

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford at Evensong & Benediction  
The Fifth Sunday of Easter  
May 19, 2019

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You do not need me to tell you people try to divorce Christian faith and practice from the institution of the Church. Souls run afoul of the teachings of Christ in His Church, or make something of the real or perceived behavior of Church members, and then go off and make up a more convenient religion. Bishop Michael Marshall used to tell us about taking a fresh bar of soap and rounding off its sharp edges while he showered, all the while thinking up ways to round off and soften the implications of Christ's gospel. And then all the objections would go down the drain with the rinse water! And you know the story that a man insists he can worship God while driving in the mountains on a beautiful Sunday morning. To which the reply is made the only time God is mentioned in such a place is when the car gets a flat tire! And then the Name of the Lord is not used in a very reverent way!

One result of the Easter Day appearances of the Risen Lord Jesus was that His disciples were reconstituted as *a nucleus of believers*. In the Upper Room the Risen Lord changed them instantly from a sorry group of ex-followers bent on sneaking out of town, into a community with *an organic life of its own*. These disciples, and those who quickly joined them, recognized they together were recipients of a common salvation and knew they were commissioned to proclaim that salvation to the ends of the earth.

Now it is true there was a personal and individual element in all this. Each man in the Upper Room not only believed Christ is Risen but also now trusted his own life to the Lord Jesus in a personal way. Yet the Gospel message from the very beginning proclaimed an event of *the community of faith*. On Easter Day morning Mary Magdalene was instructed to "*Go and tell Peter.*" In the Upper Room the Risen Lord was known to the *disciples in community*. (And it was important for Thomas to be there in community. The Lord came back for Thomas.) When the disciples at Emmaus knew the Lord in Bible study and the breaking of bread they did not proclaim a new religion at Emmaus and appoint Clopas the chief pooh-bah! They hastened back to the disciples in the Upper Room to make their report. The

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New Testament records are quite clear. Both the experience of salvation and the proclamation of it were things the disciples shared together.

Those Easter accounts show the Church at the beginning. Fifty days into that history, the first Christian sermon was preached at Pentecost. And to those hearing it, the sermon was clearly the offering of *an identifiable community of believers*. In *The Acts of the Apostles* no other explanation is possible. What is described is a group of Christian believers seeking to share with a wider circle a faith the group already possessed as its common inheritance. In response to Peter's sermon the crowd acknowledged a cohesive community of faith when they asked, "***Men and brethren what shall we do?***"

The answer was not vague, along the lines of "believe and do what you want." No worshipping of God in the mountains on Sunday morning was suggested! The answer was "*Repent and be baptized.*" To receive the salvation offered by Christ was from the very beginning to accept the invitation into the Church that already existed. "Repent and be baptized" means join the community of faith.

When we claim there is no salvation outside Christ's Church we affirm what is already clear in the Easter gospels and the earliest records of the New Testament. Saint Peter offered no alternatives to the Jerusalem crowd! Salvation is experienced and known within the community founded by Christ Himself. It is as the Good Shepherd once declared, "Other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd." *John 10:16*