

1st John 1: 1-2.2 True Koinonia

The texts from the New Testament which I read this morning provide some insight into the time just after the crucifixion. This was a time when those who had loved and followed Jesus began to understand the things he had told them about himself. The discovery of the empty tomb on that first Easter morning did not immediately illuminate their minds. They recognized his comments about the suffering and death that he had told them to expect had happened. They did not seem to remember that after three days he would be raised. The disciples remained huddled together in Jerusalem trying to determine what the future held and what they were going to do. According to John's gospel account, Mary Magdalene was the first who discovered the tomb open and empty. Fearing someone had stolen Jesus' body she reported this to at least two of the other disciples—Simon Peter and another who is not specifically named. They went and checked out her story—saw that Jesus' body was not there, noticed the discarded linens and then just went home failing to understand what had occurred. Mary remained there in her grief, weeping and she was rewarded by seeing the risen Jesus who spoke with her. Jesus tells her to go tell the disciples what she has seen and give them a message. So obediently she goes and announces to them: "I have seen the Lord." She also relays the rest of what Jesus has said. John's gospel makes no comment about her report at this point, but later some disciples walking on the road to Emmaus report they have heard a strange rumor about what Mary has said about the empty tomb and her encounter. It seems that the disciples don't place much importance on what she tells them. After she reports this to them we are told that on that same evening they are locked together in a room because they are afraid. They fear the consequences of being those associated with the man crucified three days before. These ten men gathered together are afraid and grieving and confused. Their leader is gone. They are trying to figure out what they are to do now—whether to run and hide from the authorities who arrested and crucified their leader or what? It seems they have no confidence in Mary's report of having seen and talked with the risen Lord. Then suddenly, Jesus is there among them, just standing there in their midst. There is no warning, he is just there among them. He greets them with "Peace to you." This is expressed in one Greek word and is equivalent to the Hebrew greeting of Shalom. This word is used as a greeting and a farewell. It expresses the hope for complete health and well-being—in all aspects of life. When Jesus shows them his hands and side, then the disciples rejoice in his presence. However, Jesus does not remain long. In John's account this is the occasion of the coming of the Holy Spirit. Jesus tells them: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you. Receive the Holy Spirit." He then leaves them after again saying "Peace to you." Our text this morning goes on to note that Thomas, who was called the Twin was not present at this appearance. Thomas has not left the group, but is merely absent that first evening. When he rejoins them the disciples who were there, like Mary had reported to them, they report to Thomas: "We have seen the Lord." His response is that unless he sees the risen Lord himself, he will not believe what he is told. This response has given him the label Doubting Thomas. Despite this statement, Thomas remains waiting with this group for a week before we are told that once again Jesus is suddenly standing

there among them although the door was locked. Thomas' response upon seeing Jesus is "My Lord and my God!" Often our focus with this text is on Thomas, although the doubt he expresses only asks for what the others have seen—and none of them believed without that experience of the risen Lord. Yet in the context of our other readings, it is apparent that even in their fear, their doubt, their grief, the relationships which had formed as they followed Jesus and listened to his teachings had created a bond that kept them together. Their shared experiences bind them. As the disciples begin to have confidence in their understanding of who this risen Jesus is and what he means for them to do, they begin to proclaim the good news publically, in the town square so to speak. This proclamation leads to many believing and those joining the group grow. Those joining remain with the group sharing fellowship as well. In the text from the book entitled the Acts of the Apostles we view how this growing group forms itself into what becomes the earliest congregation. This passage describes events not only post-resurrection but also post ascension; the Holy Spirit has arrived with a vengeance. The Apostles are out and about in Jerusalem proclaiming the crucified Jesus as the risen Messiah—the Christ. Despite continued opposition from the religious leaders and threats to their persons—the Spirit empowers them to continue the spreading of the gospel news. The numbers that come to join their group are astounding. In our text this growing body is described this way: "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and not one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common." That type of community togetherness strikes us as an idealized impossibility. We call efforts to establish that form of community structure socialism and view it as an evil to be avoided deeming it unworkable. Yet we are told that at least for a while, within the community of believers, that was the basis for their community. The expectations of that group were that Jesus would soon be returning. There was an urgency about spreading the message and with the surrounding culture largely hostile to their belief, the need to belong fully to the community was felt strongly. That this strong sense of community did not endure we know, but Scripture tells us that it was the basis upon which our faith was founded. Furthermore, we are told "there was not a need person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold." It is in this context that the term Koinonia appears within our New Testament texts. Koinonia is the transliteration of the Greek word which has the meanings: fellowship, association, community, joint participation, sharing. This is mentioned as a characteristic of the early believers 17 times. It is found not only in Acts and 1 John, but also in seven of the epistles—letters written to and by those communities. The passage I read from 1st John contains the word Koinonia four times. In this letter, John proclaims and testifies to the gospel news. He does so in this manner: "we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you may also have fellowship (Koinonia) with us; and truly our fellowship (Koinonia) is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete." The Koinonia is a two way experience—a sharing relationship with the divine and with ones fellow human beings. This text goes on to point out that there are ways to see this relationship. John gives these indications about that fellowship: "This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have

fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.” Just as it was true then, it is true now, if we desire to have fellowship with God, then that relationship will affect the choices we make and the behaviors we show to the world—and our witness to that relationship is found in the basis of our relationships with others—in the participation in true Koinonia which cares for the poor, the oppressed, the vulnerable as part of our understanding of the message God sent Jesus to deliver. 1st John 2: 5, “For whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection. By this we may be sure that we are in him.” We also know the truth of the first verses of that chapter: “But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous.” So we are the loved and claimed ones of God, but we are also given a purpose—to spread the message of God’s love to the world—not in a generic sense, but to those we meet daily—we are called to belong to a community living together—in Koinonia. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.