

After Easter Commandments...
Sermon on Matthew 28:16 to 20 & Acts 3: 1to 10

Prayer

Risen Christ
we are full of questions,
and you are full of life.
Break open in us,
in this time after Easter,
your love,
your tears,
and your joy.
Amen.*

Sisters and brothers,
you have just heard how the gospel of Matthew ends.
Luke and Mark end their gospels with the story of Jesus' ascension.
And the evangelist John leaves his gospel kind of open-ended: "But there are so many other things that Jesus did," that he, John, had not written down. Were they to be written down, "the world itself could not contain the books that would be written," John writes.

This is, it seems, the after-Easter-situation: Jesus had died, was buried, and is risen again.

And now?

The evangelist Luke didn't end his story with the resurrection of Jesus. He adds a second volume to his gospel. He writes the book of Acts.

Acts picks up the story where the gospel leaves off and tells what happened to Jesus' followers, and how more and more people came to follow him, not just in Palestine, but in other parts of the Mediterranean world. Acts is therefore the story of the beginnings of the Christian church.

Matthew has the commandment – "Go therefore and make disciples and baptize" – and in Acts Luke tells the stories of how this commandment was carried out.

Luke tells the story mostly by speaking of what two particular followers of Jesus did, and what happened to them. The first of those is Peter, who had been one of Jesus' closest friends in Galilee.

The second is Paul, a strict Jew, who had never met Jesus during his lifetime. Luke tells how Paul became a follower of Jesus and helped the church to spread outside Palestine.

In writing about Peter and Paul Luke mentions many other people, too. Some with names. Some without.

There is the beggar at the temple, there is Lydia, there are Tabitha and Barnabas, Silas and Timothy, there are Prisca and Aquila, and Adronicus and Junia and many more...Names that ring a bell from the book of Acts, from Paul's letters... names of people who were all called to follow Jesus because the first Christians in Jerusalem had taken their calling seriously and spread the good news of Jesus' resurrection.

The after-Easter-story and with it the beginning of Christianity starts with a commandment and with people who pluck up their courage, raise their voices, travel their journeys, and give to the world what they have been given by God and can now pass on to others.

In Acts 3 we meet Peter and John. And they meet a beggar who'd been crippled from his birth on and in the end was healed.

Not by Jesus. No. Jesus was dead. But by Peter.

After the horrible times of fear after Jesus' death, Peter and John and the other friends of Jesus were experiencing that the Holy Spirit could transform their lives and empower them to do things they would have never thought they could do:

...they walk towards a gate of the temple in Jerusalem which is called "the beautiful gate". They pass a crippled man sitting there every single day. They see his outstretched hand with which he begs for alms day in day out.

But Peter and John have no coin for the beggar. To the beggar's great surprise the strong deep voice of Peter says: "Look at us!" ...open your eyes, see the world...

"I have no silver or gold..." – a sentence the man is surely used to... that he has heard a million times...

But Peter continues: "...what I have I give you."

A few words only, maybe carefully chosen, maybe spontaneously spoken, we don't know. But a few words that change a whole life...

"Look at us.

I have no silver or gold.

But what I have I give you...

In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth,

(and that is the crucial point!)

stand up and walk," Peter says.

Peter himself may have just begun to realize that what Jesus had done before, they now could do themselves: preaching, teaching, healing and renewing people's lives.

"Go therefore and make disciples and baptise... and remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

I believe seriously and profoundly that Peter could do what he did on that memorable day at the temple gate, because he remembered that Jesus was with him.

Could this be what marks a Christian? A follower of Jesus?

...to focus on Christ being with you, and then see what you have and in the name of Christ give it to others?

Gold and silver I don't have,

but what I have I give you:

my love, my faith, my care,

my invitation to a new life,

my hopes and dreams,

my memories and convictions...

all that I can give you – to make a difference in your life.

The highpoint in our story is that the person who follows Jesus does not give as everybody expects but discovers that beyond the general expectations, there is something so totally different to give, something much more valuable... that there is life to give – in the name of Jesus: new life, support, love & care.

While everybody else pushes past the crippled man, Peter stops in front of him, looks at him and challenges him. “Look at us!”

Then he takes him by the hand and lifts him up.

Just imagine Peter: fully concentrating on what he is doing – in Jesus’ name.

Giving this man both his hands, touching him, feeling him, getting so close that the man’s feet and ankles which he’d never used in his whole life, were made strong, so that he could stand.

Peter’s undivided attention sets in motion what is then described at almost breathless speed. Immediately, the Bible says, the man jumps up, stands and walks, enters the temple and praises God.

There is no hesitation in the man’s reaction... no time to wonder much, to worry or even mistrust. The man takes what Peter offers – and is healed.

Peter’s simple but thoroughly honest “Here I am for you” sets the lame man on his feet and heals every aspect of his pitiful life.

Let’s be honest, the trust and confidence and the spontaneity of the man, is just as much a miracle as is the healing. There is no second in which he has doubts or shows fear.

He jumps up – and praises God.

And I wonder how I would react?

Would I mistrust the healing? Would I dare to stand on my feet? Would I hide my new condition – instead wait a bit, to see if it is really true? Would I be ashamed? Try not to draw people’s attention towards me?

Would I instead behave as the crowd did in the story? Stand back at a distance and be filled with wonder and amazement?

Why did these people not jump and leap and dance and praise with the healed man? Celebrate his new beginning? The new chance in his life? Rejoice with him who’d been condemned to live such a limited life till then?

Why not let the healing of an individual become the shared joy within the community?

If we were in Peter’s shoes, what would it be that we would have to give? And is it worth considering that Peter could so freely give, because John was there at his side reassuring and supporting him?

Is it the aspect of community and friendship that needs to be considered when we look at this story? And also when we listen to the commandment from the passage of Matthew’s gospel?

The commandment and the assurance of Christ’s presence among them were given to a whole group, not to an individual. And discovering our calling and responding to God’s call may be something that one person alone can never fulfil, but we all together can help each other to find out what we are called to and what we are given that wants to be shared with the world.

There is a story about an acrobat who became tired of his life as an entertainer, always on the road, and joined a monastery. But there he found that the words of the monks' prayers were in his mouth not true prayer. And so he went about his business silently. And when he saw others who seemed to know how to pray, he was ashamed. "I am the only one who knows nothing," he thought to himself, and became sad and despairing. "What am I doing here?" he asked himself. "I don't know how to pray and cannot say a word. I am useless here and not worth the habit they have dressed me in."

One day, when he heard the bells summoning the brothers to prayer, he was filled with grief and fled into a lonely chapel. "If I cannot pray with the other monks," he said to himself, "I will at least do what I can." He stripped off his habit and stood there in his colourful acrobat's costume. And he began to dance with his heart and his soul, springing forwards and back, to the left and to the right. He walked on his hands; he turned somersaults in the air. He danced his wildest, most extravagant dances in praise of God.

But one of the other monks had followed him. Through the chapel window, the monk watched the acrobat dancing and leaping, and fetched the abbot. A few days later, the abbot called the acrobat to him. The acrobat was terribly afraid and thought that he was to be punished for missing divine service.

He fell on the ground before the abbot and said, "I know, father, that this is not the right place for me. And so I will go of my own free will and patiently endure the restlessness of life on the road." But the abbot knelt before him, kissed him and lifted him up. Then he asked the acrobat to intercede for himself and for all the other monks: "In your dancing you have praised God with your body and your soul. That is your prayer, for it comes from the depths of your heart. May God forgive all of us the easy words which cross our lips but are not echoed in our hearts." (Hubertus Halbfass, Der betende Gaukler, aus: Der Sprung in den Brunnen).

What the abbot says is simply that we follow our call most powerfully when we are able to serve God with our whole hearts, and offer ourselves in freedom and in truth. We need not continually be told what we have to offer, because God has made us, created us as our unique precious selves, made in God's image, and given us all that we need to praise and to serve in just the way that is right for us.

Peter and John knew what they could do and give best. How about us?

The freedom to either pray or preach or heal or dance can be difficult to grasp, because most of us are socialised to want "to get it right". Being set free to find God as God calls me can be terrifying. It can be much easier to follow rules and take comfort from obeying them because we assume that this is what God wants. The freedom to step beyond the rules and find out my own true way of responding to God's call can be uncomfortable and scary. But also liberating...

It can be an enormous relief to discover, as the acrobat did, that I do not have to seek God in the way that someone else has put before me, in the way that works for them. God invites us to approach him not by doing things in a particular way but by being open to seeing and accepting what we are given, what comes to us in love and in joy, in wonder and in openness...

For Christians there is not one specific thing – or 2 or 20 – that we need to perform best. With the story of the acrobat we are invited to find out what our

special talent is and then share it with the world joyfully to praise God. Find out, what you can do best – not to boast or to please, but to praise God.

And what I may not be able to do, somebody else may well be...

As Christians we are not meant to live our lives lonely and alone. We are given each other.

We are meant to live and work together, do what we can do in company with each other, and by doing so bring out the best in each other. Just as Peter and John did.

Back to the gospels and how they end.

In a way they all end kind of open-ended. And in this way they are supposed to motivate their readers to continue with their own lives what had begun with Jesus – before and after his death and resurrection.

So, go into the world and make disciples, preach, teach, heal, sing and dance in the name of God – do what you can do best, do it passionately and do it wholeheartedly. And if others do the same, it will all work out to the glory of God and the salvation of his people. Amen.

Poem

In the miracle of creation,
in a still small voice,
in a baby born,
God revealed a living presence:
eye-catching, awesome, wonderful.

In nailed hands outstretched,
in bread broken, shared,
in many fish caught,
Christ revealed a living presence:
peace-giving, nourishing, joyful.

In the world's distress,
in a friend's loving concern,
in another's voice,
the Spirit reveals a living presence:
challenging, supportive, leading the way.*

**from "Fire and Bread", Wild Goose Publications 2006,
Iona Community, Scotland*