drawn to what appeared to be a very big, bright and brilliant star—that was up there—that was up there “oh so high,” as my grandma taught me to sing—“twinkling like a diamond in the sky!” This is when I wondered to myself, if instead of being a star, it was actually a planet that I might be looking at—which is often the case in an instance like this! Maybe it was the planet Jupiter or the planet Mars!

So what did I do next? I immediately pulled out my trusty I-Phone and clicked on my “Night Sky” application; only to learn, to my great surprise, that what I was actually looking at was the planet Mercury; that doesn’t usually appear to be nearly that big or bright in the evening sky; except that on this past Wednesday night, wouldn’t you know it, the planet Uranus was directly next to the planet Mercury!

As I looked into the sky at that brilliant combination of these two heavenly bodies, of Mercury and Uranus, I immediately thought of our first lesson from Acts 4 that I was planning to use as my sermon text today. For there is a brilliant combination that also presents itself to us here, brothers and sisters that could easily be overlooked by us entirely, if we are not careful. And here I am speaking about the brilliant combination between an open grave and open hearts!

Because the grave of our Lord Jesus Christ had been miraculously opened that first Easter morning, by the heavenly angel who descended from the sky and rolled away the stone and then sat upon it, Jesus’ first followers could actually then look inside of that tomb and see that the dead body of Jesus, that had just put there two days before, was no longer there! The body of Jesus was missing because he had risen from the dead and our Lord was given by his Heavenly Father new life into his lifeless body now; making of it a new and completely improved and glorified body; such as the Heavenly Father will also one day give to us once our graves have been opened by the power of God; and in the not too distant future, in the light of eternity! (Philippians 3:21)

It’s a lovely statement St. Luke, the author of Acts, writes down for us here: **“And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them” (Acts 4:33)!**

And what effect did the grace of God have upon this newly-formed Christian community of believers in the aftermath of that first Pentecost? Listen to what St. Luke also tells us: **“Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common” (Acts 4:32)!**

Sometimes a Christian congregation may be made up of a whole host of true believers, but this doesn’t necessarily mean that all the members of a particular Christian congregation are truly unified, so that we can also say, the members of that church are truly: **“Of one heart and soul!” (v. 32)**

Brothers and sisters, this newly-formed, Christian community of believers that was now created by the Holy Spirit of God in the city of Jerusalem, reflected very brightly the brilliant combination that always exists between a true apostolic witness to the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and the great gift of God’s love that he was also now pouring out into the hearts and souls of Jesus’ followers!

What these first Christians was trying to put into practice, properly understood, was really an early form of communism, and yet here I am certainly not talking about “Marxism,” or the kind of communism that was espoused by Nikoli Lenin, that became a form of government embraced by the USSR (The United Soviet Socialists Republic) from 1922 to 1991, until the collapse of the USSR. That kind of communism was godless, since it was Karl Marx who is attributed with the statement that “religion is the opium of the people!”

No, these first Christians in Jerusalem did not seek to live within one large religious compound the way some communes still operate in our own country and in other countries of the world today! Still no one had any private property. Everyone owned everything in common. No one received the profit from his own her own labor or possession. Any profit or earnings were turned over the apostles, as the leaders of this early Christian community, to be distributed equally among all.

It was all a nice idea, perhaps, but we only have to read a few more verses into the book of Acts to discover that this approach to life really wasn't “doable” at all!

This way of life may have sounded absolutely hunky dory, and completely noble, to those who first heard considered it, but there is just one major problem that these very first Christians, in their naiveté, were either not quite willing to admit, or take into account! Even though they, like all of us still today, were all saved and put into a right relationship with the God who created them and redeemed them, and all of us, through the perfect life, death and resurrection of his Son, our Lord and Jesus Christ, **we are never completely freed of our own sinful nature so long as we are living out our lives in this fallen world!**

Yes, it's true what St. Paul tells us in **2 Corinthians 5:17**, *“If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation! The old has passed away; behold, the new has come!”* But this does not mean we can ever reach a state of moral perfectionism already in this life, in this world, and certainly not on this side of the grave! **And isn't this why that second Scripture lesson that we read from I John 1:1–2:2 fits in so beautifully with our first lesson from Acts 4 today?**

In the verses that immediately follow our text from Acts 4 today in the Book of Acts—we can see just how overly optimistic, perhaps, these early Christians were—with the story of Ananias and Sapphira—in Acts 5. Here we meet a Christian couple who sold a piece of property and publicly declared to the church that they were giving to the church 100% of the proceeds of that sale, when, if the truth be known, they were actually they lying to God, lying to the church, and also lying to themselves and each other; for they **kept back ½ the proceeds for themselves!**

This in itself was not a problem! It's the fact that they said one thing and did another! Somehow Peter caught wind of what was happening and confronts Ananias face to face with the truth, asking him: *“Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God!”* *When Ananias heard these words,* St Luke tells us, *“he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard it! The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him! (Acts 5:1-6) Then three*

hours later the same thing happens to Ananias' widow named Sapphira, though she didn't know she was a widow still at the time!

Friends, sometimes, we forget that the church on this side of eternity is always made up of sinners, don't we? Think about all the glorious plans which so local congregations of Christians have made for themselves throughout these past 2000 years of the history of the Church, many of which have only ended up with the people who were involved in those Christians congregations experiencing a great deal of personal heartache and sorrow!

Nevertheless, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the message of Christ Crucified and now Risen from the dead, has opened more hearts of more people to the needs of other needy people all around them, than has any other message in the history of all the world!

Listen to what the end result was there in Jerusalem initially: ***"There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of land or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need!" (Luke 4:34)***

I am grateful say that we here at **Mount Olive Lutheran Church established some years ago already, something we call a "Love Fund,"** by the generous contributions of some of our members from time to time. And there are those times when an individual, or a married couple, or a family may be **finally strapped to a great degree,** and the pastor in consultation with the board of elders and the president of the congregation, may present a gift out of this LOVE FUND to that individual, that married couple or family; knowing that it will not solve all their problems, but it is still a very tangible way for us as a church to occasionally say to those in need, that we too: ***"are of one heart and soul"*** (Acts 4:32)!

In that second lesson from I John 1:1—2:2 we are reminded that there is something about our willingness to share our hope in Christ with other people all around us that can deeply enliven our true **sense of fellowship with God and with each other, more than anything else.** It's through sharing our faith with the unbelieving world that John says that a much expression of Christian JOY will come upon us!

But there are times when our joy in Christ will be compromised by sin that can still too often, at times, get the best of us. This is why St. John writes down for us here in the first chapter of his first letter those well-known words of our liturgy: ***"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us"*** (I John 1:8-10)!

I hope you are enjoying the beautiful, warmer weather that has been coming to us here from our good Lord in recent days! The other day when I was driving down the road watching a lady who was obviously working hard in one of her flower beds, I was reminded of another lady who went into her local arts and craft stores, you know ladies, one of those places like Michaels or Carolina Pottery, because she wanted to buy the best plastic flowers that money could buy! Since most of the flower beds were located close to the house and some distance from the road, they certainly appeared to be real,

honest-to-goodness, live flowers to people who were driving down her road! From a distance, no one could tell that they were fake and not real! But her next door neighbor lady grew mightily suspicious when she noticed that there were never any honeybees that ever came buzzing over this beautiful array of flowers. Apparently, **the bees learned a long time ago that though her flowers looked awfully pretty, they had no flavor or nourishment inside of them whatsoever.**

Isn't it possible that we Christians, sometimes, in our local churches can unfortunately bear somewhat of a strong resemblance to that lady's fake flowers in her garden that were anything but real?! Is possible that like Thomas in our Gospel lesson this morning, we may not really believe that the good news of the Risen Christ is true? Are we glad that St. John tells us, however, that there is a power inherent in the Word of God still today to awaken us out of spiritual death to fill us with the real thing—the real McCoy—the real life and love of our Lord Jesus Christ?

The Apostle John was being adamant with his readers when he said, *“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the Word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things that our joy may be complete”* (1 John 1:1-4)

One summer afternoon, the proud owner of a brand new Cadillac was walking back to his new car that he had parked in the parking lot of a large department store. As he drew closer to his car, he saw a young boy, probably about 10 years old staring through the windows of his car obviously trying to get a better look at the dashboard and the upholstery; at the interior of the car. When the owner was about 6 feet away from his car he called out to that young man, so he would not startle him, in a cheerful voice: **“Hey, there, young fellow, what you are up to?”**

This boy responded, **“Mister, I am very interested in cars and I have been trying really hard to memorize all the names of the various brands and models of cars!”**

Therefore, you can also imagine just how thrilled that boy became when the owner of that new Cadillac unlocked the driver's door and allowed him to have a much closer look inside. A few moments later the boy spoke up, **“Hey, mister, if you don't mind me asking, how much did you pay for this car?”**

The man replied, **“Nothing! My brother gave it to me as birthday present!”** The boy responded, **“I wish . . .”** but then, stopped short of his finishing his own sentence. The man chuckled, **“I know, you were going to say, ‘I sure wish I had a brother like that!’”**

“No,” the boy replied, **“I was going to say, ‘I wish that I could be a brother like that!’** You see, sir, I have a older brother who is confined to a wheel chair and there is a lot of things I'd like to be able to do for him that I am just not able to do.

“Open Grave, Open Hearts!” The good news of Jesus, his perfect life, his death and resurrection from the dead, has opened more hearts of more people to the genuine needs of other people all around them than has anything message that has ever been proclaimed in this fallen world!

We have heard other people say it, and I imagine most of us, at some point in our lives, have spoken the same words too: **“My heart really goes out to you!”**

Amen