

A Life of Worship and Service

Acts 2:42–47

Dear friends in Christ

Alleluia Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed!

The Easter season continues for a few more Sunday, still rejoicing in the resurrection of Jesus. But not only on Easter we rejoice, we rejoice every time we think of Jesus, and every time we confess the Creed, every time we think of heaven, and every time we think of our own lives in Christ, we rejoice in his resurrection, for his resurrection is ours too. One day at the end of the world our bodies will be resurrected, fully restored just as Jesus was. But the resurrection of Jesus is not only for then, it is for here too. As we are in Christ, we are already alive in him. Now if that is the case, what does it mean, what are the implications?

The theme of our Worship this morning reminds us that Jesus is the Door and the Shepherd of the sheep. His resurrection being for us now, means that Jesus is the Good Shepherd, who leads us to green pastures and still waters. And yes! He is the door, the gate by which we enter eternal life. As we follow Jesus, we know that He is always leading us toward righteousness—toward an eternity with him, in the New World.

One of the first portrayals of Jesus in the early Christian Church, is of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, surrounded by his sheep, taking care of them, as shepherds do. But how does he take care of us? How does he give you an abundant life?

In today's first Reading from Acts we see how he takes care of you and where he is to be found with his abundant life. What's happening in our text, takes place right after that first Pentecost, that day when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and founded the Christian Church. From that day on the life of the church is defined first by God's people gathering around Christ's bodily presence in the liturgy— in worship, where gifts are received, the gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation, and then, next, and quite naturally, by the embodiment of Christ and his gifts in the world, where you serve your neighbor, by loving them as you love yourself through your mercy, your

compassion, and your forgiveness. That's what's happening right in this chapter 2 of Acts.

The life the Good Shepherd gives to his church is Liturgical and Diaconal. Or as the words in Greek are Leitourgia and Diakonia. In other words, worship, and service to others.

Now, this life the Shepherd gives starts with the Gospel which gives life to the church by repentance. We see this happening right there in Jerusalem at that first Pentecost. The text tells us that in Jerusalem at that time there were lots of Jews from all over the world that came to celebrate the offering of the first fruits of the spring harvest. Peter preaches to them, and Luke reports what happens next: these Jews in Jerusalem "were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37).

What caused them to ask this question was preaching, the preaching about Jesus Christ, this is what Peter preached, saying: "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—²³ this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. ²⁴ God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it." ... "³⁶ Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified." (2:23–24, 36)

What Peter preached is the Gospel! He preached Jesus Christ crucified and risen! This is the very Gospel that Peter experienced as he lived with Christ, the very Gospel he witnessed as Jesus went the way of the cross to suffering and death and resurrection. And today, your faith too, is founded upon these facts—these historical events—these acts of salvation. Christ died for sin—for your sin—and that's a fact.

The entire fallenness of this world was laid on Jesus, and in the moment of death, in the moment he shed his blood for the atonement of our sin, all creation died with him in a death that was so brutal that it shook the earth, caused the sun to become dark, and caused the dead in Jerusalem to rise. And then, in the moment of that glorious resurrection, he raised all of creation with him and freed it from the eternal

bondage of its fallenness. Creation is now released because Christ, the new Adam, has come and liberated it.

That is what the Jews gathered at Jerusalem heard and understood, so they said to Peter, “What shall we do?” Peter answered: “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (2:38).

Repent and be baptized, equals, forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit. This, too, is the Gospel applied to you. Repent—turn from the darkness of sin to the light of Christ. Repentance means to turn your back on sin and greet Christ in faith as the one who forgives your sins. It means to come to Jesus with the simple faith of a child who in complete humility confesses the simple Christian faith that Jesus died for you. Baptism is where each of you first turned from darkness to light by the application of water with the Word of God. Pure grace. Grace that changed you from children of wrath to children of love. There the Holy Spirit came upon you, and you became members of the kingdom of which Christ is the King—there in those sacred waters, you were freed, liberated, from sin and death and the devil. Forgiveness is freedom, forgiveness is release from bondage. In Baptism you died in Christ and rose with him. You will never die again but live forever as Christ’s very own.

And all of that, all of that! You receive in the liturgical life of the Church.

That’s how the Good Shepherd takes care of you, as he did with those early Christians. The Good Shepherd took care of them in a very simple way—by gathering for worship around Christ’s bodily presence. We call this liturgy today; the early Christians called it leitourgia, which simply means God serving his people with Christ and his gifts. In worship, God gave the Church the means by which the church could center its life solely in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

If there is one attitude that characterized the life of the emerging Christian Church at worship, it was joy, for this was their new Jerusalem, this was the city of their God, this was the mountain of his holiness. It was here that they met God and God met them and they were radically changed by that encounter for their eternal good.

Hear once again what the text tells us: “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” (Acts

2:42) you are encouraged to remember this verse. For you too can devote yourself to the “apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

Luke defines worship in this way: the apostles’ teaching and fellowship in the breaking of the bread and prayers. Three simple things. Every Sunday, this congregation has all three of these things. In these things, Jesus is present here in his flesh, he is here to offer you the gifts of salvation—the greatest gifts that anyone can give and receive. He gives us himself and all that he has accomplished for us—life, salvation, forgiveness. Every Sunday, Jesus comes to us in his Word. And then after coming to us in his Word and preparing us for what comes next, he then sits down at table with us here as the host of the banquet that has no end. Here at this table, Jesus comes to us in his body and blood. Because Christ is present here, all who have died in Christ are also present with him. For wherever Christ is, there is heaven itself. Heaven is here, as we confess in our liturgy: “Therefore with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven.” Yes, from this moment on, by reason of your Baptism, you now participate in the feast of heaven, a feast that knows no end.

Then, watch what happens next, the church lives its life in diakionia, in service of others.

Yes, the Good Shepherd takes care of the life of the world through the Christ embodied in you, through your love, your forgiveness, your mercy, your sharing with the world the gifts given to you in liturgy. We call that diakonia, service—serving our neighbor with love, Christ’s love. Christ first serves us with his gifts in liturgy, and then we serve our neighbor as emissaries of his love in diakonia.

Hear again these words: “And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.” Acts 2:44–45 . Remember those verses, for here Luke describes the life of the Church after they receive the gifts in worship, they were serving one another, with their time, talents and treasures, they invested themselves in the service of their neighbor, without any discrimination and or prejudice.

By today’s social standards, they would probably be called socialist, or communists, and even a woke community. However, what they are doing, as they were pooling all their resources for the common good, was simply demonstrating what God

has done in them through Jesus Christ. That's all! They were Christians who had joined themselves to Christ bodily. Now through their bodies, in concrete, and in particular ways, they shared what Christ had given them with those in need. The Gospel gave them freedom to do this—to love as Christ had loved them by giving up his life for them as their Good Shepherd, to serve their neighbor as Christ had served them by giving his life as a ransom for many. This is the liturgy of life, the liturgy outside the liturgy, the liturgy where we serve others with Christ's gifts, embodied in us, as he served us in the apostles' teaching and in fellowship, the breaking of the bread and prayers.

We are gathered here at worship to do what no one else in the world can do: proclaim for the life of the world that Jesus Christ has come, that he has shed his blood for the world's sins, that he has risen from the dead for the world's salvation, and that he is constantly present among us, offering his body and blood for our life eternal. There is power in our proclamation to the world that it has been redeemed, re-created, and renewed by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Here in this place, we have the forgiveness of all our sins through the blood of Jesus Christ, for here in this place the kingdom of God is present among us.

We entered his kingdom in Baptism. Today our Lord welcomes us once again to the table of the kingdom. Come to the feast—the life of the Church—and then be what you have become in Christ: ambassadors of his mercy.

Amen.