

All Who Believed Were Together

John 10: 1-10

Acts 2: 42-47

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John 10: 1-10

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Acts 2: 42-47

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

You know how every now and then you get a song stuck in your head, and so the first few measures of a tune, or a few lyrics, just keep circling around and around like a loop tape? The secret I once read to get that to stop was to allow yourself to focus on the song all the way through until it finishes, even if you have to try that remedy a few times. And I can say that from experience, a recent experience actually; that does work, even though I did have to hunt around for all the lyrics to ‘Rhinestone Cowboy.’

These past few weeks I have had a phrase, a biblical phrase, that has kept popping into my mind and circling around. It’s a short phrase that has echoed in my mind because these are words that stand for something we cannot be doing in the ways we have always known, yet we continue to find ways to live out this faithful phrase, *‘all who believed were together.’* All who believed were together. Even as that swirls around in my mind and takes on some creative shape in my imagination, it is not like a song lyric that I want to end. It is an image, a fact, a truth, that continues despite our physical distancing. It matters that we continue to find ways that honor what the Church has done to gather together since the afternoon of the first Christian Pentecost.

The words “All who believed were together,” has been on my mind since we had our first online worship service on March 22. It was so easy to see how those words, that image, could be

pushed to the side as a physical act so that everyone could be safe, could do the right and smart thing of staying home. It takes only a matter of seconds to think of all the things we can no longer do because it is impossible to be physically together, and to look on those losses with a sense of grief. While it is fair and right to look back with sadness at all that has been important and suddenly ripped away, and to accept that what will become of it is a great unknown question and mystery, it is a mindset that holds us in a Good Friday mindset, and keeps us from knowing and living out what the Church has done since our earliest faith ancestors came together as a people of the resurrection. The words, 'All who believed were together,' has been an invitation to new ideas, new ways of worshipping together in spirit, and to finding different ways to connect with each other for the past few weeks and into the future.

I find it powerful and profound that these words come to us today as a part of the lectionary readings, at a time when we have shifted from a quick response to the sudden urgency of the pandemic, and now to a recognition that we are looking at a longer-than-first-imagined separation time. We have discovered, and been led, to *add ways* to worship, *not subtract*. We have expanded our ways to be together as the Body of Christ as we have reached beyond the walls of our sanctuary to welcome many new people who now join us online. We are together in spirit, sharing worship, music, prayers and faith with many who we cannot see, yet rejoice that God has brought us together at this time. We have expanded how we worship, we have not settled for a temporary substitute.

The Covid-19 virus has surely come as a thief and a bandit to steal, kill and destroy. As people of the resurrection, we know that Jesus came that we may have life, and have it abundantly, whether that abundance is now or eternal.

Luke's words that describe the earliest days of the Church are an extensive invitation from the past for us. Like our faith ancestors who were the believers gathered together, we too continue to worship God, and focus on the teaching of the apostles, and have the ability to go beyond that to learn more about faith and religions, to explore ways of outreach to those in need and the deep, inner reach of personal spiritual practices. We find ways of fellowship, from calls to notes to Zoom to walking by and waving from a distance. We find ways of acting with glad and generous hearts for the common good through our community donations, pledges and offerings. We have even been blessed with a way to celebrate Communion together in our own homes- an idea that would have seemed absurd and impossible just a few months ago. We continue in the footsteps of the early church as we follow their ability to hold together with deep empathy and compassion for one another and for the ways in which God calls and leads.

The early church was born in a time of great change and upheaval. There was no pattern for worship, as the early believers created from scratch, from trial and error, to find ways that told the story of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit in ways that lived out the lessons, the history and the call. They acted from a recognition that we are made in the image of God our Creator, and so too must be creative to be vital, and must be open to newness and change.

It is not now about the words in our head as much as it is about what is held in our heart. We gather for worship in different places yet hold each other together as one in the Body of Christ as we gather with glad and generous hearts to praise God and have the goodwill of all the people at the heart of our worship. Amen.