

Here!
“Be here.”
Acts 2:1-4

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Evasion

A large class of freshmen gathered at the university men’s physical education building for an 8:00 in the morning class. It was a mandatory university requirement: a gym class. The instructor described how it worked: weight lifting would be the focus. Students were to set personal goals to establish a life-long habit of physical exercise. Grades would be determined by attendance. Show up and you get an A. Fail to come: you get marked down. That simple.

Boring!

And besides that: *8:00 in the morning!* A huge crowd crammed the weight room, each student standing and waiting for his name to be called. Hearing his last name barked out by the instructor, he’d shout out “Here!” And then he’d go do bench presses and leg lifts for the next 50 minutes.

A few weeks into it (after the mystic of being in college wore off and fear subsided into routine), a few of the guys were talking and one of them ventured an idea. “What if we took turns coming to class? When each of us took our turn we’d listen for the name of a friend sleeping in and say, “Here!” and then move to another part of the crowd before having to answer again.

Then we wouldn’t all have to show up every time. No one would ever have to know!

Does this kind of thing still happen? Ducking out, I mean. And if it does, what does it hurt? And who would it hurt? After all, tuition is paid. The university has its funds. The instructor gets his pay check. And students sometimes get to sleep in.

Even the instructor’s goal gets met. Students will establish a life-habit, all right. Only, just not the kind of habit he had in mind.

Enlivenment

The habit they'll establish is the habit of escape. Escape from uninvited expectation. Escape from disappointment. Escape from boredom.

Escaping can become a habit.

I wonder if Jesus' followers were any less likely to try the habit of escaping after he died. They had been, after all, associated with a man convicted and executed for insurrection. They must have felt uneasy about their future. Who wouldn't want to escape?

Peter swore up and down he never knew Jesus. But he wasn't the only one. All of them scattered, except for some of the women.

To the reasons for escape, maybe you can add fear.

But it was something stronger than fear that got them together. Jesus, though dead and buried, kept showing up. Resurrection: a powerful act of God that made him alive and present. This in itself gave them hope – and had its way of countering their bent to escape, it brought them together. And when they were together: that's when he was apt to appear again and again.

It was the Resurrected Jesus who told them to get together on the day we just read about. Jews everywhere and especially there in Jerusalem were celebrating Pentecost, the festival for the gift of the Ten Commandments and the Law which made them who they were.

So, something like Arts Beats & Eats was going on in the streets outside the room while they were huddled together, doors and windows shut: probably still scared ...and yet, *expectant*. Like something was going to happen and they didn't know what.

They might have been praying. Whispering to each other. Singing a psalm or hymn. But quiet, I think, mostly.

Then, it must have been abrupt, a jolt out of the blue. The writer of the Book of Acts captures the earth-shaking, life changing moment this was.

The room shook with thunder and the sound you hear when a sudden, powerful wind whips through the trees and raps against the window pane. Something happened.

Something big.

Divided tongues as of fire rested on each of them. ‘Sounds strange and upsetting, maybe, if you were to stop and picture it – like something out of a George Lucas production.

But the first readers would have understood. In their time talk of fire resting on each person would mean that they were all given sudden inspiration and understanding. Like they all became prophets – everyone of them.¹

And they were all moved to proclaim: “Jesus Christ is Lord. God’s fulfillment is here. It’s now. A new age of peace; new hope for justice; healing for the broken; rescue for the perishing: It’s happening! Now!”

Their message was so powerful it even crossed over language barriers right away.² Simple hill folk and fishermen spoke in different and various tongues. It was evident that each of them was filled by the fire of the Holy Spirit of Christ. The Holy Spirit of God.

This Bible reading is usually used in church in late May or early June when we celebrate Pentecost, which Christians often say is *the birthday of the Church*. That’s what this is about. It’s where the church began: not in a board room where a plan of organization was worked out by institutional leaders. And not on the pages of a manifesto written by an emerging social activist.

None of them got this on their own. The writer of Acts was careful to start the story saying, “They were all together in one place.”

They, each of them, had broken the habit of escape.

I think what got them to break it was the power of expectation.

Have you ever watched the sports news when they show what happens in the stands? One of those spots that aired not too long ago showed a guy in the crowd talking on his cell phone. A long ball was hit into the seats right at him and, as he was talking, he reached out his other hand, on which was a baseball glove. The ball went right into the mitt – a perfect catch – as he continued to talk, apparently without a pause.

Multitasking *has* become a way of life. More importantly, this was also an example of the power of expectation. The man *came with his baseball mitt*. A crowd of what, 40,000? And he believed a ball might be hit to *him!*

He came expecting something to happen. And he was ready.

The ready will not be hiding in fear; the ready will not be bored; and the ready will not be inclined to escape.

That's the attitude of the expectant followers of Jesus. They showed up expecting something to happen. They believed. And when something happened they were ready.

"We renew our covenant faithfully to participate in the ministries of the church by our presence...: a church membership promise like I was saying last July.

When God calls you: say, "Here I am...I am HERE."

The call to the commitment of presence with each other is a gift, just like prayer is a gift. It's the gift to break the habit of escape; to be a part of something where big things can happen.

Engagement

Like the time I saw a whole gathering of Christian men listen to a message on how completely God will forgive anything. Something moved among them. You could feel it. There was an outpouring of relief and freedom and tears because of it. And they were all men.

Like the time I was a part of a church that had to call off worship because of a blizzard. But stranded motorists on the road needed rescue and shelter, so lots of the church members showed up anyways; they got on their snowmobiles and in their pickup trucks, went out to the freeways: bringing the stranded travelers into to the shelter and community of the church – and maybe saved some lives.

Like a Baptist church in Montgomery Alabama that responded to the arrest of a Black woman who refused to give up her seat to a White man. They were moved to start a civil rights movement that put an end to Jim Crow laws and advanced justice for all in America.

Like congregations that worked long years underground in Poland and East Germany. Their life together started a movement that ended up liberating their countries from Soviet domination and ended the Cold War and brought freedom and justice to millions.

Like a teenaged girl who had lost both parents and was completely alone. Some people of a church invited her to church; and she was given such welcome and caring it changed her life.

These things keep happening. If you pay attention you might see they're happening every day.

People decide not to escape and they get together. They aren't perfect. Sometimes they get on each other's nerves, hurt each other's feelings, wonder why the sound system isn't better; or the sermon; or the seats.

But they aren't like guys who duck out of gym class.

They get together. If their name were called, they'd say:

HERE!

And it's anything but ho-hum. *Anything but* for those who come, and come expectantly.

For them, sometimes the room shakes

and they get set on fire.

¹ Robert W. Will, "The Acts of the Apostles," *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, vol. X. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. © 2002. pp 54-55.

² *Ibid.*