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Easter Blessing

John 20:26

My recent search for Scots Irish ancestors in Ireland turned out to be a search for a distinctive community. My attempt to trace the individual ancestors listed in the family Bible never went very far because they were too poor and they moved too often and 18th century records are sparse. Real progress eventually came from building the list of people who were associated with them in Randolph County, Illinois in the 1830s. The names of the people with whom they intermarried, went to church, and near whom they owned land began to show up in the other places named in the family Bible. The same names can be found together in Kentucky in 1812 and in North Carolina in 1804. On my recent trip to Ireland I found those same names boarding a ship together at the port of Larne in 1772 and arriving together in Charlestown, South Carolina. And now I have the records of this same group of people receiving grants of land in the South Carolina piedmont a few months after arriving in America. And that is where the family Bible says they started out.

Call them an extended family, a support group, a clan, or a church. This grouping of people, which was formed in Northern Ireland as they pooled their resources to travel together, was still in place sixty years later when they settled in Illinois. They were not rooted in a place but in a community of people who took responsibility for one another. They were defined by those relationships.

In the 20th chapter of John's gospel we encounter a people who have also come to be defined by their relationships. It is a community of disciples who were formed by Jesus. The death of their leader creates for this community a terrible crisis. Without Jesus the survival of the community seems most unlikely. The disciple Thomas is a realist who understands this fact better than most. Thomas has faced the bitter truth about Jesus' death and he is ready to come to terms with this loss. It is time to move on, leaving behind his dreams about Jesus and his hopes for the community Jesus had created. When he hears reports about Jesus' resurrection he suspects that they are the product of the over active imaginations of his friends who won't face their grief and move on to the next stage of their lives. Someone has said that nothing is worse than getting cut by your broken dreams. Thomas knows that and he has bled enough. And so it is that he demands proof.

In the end Thomas receives something that is far better than proof. Jesus appears at a gathering of disciples when Thomas is present. Jesus then extends to Thomas the opportunity to place his hands in his wounds. This is the proof that Thomas had demanded. But Thomas doesn't touch the wounds. When he hears Jesus' words of blessing his world is changed. Jesus says, "Peace be with you (John 20:26)," and with these words he reconstitutes the disciples into a new kind of community. Thomas the realist is the one who immediately gets it. Thomas recognizes that everything has changed. The grace of God has come down from heaven and been enfleshed in Jesus Christ. That grace will define the community which is now stronger than anything Thomas had ever dreamed. The only response that Thomas can muster to this Easter blessing is a confession of faith, "My Lord, and my God (John 20:28)!"

In the fourth chapter of Acts we get a glimpse of the kind of community that was created by the Easter blessing. This is a community which no longer operates on fear. They are not hiding behind locked doors as the disciples were immediately following Jesus' death. The church in Jerusalem has become a family where the needs of every member are taken seriously. They have learned to respond to the social breakdown of their times. In ancient Israel it was the extended family which provided the safety net to those who experienced misfortune. But in the more cosmopolitan Greco-Roman world the family system had broken down. The early church was formed in this more fluid society where many people were separated from their former support systems. The Book of Acts tells us that the Jerusalem church created a support system for those in need by pooling their financial resources. They learned to use their money to celebrate the grace of God. The Easter blessing had changed everything for them.

In 2004, Laura Mendenhall, president of Columbia Theological Seminary, wrote of one of her last visits with a member of the faculty who was dying. Shirley Guthrie had been a beloved professor of theology for many years. She wrote:

We were talking about his approaching death, and I told him he seemed to be at peace. His eyes twinkled and with amazement in his voice he said, "Yes, and the peace is bigger than I imagined." He went on to say that he had quit worrying about all the things he had to do...ought to do. "It turns out," Guthrie said, "these things are not as important to God as I thought. It's all about forgiveness [and grace] (Kimberly L. Clayton, *Journal For Preachers*, Easter 2007, pages 5-6)."

That is the Easter blessing which changes everything for Thomas and for us. It is the foundation on which this community is established.