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Our Scripture reading for today talks about the early church. And I mean the *early* church. This takes place right at the beginning: that time right after Jesus had been resurrected and ascended to heaven, those first few years when Christianity didn't even have a name. They were still the same people they had always been, but something new, something special had touched their lives and they were trying to figure out how to make sense of that and how to grow and develop and move forward with that element in their lives.

In this time of the early church, a lot of what *we* call church happened in *homes*; it was people gathering around someone's table and talking and teaching and praying and spending time together and figuring out what community looks like after it's been turned upside-down by someone like Christ.

These were mostly Jewish people, in and around Jerusalem, as the stories and messages of Jesus began to spread those first several years. They still went to the temple, they still kept their practices and followed their traditions and lived their lives—who they were and *what* they were hadn't changed... but there was something *new* in their lives.

They'd had an encounter: an encounter with a person, an encounter with those he had inspired, and an encounter with a series of events that had shaken the entire Jerusalem community. We remember the story of those encounters every Easter season, as we try to imagine what it must have been like in those few weeks two thousand years ago, and what that experience might have introduced into the lives of people like you and me.

In our reading, we see what such a close encounter with the holy can bring about in people who're open to it. We see people—normal people—people who are going to work, or caring for their families, or doing their errands, people who go to Temple regularly and do all the normal things—PTA, Rotary meetings, Scouts, Zoning Board—but who've also found something new. Something that inspires them and brings them together in a new way. We see people who, once their duties of the day are done, gather in someone's home—groups of five, six, nine, twelve—here and there all over

the city, mixing and matching, maybe at a different table every week or even every night, gathering with people who shared this spiritual experience in common, and who were seeking ways that this experience might *enrich* their lives, and the lives of those around them.

I say all this... because the more things change, the more they stay the same. We may be separated from the early church by two thousand years and incomprehensible shifts in society and geography, we may meet Sunday mornings in a different *kind* of building performing our own rituals that would have been completely foreign to the people who would one day become the first “Christians,” but there’s still something familiar, or *recognizable*, about what they experienced so long ago.

What did they do, around those tables *and* when they left to go about their daily lives? How had this Christ encounter *augmented* their way of being?

Well for one, they taught and they learned—they shared the Good News of Jesus Christ and sought to make meaning out of his life and teachings. There were eleven or twelve apostles in those days, people who considered themselves close to Jesus himself... but there were far more than eleven or twelve of those “house churches.” Acts tells us that on the day of Pentecost three thousand people from all walks of life felt their hearts touched by the Holy Spirit and hungry to follow Christ’s way.

Sure there were a few apostles here and there, just like there are a few pastors here and there today, and all they had to bring to the table was valuable... but God’s work was happening in and among these people whenever they shared their thoughts, their opinions, their rememberings and understandings; whenever two or more people shared something about Christ’s teaching with one another, something special was happening. Not to preach myself out of a job, but sitting and listening to someone like me or Pastor Eric or Reverend Pat, it’s only *one* piece of the puzzle. The pews all point this direction, but a kitchen table is *round*... and *devoting* ourselves to the apostles’ teaching, that’s something that should happen in *community*.

The apostles performed wonders and signs, and they shared first-hand accounts of their travels with Jesus. Today, Pastors share of their training and

education and insight and research... and in coffee hour after church, *you* should be sharing with one another your *own* figurings and opinions about today's reading and whatever-the-heck Pastor Dan had to say about it. In our homes we should be saying, 'hey, I couldn't stop thinking about *this* or *that* all week,' and in the way we live out our daily lives, what we're learning and the work the Holy Spirit is *doing* in our hearts and minds *should* be evident to others.

That's something huge about the early church—soon enough, these people, these normal people just like every one else, started to stand out. There was a... glow about them. Not a literal glow or a magical glow, but—in the words of the Broadway musical *Wicked*: something had changed within them. Something was... not the same. Their demeanor and their actions betrayed something about them: the evidence of an encounter with the Holy, and the fruits of engaging with the teaching of the apostles. They had become the kind of people who would walk down the street, or make their way through the market, or interact with a stranger or a friend or simply clock in for a hard day's work... and folks would look at them and say, "I'll have some of whatever *he's* eating."

The way they lived their lives had been *enhanced* by their experience of Christian community. They weren't different people—I'm not expecting you to walk into church at ten o'clock on a Sunday and walk out at eleven a *completely* different person—but every time they left a gathering of their companions in Spirit, there was a little something *more* to them.

Because as much as the work of the Spirit happens in homes and churches and the privacy of our own hearts, it never—*never*—ends there; it should touch every facet of our daily lives. What happens in Vegas may stay in Vegas, but this ain't Vegas, and the glitter you pick up here *doesn't* wash off.

In those first few years, we see a community struck by a tragedy—the death—the *execution* of Christ, a *profound* loss. But we also see a community whose encounter with the *Risen* Christ enhanced their lives, enlarged their hearts, and empowered their work. And today... the more things change, the more they stay the same. Our own communities too were struck by tragedy in

2020 and the years that followed. Over a million people have died from COVID in America alone, and the loss of family and friends is profound. Our churches took a big hit, and our ways of living were shaken. But I look around this church in this the year of our Lord 2023, and I see a community that has had an encounter with the Risen Christ. I see a community that—much like those people who would one day call themselves Christians—is coming together.

A community with a renewed hunger for Christ's teaching, with a renewed hunger for fellowship. I see a community *excited* to break bread with one another *and* to share that bread with those in need. I see a community that knows how to pray alone, but every week I see new people appearing in the pews intrigued by the idea of praying together.

I'll have some of whatever she's eating... even if it is just bread and grape juice. That's the way it should be, right? Whatever we're doing in here, or in coffee hour, or at Bible study or Youth Group or at the dinner table when we gather together as friends... when Christian community is done right, it should fill our hearts and shine forth in everything we do in the streets of our own city.

What is it they say in those cereal commercials? "Part of a balanced breakfast!" Teaching and fellowship and breaking bread and prayers, finding things in common and sharing of our blessings with those in need, praising God and giving and receiving goodwill... it's all part of a balanced breakfast. And with a good breakfast in you, you can do anything. "And day by day the Lord added to their number." Amen.