

Rev. Mary Elizabeth Hanchey
May 8, 2022

These Clay Jars

Acts 2:22-24; 2 Corinthians 4:7-12; Luke 7:18-23

Can you picture a movie where the passing of many years was depicted in a short burst of sped up scenes so that there is frenetic movement through major events until you land in the middle of a living room, or a family meal, or a heated discussion? You are here, and then whoosh, you are there, and then whoosh, you are somewhere else entirely and years have passed and people have changed.

Sometimes that's how I feel about the church year.

We talk about Advent and Lent being waiting times, times when we might more slowly progress toward the key scene. But then we have the baby Jesus, followed quickly by two year old Jesus at the Epiphany, and then Jesus is starting his ministry and wandering about the desert confronting Satan, and then he's in Jerusalem on a donkey, and then he is crucified and risen, and then we are sitting with the early church trying to figure out what it means that Jesus is crucified and risen. And it's only May.

But that is what we have been doing these weeks since Easter - sitting with the early church, studying the Acts of the Apostles. The early church, trying to live in a world where Jesus had died, where there was resurrection but also death, and where Jesus' promised return was still an unachieved mystery, was struggling to understand. As are we.

Our first story was about Jesus presenting himself to the disciples for 40 days (so while during Lent we walked these 40 days with Jesus, now we just get 40 days in a passing mention). We are told that Jesus was teaching the disciples about the reign of God.

And then last week was Confirmation Sunday, so we didn't hear the Acts passage. But in the Acts passage assigned to that Sunday, the disciples ask Jesus if this is when he is going to fix all of the political mess and restore sovereignty to Israel. You might remember that Jesus makes no such promise, but offers, instead - "It is not for you to know....but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you."

And this week, we actually skip ahead of the Pentecost story - to which we will return in a few weeks as we turn toward the summer - to hear Peter teaching the early church: Jesus revealed God's power, God knew that Jesus would be killed by those outside of the law- outside of God's law, and that death has no power of Jesus.

Peter's focus in Acts, this sort of "church I just want you to understand these things" is pretty thematically typical of Luke and Acts (and remember, Luke and Acts are understood to have the same author) - both of which emphasize the divine necessity of Jesus' mission - and death - and lean into the teaching that not only did God know Jesus would die, but that Jesus had to die.

Not all of scripture is rooted in this understanding. And there are thoughtful theologians who push back against the idea of redemptive violence or substitutionary atonement. We have a lot of work to do in sorting out what those ideas mean for us as a people who follow Jesus. But foreknowledge and necessity are themes that you will find in Luke and Acts.

Similarly, Luke and Acts work to portray Jesus's life and mission as a fulfillment of the scriptures -to demonstrate that Israel's own story legitimates Jesus as the promised Messiah and Savior. Did you notice, in Acts, that Peter addresses "Men of Israel"? (And yes, he seems to have failed to address the women.) And then, in the Luke passage, the question is "Jesus - so - are you the One? Like really THE ONE?" And Luke has Jesus answering by providing a litany of miracles, all of which had to do with healing bodies.

"Go and tell John:
those who were blind receive sight,
those who were lame walk,
those who were diseased-in-skin are cleansed,
those who were deaf hear,
those who were dead are raised,
those who are poor have good news proclaimed to them."

AND...(did you catch the last bit) "blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

Jesus is overflowing with divine power - and it is all about healing, and not even a little bit about picking fights.

To John the Baptist, to the early church, to those who sought to understand who Jesus was then and to those who seek to understand who Jesus is now - the author of Luke and Acts keeps hammering at the same message: pay attention. Jesus is a

fulfillment of God's promise to Israel, Jesus is full of God's power, Jesus' power overcomes death and brokenness.

And so, these several weeks after Easter, as we wonder how living as Easter people who follow a risen Lord might change us, we strain under the weight of our realities. The waters have come up to our necks. The wheels are coming off. The world is on fire.

We have been hurled forward from Easter - on what scene has that camera landed?

The sanctuary, where you sit trying to figure out how to worship today?

The massive fight at East this week?

A living room, where someone whom you love is struggling to get out of his chair, or pay attention to her homework, or process hurtful words?

A factory where underpaid workers are injured on unsafe machinery?

A hospital room that you visited this week?

The Planned Parenthood waiting room where grief and fear and resolve do a tragic dance?

The woods where you are trying to outrun your despair and catch up to your hope?

There, wherever the story of Eastering crashes into your reality, you may wonder: what is this stuff about death having no power? Why are we spending energy unraveling how the writer of Luke-Acts endeavors to portray Jesus? What is this foreknowledge and definite plan business?

And I'm here to proclaim - I don't know.

Is this stuff worth untangling? How is it going to change the way you leave this space today? I'm not sure.

But this is why I think it matters: these texts today are a part of - and only a part of - but a part of our striving to articulate, and to understand, why we make any claims at all about Jesus. Why we even deign to talk about being Easter people. We sit in our scenes with most of the rest of Christendom listening for something clarifying. And there is this refrain, coming to us in the midst of our tangles: death has no power, but Jesus does.

Is that enough? Maybe not on most days. Because death sure seems to have a lot of power in my world, and this sort of radical healing of body parts is pretty scarce.

But listen to the teaching to the early church at Corinth - and let me start with what comes right before the passage we heard today. Right before it, we read that Christ is the image of God, and that when we proclaim the gospel, we proclaim Jesus' power and not our own. The very last line before today's reading says this: "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

So this "we have this treasure in clay jars" bit is about the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

The treasure is our ability to perceive Jesus' power as having to do with God's - and the clay pots are symbols of our fragility: the clay pots, like our own pretensions of power, are easily smashed. Fragility cannot trap God.

We may be frail, but we can draw on the treasure that animates us. These bodies of ours - these lives we lead - these clay jars...they are fragile. But God - revealed to us in Jesus - is not.

Hear again with new ears:

The supreme power is God's and not of us.

In every way are we oppressed, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; knocked down, but not destroyed; always bearing forth in the body the death of Jesus, in order that the life of Jesus might also be revealed in our bodies.

Death may be at work in our bodies. Death may be at work in this world. We may feel crushing despair. We may feel forsaken and destroyed. But the bursting forth of life is not dependent on us. It is not trapped by our brokenness. It is not hidden by our darkness.

It's ok if you do not feel powerful today in whatever scene you find yourself. We are still learning to live as Easter people. We have this treasure in clay jars so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belonging to God does not come from us.

So may it be.