

Easter Leftovers 2021

Co-missioners,

Our editor had a few mini-“Aha’s” this Easter. We pass them along on the chance you’ll find them useful.

Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

**Easter Leftovers, 2021:
The Life We Hold in Common, the Seeing of
Easter, the Shabby Sheep**

by Jerome Burce



Preamble

I dare today to pass along a few thoughts that percolated this Easter season as I wrestled again with old familiar texts—underused texts, as they proved once more to be. I’ve certainly underused them myself over four decades of preaching, teaching, and pastoral service. As I listen loosely to the chatter in the wider church, I notice the same lack in others, so much so that I can’t help but ask if anyone out there is reading closely at all, as in pausing to chew on the wild wonder of the claims these texts keep pitching. There is so much more to Easter than a promise that you’ll go to heaven when you die. Did America’s Christians hear that this year? Most did not, I’m guessing; and here I include America’s Lutheran Christians. We are blessed, no question, with a magnificent confessional tradition. It too is underused, and badly so. Ergo Crossings.

Though again I can't avoid the suspicion—it's been niggling at me for the past couple of years—that the tradition itself makes less of Easter than the likes of Ss. Paul and John would have us do. Else why would the stuff that so excites me now have been hidden from view in my student days—or so it seems as I think back on them. There's always a chance, of course, that I wasn't listening. How many students really do?

In any case, here are four things that snagged my eye this Easter. The first is a snippet of English translation. The other three are dimensions of the Easter Gospel that seem never to get the attention they deserve, and still less the faith they invite. This would grieve the apostles who put them out there in the first place. They'd wonder why we insist on ignoring good news at its best and most astonishing. It's not as if they hid it. We just don't see it. Our eyes haven't been trained to. Or perhaps we don't want to. This too is always a dreadful possibility. Again the prayer of this past great Sunday: "Come, Holy Spirit!"

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I. A Splendid Piece of Translation

The Epistle for the Second Sunday of Easter this year was 1 John 1:1–2:2. Encountering it stirred memories of hearing it read at the service that installed me in my current call. That was almost three decades ago. It's the only thing I remember about the service apart from wishing that the local bishop hadn't insisted on doing the preaching. I would rather have listened to my father that day. Easing the disappointment was the startling refreshment of this Epistle, read out in a translation I wasn't familiar with. I was struck in the first place by its sheer loveliness, though also by its clarity. The lector was the late Rev. Dr. Manfred Lassen, then serving as chaplain at Oberlin College. Later I tracked him down to ask what version he was

reading from. The New English Bible, he said.

I returned to that this Easter and found those long-ago impressions being confirmed. English translations struggle as a rule with the opening section of 1 John. NEB—the original 1961 version—knocks it out of the park. More's the pity that the copyright holders, Oxford and Cambridge Universities, seem not to have released it for access online. For those without a hard copy on their shelves, I give you the first four verses. Compare it yourselves with the stuttering efforts of NRSV—ESV or NIV, for that matter—that lots of us were subjected to this year.

¹It was there from the beginning; we have heard it; we have seen it with our eyes; we looked upon it, and felt it with our hands; and it is of this we tell. Our theme is the word of life. ²This life was made visible; we have seen it and bear our testimony; we here declare to you the eternal life which dwelt with the Father and was made visible to us. ³What we have seen and heard we declare to you, so that you and we together may share a common life, that life which we share with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ. ⁴And we write this in order that the joy of us all may be complete.

For now, take a moment and simply savor the prose. Then join me in prayer for the power to digest it.

II. So Much More than “Fellowship”

The Greek word is “koinonia.” It shows up twice in 1 John 1:3. NRSV renders it both times as “fellowship.” ESV and NIV do that too. Here is NRSV: “...we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.”

Really? What does this mean?

Fellowship is a long-debased word. I have a feeling that for anyone younger than forty it's an obsolete word too. I don't hear it used in everyday English. And if a sharp-eared child, catching it at church, should ask her grandparents what it means they'll likely mutter something about potluck suppers and being nice to people.



“Koinonia” was itself in vogue in American church talk a while back. The old constitution of the congregation I serve assigned the fostering of it to one of several ministry boards. By the time I showed up, the “koinonia committee” had as its chief function the management of the Sunday morning coffee hour. With that as a key feature of the semantic context, it's pretty hard to get excited about what John is saying here.

So too in an older Lutheran day when “fellowship” was freighted with a modifying “altar-and-pulpit,” as perhaps it still is in LCMS and Wisconsin Synod circles. Here the issue was a deal more weighty. Can we go to communion with these people, or not? Can we let one of their pastors preach, or not? Theologians opined, conventions debated, and the folks in the pews were still felt to wonder what fellowship meant, or, more to the point, what John might mean when he talks about it here.

In rides NEB to the rescue. “What we have heard and seen we declare to you, so that you and we together *may share a common life...*” This on a day—you may recall—when we heard about the first batch of baptized believers doing their best to exhibit this as their everyday lived reality. See the last paragraph of

Acts 2. *Koiononia* derives from *koinos* which, Fred Danker says, means “shared collectively” (*Concise Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 203). John’s point—his breathtaking assertion—is that you and I are sharing in the life of the Father and the Son already today. What’s theirs is ours, what’s ours is theirs. This is the sweet swap on steroids, Luther’s “happy exchange” pushed to the *n*th degree. It’s Paul shouting that “all things are yours because you are Christ’s and Christ is God’s” (1 Cor. 3:21). But show me the baptized kid or its Christian mother for that matter who imagines for a moment that such a thing could be true of them. “All things are yours.” I mean, really!

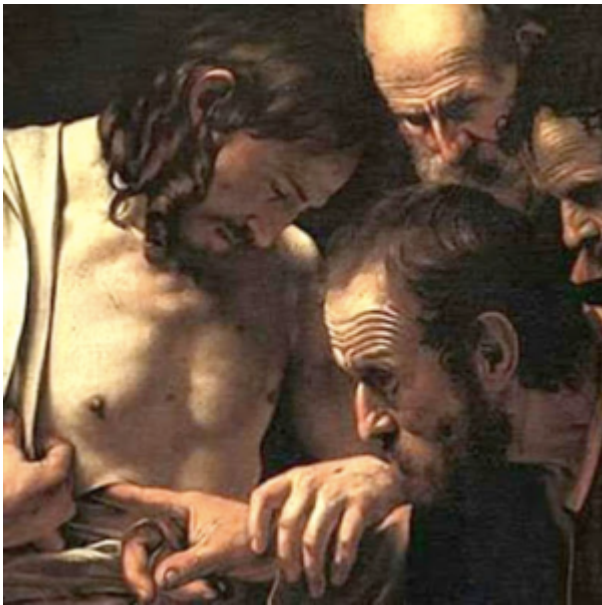
Now show me the preacher who pushes people to imagine this. Where are these creatures? Not, I fear, in the pulpits we’re familiar with. Since when does it cross our minds to regard the folks we’re talking to with such high honor? Our job, we think, is to correct them or to nudge them one way or another into correcting themselves. Easter is held out as nothing more than a thing to hope for when we’re all done failing, whereupon a crucified and risen Christ will step in at last to fix the mess. Yes, fantastic! But that’s still not Easter at its fullest and best the way John talks about it, or Paul for that matter. Their Easter is a reality that embraces us already. Even now we are “in Christ,” as Paul keeps putting it. This very day the Father and the Son are sharing their life with certifiable sinners, as John insists. How tasteless of God to do this! (See item IV below.) How invigorating too when the wonder of it begins to sink in and eyes are opened to see the baptized sinners we hang out with—who we all too often squabble with— as the glorious saints they also are. (Here again: thank you, Luther.)

III. Easter as Something to See (as in a Mirror, Darkly)

Looking back, I notice that I touched on this theme twice last

year, and in the same month, no less. It come up first in [a reflection on George Floyd's murder](#), and then in an argument for sticking with [in-person communion despite the pandemic](#). The latter included a method for doing this safely. (Yes, it worked, and very well.)

I point you to those items for the meat of the argument I would otherwise mount here. For now it's enough to celebrate the boost it gets from NEB's rendering of 1 John 1:2a: "This life was *made visible*..." By this he means "the eternal life which dwelt with the Father" and "which we share with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ." Again, says John, it "was made visible to us." The Greek verb in question is "ephanerothe." NRSV renders it as "was revealed," ESV as "was made manifest." Both terms partake of a certain ambiguity. NEB cuts straight to the chase. Eyeballs were involved here—pupils, retinas, optic nerves. We *have seen* this life; "we looked upon it, and felt it with our hands."



It's impossible, of course, to read this passage without thinking immediately of John 20:19ff., to say nothing of John 21. There the eyeballs rested on Jesus himself. We don't get this privilege, of course. "The cloud hid him from [our] sight," as we heard on Ascension Day. Where the person of the Eastered Jesus is concerned, "we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7). Not so when it comes

to the Easter life we share with him. No sooner has Paul written the words just quoted than we catch him erupting with a command to use our eyes. "If anyone is in Christ, new creation! *Look!* The old has passed away; the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17). Here he calls to mind something Jesus said just before the cloud hid

him. "You will be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8). And as the rest of Acts makes plain, he intends for us to do that not merely as talking heads but as visible indicators that something fresh, new, lively, and lasting is percolating in the stricken mess of our angry, fractured, dying world. We, the Jesus-trusting types out there, are the closest thing there is to visual proof that Easter is a thing—a real thing. And those with eyes to see will find the proof convincing.

For now I wonder what might happen if the folks who pushed Easter from pulpits or touted it in their daily devotions would bring this up as a matter of course. I'll bet our church life would look and sound a whole lot different than it does. There might be some joy, some grit and energy, in what we do. A lot more patience and forgiveness too. Just a thought—and one that lingers.

IV. Good Shepherd, Shabby Sheep

Comes the question: how is Easter life to be seen when the Christians out there don't look the least bit Easter-ish? Here I quote from the sermon I preached last month on Good Shepherd Sunday, the Fourth of Easter, 2021—

"Why is it, the critics say, that Christians behave so badly? If there really is something to this Jesus of theirs, then why don't they take him more seriously than they seem to do? Why don't they love each other the way they claim that God loves them? Why do we see them divided in a million different camps, competing with each other, loathing each other? Why are they as quick as anyone to condemn people they disapprove of, whatever the reason may be? Why are they so full of themselves, so slow to see the good in people who don't think or believe the way they think and believe? Why does evil seem to bubble up inside of churches as fiercely and as frequently as it does in other places?

“Now there are a lot of ways to respond to this. One way is to argue with it. A lot of Christians do that. As for me, I wish there was a whole lot less than there is to what these critics say. Honesty is the best policy here, the way it always is. In this case, honesty is the path to take to see our Jesus at his risen best.

“My favorite image of Jesus the Good Shepherd is not the one you see in all the pious pictures. Instead it’s one I saw some forty ago in the far back hills of Papua New Guinea. I was a young pastor and missionary, visiting some congregations in a place you couldn’t drive to. You had to hike. During the visit my local colleague and I ran a workshop for the little bunch of pastors in the area. One of them showed up in traditional dress, leaves in the back, a covering in the front, no shirt—a hick of hicks as even the locals would see him. And with him he had a dog. A little dog. The skinniest, mangiest, ugliest canine creature I’ve ever laid eyes on. I’m sure the thing was covered with fleas. And all through the class the man held this mongrel in his lap—stroking him, petting him, cuddling him. You could tell he loved this creature that no one else could begin to love.

“And this, it seems to me, is Christ and his church. It’s Christ and me. It’s Jesus and you. It’s the risen Lord of heaven and earth and those churches down the street with the wrong names, the wrong set of letters (not ELCA), the wrong music, the wrong attitudes, the wrong priorities—wrong as you or I might see them, that is. And in all those churches, in ours as well, you’ll find people who are about as tough to admire and love as that ugly little dog was. Yet there is Jesus, Good Shepherd Jesus. There he is, loving them all, just he’s doing this morning with all of us here. Here he is touching us, consoling us, feeding us, forgiving us. Here he is *for us* in this wondrous Sacrament of his body and blood, and in it he gives us a taste

of the feast to come.

“This is Jesus’ answer to his critics today. He sets his jaw and keeps on doing what he died to do, what God raised him from the dead to do. And nowhere in all the world will you find a grace as rich and strong and dripping with the life-giving love of God as you’ll find in Jesus Christ this very morning.”

Conclusion

Matthew 18:20: “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them.” That, first and last, is where to look these days to see the life John talks about in his first letter: the life “made visible,” the enduring one that “we share with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ.”

And how do we begin to open our eyes and take this seriously?
One more time: “Come, Holy Spirit.”