First Followers: A Portrait of Barnabas

Eastertide is the seven weeks following Easter up to Pentecost on May 23rd. I will be bringing a series of messages from the lectionary readings in Acts called ***First Followers: Portraits***.

In these messages I want to look at six ordinary individuals and what they experienced in those days following that history changing Passover in the Land of Israel two thousand years ago. We will look at Barnabas today, the man born lame next week, the high priests on April 25, Cornelius, the first gentile believer on May 9 and those who were at the Ascension on May 16.

I want to look at how the First Followers were swept up in this The Empty Tomb Movement. I refer to the first Christians this way because it was a number of years before the followers of Jesus became known as Christians. But in the days immediately after the resurrection, they had no name really, but then after a short while became known simply as “The Way.”

Pastor Jimmy will be preaching on Pentecost on May 23 and also on Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch on May 2. We look forward to his contributions to the series!

We can see from Acts that the resurrection is the main focus of the Empty Tomb Movement because when the eleven chose to replacement of Judas Iscariot, the candidate … must become a witness with us to the resurrection (Acts 1:22).

And in the first sermon of the movement at Pentecost, Peter said: This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses (Acts 2:32).[[1]](#endnote-1) The reality of the resurrection was central to the First Followers.

If you have not read Acts you are in for a treat. I want to give you the challenge of just reading the book, beginning to end, maybe even a couple of times. It is a fascinating historical story about what happened *after* the resurrection.

The Book of Acts is the only document preserved in history of these earliest days of the church. Paul’s first letter wasn’t to be written for another fifteen years or so. In the 2-300s the *Apocrypha Acts of the Apostles* were created by Gnostic communities, but when you are in Acts you are on very sacred ground. Thank goodness Luke had the inspiration from God to set these events down![[2]](#endnote-2)

Now it’s not just that we learn so much about early Christian practice from the Book of Acts, but it is the Book of Acts that gives the gospels their meaning. If we had only the teachings of Jesus we would be immensely wealthy. If we had knowledge of miracles he performed we would be blessed and amazed and give thanks to God.

If you want to understand why the gospels are important, then the Book of Acts is the answer to that question. Otherwise the gospels are just a collection of great teachings and deeds of Jesus.

Because what happened *after* the crucifixion is where you will find the meaning of faith in Jesus, the meaning of life, lived out in the echoes of the resurrection zone, a conception of life completely altered by the historical fact of the resurrection.

We don’t turn to Acts each year because we expect to return to the power and glory of those days, that isn’t possible or desirable. But we need Acts in our hearts and heads because we are also called to bear witness to the resurrection to *our* *culture*, just as the First Followers were called to bear witness to the resurrection to their culture.

As for them, so for us, it is a challenge of immense difficulty and importance. Without the power of the Holy Spirit that the First Followers had, we will not be able to effectively communicate Christ to our culture.

We turn to Acts to remind ourselves of the power of the Holy Spirit in the community and to see once again how revolutionary the resurrection was and is – not in a political sense, but as a revolution in our encounter and experience with God. If you want to meet the Resurrected Jesus, come with us on this journey.

Also, by looking at these portraits of the First Followers I hope we can find inspiration for our lives in the experience and devotion of those who have gone before us, and also to revive our interest in the life of the Holy Spirit in our community and be inspired to walk in The Way with a renewed sense of spiritual power.

Context

First I will talk broadly about the history that Acts describes, and then we will move to our portrait for the day, Barnabas. So Acts reads like this:

* Ascension of Jesus
* Pentecost when the Spirit fall on the church, 3000 believers added in a single day and 15 different language groups hear praise for God in their own languages. Last year I called it the Christian Camelot because it was a time of golden harmony and spiritual blessing, a community basking the experience of the resurrected Jesus.
* Peter and John are arrested for disrupting Jerusalem with this new teaching
* Stephen is martyred and the church scattered from Jerusalem
* The gospel is carried to both Jews and Gentiles and eventually to Rome itself by many, but mostly by Paul. Luke is Paul’s champion.

Among Acts’ many memorable characters, Acts 4:36 tells us about Barnabas:

There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”).

Today we are going to look at a portrait of Barnabas. He was what we call a Diaspora Jew, that is, a Jew living outside of Palestine. He was Jewish but a Greek speaker living in the Gentile culture of the island of Cyprus. He was a man of the world who had come to Jerusalem for that Passover when Jesus was crucified, and was thus swept up in the events of that singular time.

One year ago, when we had been in the pandemic for 4 weeks, we talked about blind corners and how God seems to have a few in store for all of us in life. We talked about how blind corners are a chance to create something new, to learn something that couldn’t be learned on the main road of life. The corners are where all the excitement is.

This Passover in Jerusalem was Joseph the Levite’s blind corner, and he came around the bend to be Barnabas, the son of encouragement.

Now our passage today tells us that Barnabas …sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles’ feet (Acts 4:37).

Luke tells us that the First Followers practiced a communal sharing of all material goods.

Compare Acts 2:43, where immediately after Pentecost they lived together in common, sharing everything, selling their possession to give to the poor and worshipping daily together in the Temple. It was, indeed, what I called last year a Christian Camelot. Members of The Way had the good will of all the people (Acts 2:47).[[3]](#endnote-3)

The most important thing we know about Barnabas is that…

…for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were brought to the Lord. (Acts 11:24)

May I just tell you about the remarkable life he lived?

Outside of the Twelve Apostles he was a leading figure, just as prominent as Stephen, who we will encounter later in our story of Acts.

It as Barnabas who

* When the new convert Paul, the guy who had been persecuting the Christians and putting them to death in his role as a radical Pharisee, turned up in Jerusalem after his conversion to Christ on the road to Damascus, he so frightened the folks at Jerusalem First Church of the Way, that Barnabas had to bring him to the Apostles and vouch him. He told them how Paul had spoken boldly for Christ in Damascus and that he was the real deal.
* Later, when the First Church heard that First Followers from Cyprus were making converts among the Greeks in Antioch, they sent Barnabas up to check it out and he saw that the Greeks in Antioch were getting saved! He went back to First Church and said this is good; he was excellent with people. He had the gifts of a diplomat.
* Barnabas recruited Paul to come to Antioch and they worked side-by-side for a year. In fact, up until about Acts 14 it is “Barnabas and Paul.” Paul was the intern to Barnabas. After that Luke switches it to Paul and Barnabas; I guess Barnabas was just a good mentor that his intern eclipsed him in ministry. Perfect… that those we mentor surpass us in effectiveness. I’ve always been very happy that one of my best students, Rob Snow, succeeded me in the prof of NT at Ambrose.
* Maybe Barnabas was not the type to develop a new Christian theology as was Paul. God uses all of us according to our gifts.

From the Text

First: Barnabas was all in and he held nothing back.

He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles’ feet.

When he sold his property to donate it to the church he held nothing back for his own interest. He is remembered for the completeness of his commitment to the faith. Something that we all can aspire to!

In the next chapter of Acts, Ananias and Sapphira are a couple also sold a piece of land and gave the proceeds to the Apostles, but who withheld a portion of their property and then lied about it to Peter. And then his wife, not knowing what had happened, went into the disciples and repeated the deception (5:1-11).

So you see the contrast Barnabas, the whole-hearted man of faith who held nothing back in his devotion to the cause, and Ananias and Sapphira, who were attempting to game the system a bit.

Here is where I encourage us to go all in for Christ. Don’t linger on the perimeter. Don’t be Ananias and Sapphira. I want to be a Barnabas. I want to turn that blind corner and have my life explode with the meaning of the resurrection.

Second: in Barnabas’ selling of his property and bringing the whole of it to the Apostles, I also see here an example of the House of Listening theme. Do you remember how we contrasted Jesus’ declaration that the Temple should be a House of Listening with the worldly concerns of his fellow Jews for whom the Temple business had transformed it into a House of Things.

I see in Barnabas a good example of a man of listening.

Third: We learn through Barnabas what a powerful thing a life completely surrendered to The Way is.

I see in Barnabas an individual who about mid-life was drawn to a cause for which he was willing to lay down everything. He came to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, and was swept up in something he could not have predicted in a million years. Faith in the risen Christ grabbed him, consumed him, and changed the course of his life.

How blessed we are when we discover a passion in life for which we are willing to lay down everything we have to serve that purpose, a mission which is so meaningful that nothing is held back. What a happy person we are!

What the story of Acts means is that you can find the meaning of life. Perhaps you are still searching for meaning of life. The answer to that quest is the resurrected Lord.

Jesus, we now see was the One who was to lay down everything for the plan of God to redeem the world.

1. The Way wasn’t yet a church. It had only the very first aspects of organization or leadership. One has the impression that these days are mostly cascading events under control of no one but the Holy Spirit. From the human view, it looks very chaotic. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The most accessible collection of early Christian apocrypha is *The Other Bible* by Willis Barnstone, HarperSanFrancisco, 1984. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. And do you see how The Way was still very much a Temple-based messianic Jewish sect. Living in community. Pulsing with spiritual power and vibrancy, and also focussed on Jesus’ social agenda of equality for all, including women and slaves, and the ministry of charity to the poor.

Also, the affinity of the First Followers with the Essenes is often remarked, another Jewish religious group who lived in community. It was the Essenes, living communally at Qumran, who preserved the Dead Sea Scrolls. Some people think John, of the Gospel of John, was an Essene, and his mystical gospel makes me understand why. The Essenes had quite a bent toward a mystical theology, as does John. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)