



May 7, 2017, 4 Easter

St Paul's on-the-Hill

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“Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles” (Acts

2:43). By now, many of you have heard me say a number of times that it is always interesting to pay attention to anything you may have forgotten was in a biblical text, whether you're studying it privately, hearing it in church, or preparing to preach on it. Our lesson from Acts this morning is quite a familiar one; it is a summary description of life in the earliest days of the church in Jerusalem. The teaching of the disciples and table fellowship – an early manifestation of the eucharist – are at the center of it all. All things are held in common; possessions and goods are sold and proceeds distributed to all as need requires. We know it is very early still because this community still spends “much time together in the temple” (2:46b), indicating that its Jewish identity is still clear. And “day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved” (2:47); we have the sense of incredible dynamism and excitement as the new movement grows quickly.

But “awe came upon everyone” – somehow I had forgotten these words in this passage. The sense here – and this is very much what Luke wants to convey to us – is that the same awe that people had in the presence of Jesus' signs and wonders was continuing in the presence of the ministry of the apostles. The church was actively continuing what Jesus had been doing. The church now bore witness to the presence and power of its resurrected Lord, and continued his ministry.

The language of our gospel lesson from John corresponds beautifully to this idea. Unlike the “thieves and bandits” (John 10:8) who had gone before him, Jesus says, “I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture” (10:9). Jesus is the gate to a completely new state of affairs: a new life in a transformed world, in which truly awesome things happen. It was awe about this that “came upon everyone” in the early days in Jerusalem: awe at the manner of life that transpires for those who have allowed Jesus to be their gate to resurrected life.

I grew up in a large Methodist church on Long Island. It was during the heyday of suburban American mainline Protestantism, and our church had many programs for children and youth. I believe I was in the 9th grade when I was involved in starting something called the 7:44 Club. Perhaps you're guessing what this was. We met for doughnuts and discussion on Sunday mornings, yes, at 7:44. We three ninth grade boy founders thought this was thrillingly clever and adventurous. The idea was that we would have a forum to ask all of our questions about faith and theology and doctrine. Of course, we needed an adult who would be the answerer of our questions (it hadn't occurred to us that it might not be the easiest matter to find

someone willing and able to do this at 7:44 on Sunday mornings, especially if that person knew any of us!).

But someone did indeed step forward. Alan was the dad of another 9th grader, and also the scoutmaster of the Boy Scout troop that met in our church. I had known him as a kind, reserved, very disciplined and conservative man, and indeed this was the style he brought to our discussions at first. But over the course of the year, we all had the opportunity to watch him go through a personal spiritual transformation. He was in the insurance business, but before long he began to share with us his own sense of a call to ministry. We watched as he answered our questions with more and more depth and warmth as time went on; his reserve gave way to a wonderful engagement with us. He smilingly tolerated our professed allegiance with the radical left wing (it was 1969, after all!).

And then one Sunday morning about half way through the year, he answered the first question of the morning this way: "Well, you and I can spend the first thousand years of eternity discussing that." We were floored. It was clear that he was utterly sincere. Alan was now a man for whom the reality of a Risen Lord was palpable. Our buttoned down leader had been resurrected as a disciple of Jesus.

Over time, we experienced the depth of the change in Alan. Where once there had been a smiling tolerance, now he would plumb the depths of our questions. He truly cared about each of our journeys. He was never a know it all, but consistently conveyed that Christian faith, if we stayed with it, could provide not only answers to our burning questions, but a map for the way forward. I can fairly say that what we came to experience over the course of those Sunday mornings at 7:44 was awe: awe at what an encounter with the resurrected Lord could do.

By the next fall, he had begun seminary full-time. Our club eventually disbanded, but we continued to have a very active youth ministry (only Alan, we came to understand, was willing to eat those doughnuts with us!). And *five* of us from that band of twelve or so young people wound up going to seminary ourselves.

We had watched up close as Jesus became Alan's gate. It was through and with Jesus that he intended to go forward. We wanted that too, and came to taste it for ourselves. And this brings us right to the task of the church. Each of us is called to stay fresh in our own willingness to walk through the gates that Jesus continually provides for us, to follow along the path that he is showing us. If we all do this, signs and wonders will abound. It will, in the true sense of the word, be awesome.