



First United Church of Oak Park

Held in Common

Acts 4: 32-37

The Rev. John Edgerton

April 11, 2021

The book of Acts, more fully named the Acts of the Apostles, picks up where the gospel of Luke leaves off. The book of Acts tells the story of how the good news spread, and how the community of the faithful that we now call the church came to be. It tells the story of how just a handful of the faithful grew to become the church. And it all begins with the resurrection. The story of how the church came to be cannot be told or understood without the resurrection.

It all begins with Christ resurrected, the stone rolled away from the tomb, angelic proclamation to the women who were the first to tell of the good news, and the new reality that anything was possible for them. Since Christ is risen, life was victorious, the door was open, the whole world was open to them now. The whole world was changed to them now, changed not just for them but for everyone. As soon as they saw the stone rolled away from the tomb, as soon as they saw that open door from death to life, that open door presented to the faithful a journey and a choice. What shall we do now? And how shall we do it?

Those earliest believers — they could have done anything. They could have drawn their circles as close as they could to guard the word of Christ's resurrection like it was a secret treasure, with only the worthiest given the chance to know the secret truth. Or they could have marketed themselves to the well-heeled and influential, erected high gilded gates so that only those who had the money could access the deep secrets of the good news. With the door of the tomb flung wide open, with the whole world open to them — what would the believers do? What kind of community would they build?

In the passage we heard today, we see what they decide. They decide that they shall become a community, open to all. Not merely those who had been there from the beginning, but anyone. A community, open to all: the church. The community would be a place not merely for the well-to-do, but where everyone stood on equal footing with one another. And this is how they accomplished that equality even in the face of differences in wealth. The community would be

structured so anything that belonged to the community would belong to all who were a part of the community. When Barnabas sold a field and gave the proceeds as a gift, that became a resource that belonged to all in the community, equally. For those who were in need, provision was made for them out of what belonged to the whole. Anything that was needed, it was provided for out of what had been given by the faithful.

What they built was the church. The church is the community of the faithful, open to anyone, with all of what belongs to the church belonging to all who are a part of the church.

This is a remarkable thing. These were ordinary people: fishermen and government officials and physicians and the infirm and farmers and builders and shepherds and people from every walk of life. When they faced a brand new world, when they had to decide what to rely upon to navigate life in a new world, when they met to decide what would be reliable and trustworthy, the church decided they would rely upon one another. The faithful believed that by relying on one another, they would always have enough. Generosity. That is the ancient way where the faithful give of what they have to the church, and then having been given, it then belongs to the whole of the church equally. When facing a brand new world, needing to decide what was reliable, what was trustworthy, they decided to trust in one another.

A great many things have changed in the 20 centuries since the beginning of the church. But that decision, seen here in Acts Chapter 4, that decision that the church would function by relying on one another, this defines what the church is, right down to this day. Right down to First United Church of Oak Park, this story from the Acts of the Apostles defines how we function as the church.

It begins with Christ resurrected. It begins with the stone rolled away, it begins with the door to the tomb opened up, and that open door leads out into the whole world, a changed world changed not just for us, but for everyone. We are right there again. With over 3 million people a day being vaccinated in this country, I look out and I see a world where so much will be possible again, that has not been possible. The door to the tomb stands open, with life victorious and resurrection carrying the day. And that open door from death back into life, it presents to us — the faithful — it presents to us a journey, and a choice. What shall we do now? And how shall we do it?

There is so much that we will be able to do again: with music, with children's formation, with fellowship, with study, with mission, with activism, with tender

care for one another, with witness, with intimate fellowship, with changing structures in our village and our world. There is so much that will be open to us again. But how to do it? What can be relied upon when all else is altered? What can be trusted when the whole world has transformed? We know the answer to this, too, from the earliest days of the church. We rely upon each other; we trust in one another, we trust in the ancient way of being the church. Generosity. That is the ancient way where the faithful give of what they have to the church, and then having been given, it then belongs to the whole of the church equally.

When any one of us takes some of what we have and gives it to the church, that becomes a resource that belongs to all in the church, equally. Anything that the church has need of, it is provided for by what has been given by the faithful. The year that is to come is one that the church will remember and talk about for a generation. So much will be possible for us again: the joy of our fellowship will be deepened, our appreciation of congregational worship will be sweetened, our justice work made more urgent, our shaping of children and youth done with greater love for gathering the generations together. As remarkable as this lockdown year has been, I believe the year when we are able to open up again will be more memorable yet. And what we will need to live this out, what we need to walk through this newly opened door into the wide, wide world, what we need to do this will be provided for out of what is given by the faithful. All it will take is generosity. That's it. The generosity of the faithful makes anything possible. This is how it has always been, from the Acts of the Apostles right on down to First United Church of Oak Park.

Because it is still true, that when the world changes beneath our feet, whether it is by closing down or opening up again, when we are faced with the question: what is reliable, what is trustworthy, what can we depend upon when all else has changed? We rely upon one another, we trust one another, we depend on one another. I wouldn't have it any other way.