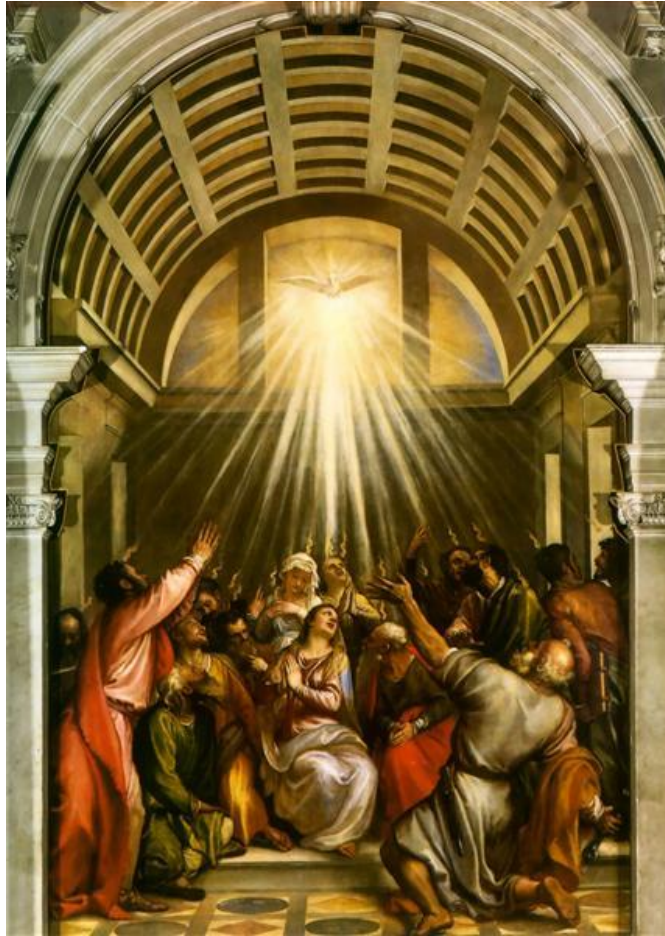


EASTER PEOPLE



Acts 2:1 "When the day of Pentecost had come, the disciples were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability."

Each year during this church season, I hear some of my fellow clergy talk about how we Christians, we are "Easter people," that we are like those first disciples who were shaped by the events of Jesus' Resurrection on Easter Sunday morning. But wait a minute, I sure hope that that is not the case. I am not an 'Easter person,' nor do I wish to be one. Nor do I wish you to be one. Let us stop and remember for a moment, from the Gospel readings we have been hearing all Easter season long, what those first Christians were like during the first Easter season, those 50 days after the Sunday of the Resurrection, and determine whether we wish to be like them at all.

For all during that period of time, what we call the season of Easter, Jesus' disciples remained confused, and frightened, and full of doubt and disbelief of the events of that first Sunday of the Resurrection. They were unsure of themselves and bewildered by the dramatic event to which they were the first witnesses. They continued to hide behind closed doors for fear of the Jewish authorities all during that time. And in fact, the Resurrection appearances themselves only tended to further confuse and confound the disciples. They simply did not understand what was happening around them. Therefore, sometimes after a Resurrection appearance, the disciples said nothing to anyone, even though commanded to do so by angels or by the Resurrected Jesus himself. For they were still afraid and confused; and if they did report the appearance to others, their report was generally not believed, it was considered an 'idle tale.'

Thomas was not alone in his doubts. Even when the disciples saw the Resurrected Jesus for themselves, they were, we are told, 'disbelieving in their hearts,' they thought he was only a ghost, or a figment of their imagination, or they didn't recognize him at first, or weren't willing to acknowledge that they recognized him to the others. They didn't understand what had really happened, and what this all meant. Do we want to be like that? Do we want to proclaim ourselves as 'Easter people,' if that's how the first disciples acted during those days.

Nor do I want to be an "Ascension person," Christians, who like us, understand that Jesus was gone from their presence somehow, but who didn't know what to make of it, didn't know what to do, and/or simply didn't do anything. The angels at the Ascension said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." And then what did those disciples do? They did what they had been doing all for the last forty days. They went back to the Upper Room, consoling one another, praying, all behind closed doors, for fear of the Jewish authorities.

No, I don't want to be an "Easter person" or an "Ascension person." No, I want to be a "Pentecost Christian." For it was, then, only after Pentecost, after the descent of the Holy Spirit like tongues of flame upon the disciples in that Upper Room that those first disciples began to do anything. It is only after the descent of

the Holy Spirit, that those first disciples became "empowered" or "inspired," and then at last had the courage to do something besides cowering behind closed doors. It was only then that they went out from that Upper Room where they were hiding for weeks and began to witness to what they had seen, for the first time, with boldness, in the synagogues, and in the marketplaces, to declare the truth of the Resurrection to others. It was only after Pentecost that St. Stephen preached to the crowd in Jerusalem, which cost him his life, or that St. Peter and St. John witnessed in the Temple courtyard and were arrested, or St. James of Jerusalem was arrested and martyred. It was only after Pentecost that St. Barnabas and St. Paul began their missionary journeys. So it was only after Pentecost that the disciples had courage enough to withstand the fear of prison and punishment and even martyrdom to testify to others, to bear witness to the things they had seen, to tell their stories. Only then did the disciples seem to understand the importance of the Resurrection for their own lives, and for ours. Only after Pentecost did they fearlessly go out and preach and witness to the reality and truth of the Resurrection, and only after Pentecost then were their lives indeed changed and transformed forever, as they became witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

In my opinion, those early and exciting stories from the Acts of the Apostles, which we traditionally read as the first lesson in Easter, should **not** be the read on the Sundays of the Easter Season,

but should instead be the first lessons for those Sundays of the Season after Pentecost, as a historical reminder of the true activity of the Church and as a prophetic promise of the true nature of the Kingdom of God. The kind of joy and excitement that we tend to associate with the Easter spirit is really more appropriate to the season and activities of the Church after Pentecost, not before. That Season after Pentecost which we so often consider as "ordinary time" in the Church calendar and which we color with the everyday green of grass, should instead be seen as the extraordinary season of excitement and wonder and joy that changed the lives of the disciples forever and caused the birth of the Christian Church. That Season after Pentecost should instead be colored with the red of the consuming flame and fire of the Holy Spirit, and of the blood of the Saints and martyrs.

As an early church historian, Acts is one of my favorite books of the New Testament. And the early sermons of the Apostles recorded there are indeed a unique witness to the Resurrection. Thus, they are the chosen readings for Easter, I assume, because they exemplify the power of the Resurrection in transforming those frightened and weak and confused disciples into inspired witnesses and leaders for the early Church. For the disciples' lives were indeed dramatically changed forever, and this is indeed one of the often-cited proofs of the reality of the Resurrection. But those changes and events recorded in the book of Acts did not occur during those forty days of

Easter when the Resurrected Jesus is reported to have been wandering around the hills of Galilee sporadically appearing to his disciples. No, they all occurred after Pentecost.

And finally, it must also be always remembered that WE live out our lives in that very same Season after Pentecost. So let us with boldness and faith then affirm the life-changing truth of the Resurrection that changed their lives, and ours, and can change the world. Alleluia. Christ is Risen. The Lord is Risen indeed. Alleluia.