

“Awe Came Upon Everyone”
The Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 3, 2020
by Rev. Ruth Ragovin



Villagers Practicing Social Distancing while Rev. William Mompesson preaches during the Bubonic Plague in the Village of Eyam in 1666 (Eyam Museum)

Acts 2:42-47 ~ ⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day 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, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

There is a meme that's been circulating on social media these past few weeks: Illness to Wellness (pointing out the "I" in Illness and the "We" in Wellness). I think during this pandemic that even the most extreme introverts and the Enneagram type 5s are realizing how much we need other people. We understand that, even though we are all I's sheltered in our homes, WE are all in this together. The hashtag #alonetogether sums up what we are about. We are interconnected, for better for worse. We will swim or sink together to the extent that we love our neighbors as ourselves, doing things for the common good by not rushing back too quickly to in-person worship, staying safe at home, physically distancing ourselves when out, wearing masks, washing our hands until they feel raw. Yet even though we are asked to socially distance ourselves we can still, as our scripture says, do things "in common" that will help us move from illness to wellness.

Today we continue to find ourselves in the glorious season of Easter on the fourth Sunday of Easter, also known as Good Shepherd Sunday. On our journey from Easter toward Ascension and the day of Pentecost we have stopped along the way to meet a number of individuals as they encountered the risen Christ: Mary Magdalene, the other Mary, Thomas, Cleopas and his companion. Today's scripture, however, moves us from the "I" to the "We". From the individual to the communal. From an individual confession of faith to understanding that being an Easter person brings one into a Christian community in which our collective WE-ness does things differently than the world.

We've been gathering together in the virtual world of Zoom on Wednesdays at 6 PM and, after a time of checking in with each other, we've engaged in a spiritual practice known as 'lectio divina' where we read a scripture as though it is a letter from God to each of us individually as we ponder which word, phrase, or sentence had been given to us that we then can take out with us into the week. It's been a meaningful shared experience and, what's so fascinating to me, is that each person has been spoken to so uniquely and there is little overlap in what comes to us. So this week I sat with our lectionary passage from today and engaged in lectio divina to see what God had to say to me. I admit to being surprised that what seemed to shout out to me was the little three letter word AWE. Verse 42 says that *Awe came upon everyone ...*

Awe. People both within and from the outside who were observing this fledgling community of people who called themselves the followers of the "Way" were awed. So the question that I've been led to bring to this message today is what was it that led people to stand in awe of this community.

First of all, what is awe? While precise definitions are difficult, I think we all know what awe feels like. Sometimes we hear a piece of music, or look at something in nature like a sunset or the waves crashing into the shore or even a flower, or see a newborn baby, or observe an act of sacrifice or kindness that evokes a feeling of awe. When we say something is awesome we're saying it is beyond wonderful, incredible, or great. When I try and dissect what this feeling of awe is, I realize that when we feel awe we are intuiting that there is something of God in it. It is a grace-filled spiritual experience in which we sense the infinite in the finite. I think that when the writer of Acts says that *Awe came upon everyone* he is saying that they saw God's Spirit within and among them.

Our passage today gives us a snapshot in time of how people saw the early Christian community, what filled them with awe. The passage says that awe came upon them because of the signs and wonders that they saw the apostles doing. We know that the apostles had received the power to heal and do other things that pointed to God's power working within them. The awe probably also came from seeing the rapid growth of people becoming followers of the Way. Indeed, just before today's passage, we learn that after Peter's sermon, three thousand people became Christians. That's incredible, but I'm thinking that the growing awe that others felt when observing the Christian community didn't just have to do with seeing the apostles perform signs and wonders or seeing the sudden growth in the early church.

I think the awe also had to do with the way this group of Easter people began relating to one another and living in a way that grew organically out of their experience of what Jesus was calling them to be and do. And this scripture, which has served as a kind of blueprint for what the church is to be, gives us a whole lot of information about what made them such an awe-inspiring community. Verse 42 begins by providing the primary four characteristics of this early Christian community: **42They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.**

First, they devoted themselves to the **apostles teachings**. They based their belief system on what the apostles, who had traveled with Jesus, told them about him. Remember that for the early followers there was no New Testament, no Apostles Creed, no Nicene Creed, no Westminster Creed, only what they heard orally or the few letters reached them. Today we devote ourselves to the teachings contained in our Holy Scriptures, and the New Testament in particular.

Second, they devoted themselves to **fellowship**. Fellowship meant way more than just attending church on Sunday mornings. They went all out on this fellowship thing. Our scripture today tells us that they were together. They had all things in common, to the extent that they actually sold their possessions, putting everything into the common purse, and then made sure that all who were in need were taken care of. Wow! Acts 4:34-35 shows that they took this pretty seriously when it says: ***There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. ³⁵ They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.***

As a positive role model of this kind of communal fellowship they lift up Barnabas, who sold a field and gave all the proceeds to the apostles (4: 36-37). On the negative end of the spectrum, and as a warning, they share the story of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11), who sold a piece of property but instead of giving all the proceeds to the Apostles, held some back for themselves, and both died as a result.

Now I know that this kind of communal fellowship makes all of us who live in our individualistic, capitalist society quite nervous. We brace and become super reactive when we read these verses. Words like socialism and communism come to mind. Our minds wander over into the ongoing political discussions about big or small government, universal childcare and healthcare and college tuition, and what bailouts during this pandemic should be. We struggle with and have different opinions on these issues. And the fledgling Christian community struggled as well. This kind of communal living, which was similar to that of the Essenes, was only practiced in Jerusalem for a short period of time and, then later on, only in monastic and some intentional Christian communities. What remains to this very day, however, is the highly intentional relational quality of Christianity with its stress on fellowship, hospitality, inclusion, welcome, and especially the ongoing Christian commitment to be extraordinarily generous and to take care one another and especially those in need. Christians were known for their care of the sick, widows, or orphans. Later they were to be the first to establish hospitals, orphanages, and schools.

Third, they devoted themselves to **“the breaking of bread.”** This scripture has been interpreted to mean both the early Christian celebration of communion as well as enjoying shared meals together in their homes. Today I want you to note the words that ***they broke bread at home ...*** This “at home” part reminds me of all the many Christians all over the world whose church buildings are closed.

We can't be in our beautiful sanctuaries, surrounded by our brothers and sisters in Christ and take communion, but we can break the bread and share the cup #alonetogether in our homes. And let us do so, as our scripture says, *with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.*

Finally, they devoted themselves to **the prayers**. We know by the way this is phrased that they not only prayed individually but there were also some set prayers that would have been said. Perhaps something from the Psalms or an early version of the Lord's Prayer. And both our individual and collective prayers are important. As was the case during our Wednesday Night 'Virtual' Live Zoom meeting when we ended our gathering by first praying for those about whom we were concerned and then joined our voices together by reciting the Lord's Prayer. And although there were lag times between our voices, it was a beautiful experience indeed to be #alonetogether as our spirits and prayers connected with each other and God.

Those within and without the early Christian movement were filled with awe when they observed how these followers of the Way lived out their faith in practical ways. And God blessed their efforts. Indeed, our scripture ends by saying that *"day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved."*

Over time the Christian movement continued to grow rapidly as people continued to be filled with awe at what they saw. These early Christians exuded a special quality as they lived out Jesus' commandment, given to them in the Upper Room in Jerusalem on Maundy Thursday, the day before he was crucified: *"that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."* (Jn 13:34-35)

In the second century, as Christianity began to spread throughout the Roman Empire and people began to grow suspicious of who these people were, the great church leader Tertullian (c. 155–c. 240) wrote: *"It is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. See how they love one another ... they are ready even to die for one another ... (The Apology, ch. 39)."* See how they love one another! See how they love neighbor as oneself! See how they 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you!' Greater love has no one than this, that one should lay down one's life for one's friends.

Many believe that the reason for Christianity's explosive growth from being an obscure marginal movement to having about 6 million believers by CE 300 was how the early Christians responded compassionately to disease, suffering, and death, especially in times of pandemics. People begin to notice a distinctly Christian response of sacrificial care of the sick first during the second-century Antonine Plague (165-180 CE) that killed off a quarter to a third of the Roman Empire, including Marcus Aurelius, in what may have been an outbreak of smallpox.

Then, between the years 249 to 262 CE, Western Civilization experienced a devastating lethal pandemic, the Cyprian Plague, which may have been a disease related to Ebola.

Beginning in Ethiopia around Easter of 250 CE, it moved on to Rome, and then spread to Greece and beyond to Syria. At its peak it was said to have killed as many as 5,000 people a day in the city of Rome. There were massive food shortages, followed by famines, at a time when wars also were being waged. Towns were permanently shuttered as people fled. The military and Roman infrastructure were tremendously weakened. People literally thought the world was coming to an end.

Yet there was an explosion of Christian growth during this period as people stood in awe of how the Christians responded. Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria, reported that during this pandemic ***“the heathen... deserted those who began to be sick, and fled from their dearest friends. They shunned any participation or fellowship with death...”*** But this was not how Christians responded, who only represented less than 2 percent of the population of the Empire. Dionysius says of the Christian response: ***Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead.***

(Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 7.22.7–10)

The world had never witnessed anything like the communal love the Christians demonstrated as they reached out to help the afflicted during this pandemic. While they could not cure them, even their elemental nursing through the offer of basics such as water, food, and comfort helped to bring down the death rate significantly for those who were temporarily too weak to care for themselves.

It is believed that the Christian response to others during these two pandemics reduced the mortality rate by as much as two-thirds. It also led to Christianity's explosive and rapid growth.¹ This may have been because these early Christians reached out to everyone. Indeed, this pandemic was named the "Plague of Cyprian" after Cyprian the Bishop of Carthage (d. 258 CE), because he rallied Christians to reach out to others regardless of whether one was helping a fellow Christian or not. He told them that their Christian character should shine through during this time of hardship, writing: *How suitable, how necessary it is that this plague and pestilence, which seems horrible and deadly, searches out the justice of each and every one and examines the mind of the human race; whether the [healthy] care for the sick, whether relatives dutifully love kinsmen as they should . . . whether physicians do not desert the afflicted.*

The plagues "search" us out, said Cyprian. They show others what our values and our character are. Our present pandemic shows others the stuff that we are made of, as we also are called to reach out in Christian love and service, albeit in a different manner as we choose to save others by physically distancing ourselves so that we not only help prevent the spread of Covid-19 but also help our medical community as they take care of the sick. The plagues also "search" out our society as a whole as they put a magnifying glass over and cast a spotlight on whether our policies are just and merciful.

The Christian character of the remote Derbyshire village of Eyam in England was also searched out during the 17th-century bubonic plague, which was raging 140 miles away in the city of London. The plague arrived in Eyam in 1665 in a bale of cloth brought to an itinerant tailor. He opened it and set it out to dry in front of a hearth. The heat released the disease-ridden fleas contained in the cloth. As the plague began spreading through the community and 42 villagers had died, and people began thinking about fleeing to save their lives, their newly appointed young minister, William Mompesson, took the unpopular position that they needed quarantine themselves so that, even though they might die, they at least could save those outside their village.

On June 24, 1666, Mompesson got them to agree to seal off their village as an extraordinary act of sacrificial love. No one would be allowed either in or out. They marked off the boundary with a circle of stones. He arranged with some outside to leave food at their boundary line, with the villagers, as payment, leaving coins soaked in vinegar, which they believed would kill the "plague seeds," in grooves in special stones. They also physically distanced themselves from each other, agreeing to stand at least six feet apart. They buried their own dead.

On Sundays they gathered together, not in the church, but down in the glen standing apart from each other as Rev. Mompesson stood on a hill and brought hope-filled sermons (see photo on page one).

Over time two thirds of the villagers succumbed to the plague, which had a case-fatality rate of 30-60%. One woman, Elizabeth, lost her husband and six children in a matter of eight days, all of whom she had to bury with her own hands because of the physical distancing guidelines. Rev. Mompesson also lost his own wife, Catherine, who was only 27 years old. Yet, however painful, Mompesson knew that, in the end, even though in just over a year 260 of the village's inhabitants from at least 76 different families had died, they had saved thousands more, sparing the surrounding communities. The plague had searched them and found their Christian hearts.ⁱⁱ

This same bubonic plague also searched out the German village of Eilenburg where Martin Rinkart was the minister. There people died at the rate of fifty a day. In all, over 6,000 people died in his German village, including Martin's own wife. Yet, in keeping with the spirit of the Christians during the two early pandemics and the villagers in Eyam, in the midst of that catastrophic social and personal loss Rinkart penned one of the greatest hymns of Christian praise the world has ever seen.ⁱⁱⁱ

*Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices,
who wondrous things hath done, in whom his world rejoices;
who from our mother's arms hath blessed us on our way
with countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.*

*O may this bounteous God through all our life be near us,
with ever-joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us;
and keep us in his grace, and guide us when perplexed,
and free us from all ills in this world and the next.*

*All praise and thanks to God the Father now be given,
The Son, and Him Who reigns with Them in highest Heaven—
The one eternal God, Whom earth and Heav'n adore;
For thus it was, is now, and shall be evermore.*

Let us pray: God, we pray that when this pandemic searches all of us out, with all the suffering and losses that our world will endure, that we might still be able to say to you with confidence, “Now thank we all our God with heart and hands and voices.” In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

NOTES

ⁱ See Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World’s Largest Religion*.

ⁱⁱ There is a wonderful novel based on the experience of the villagers at Eyam during the plague, which I encourage you to read. Geraldine Brooke, *Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague* (NY: Penguin, 2001).

ⁱⁱⁱ David Regier, Hymn Reflection: Now Thank We All Our God in <https://medium.com/cbuworship/now-thank-we-all-our-god-8b0a79c17877>