**2 Easter**

**April 12, 2015**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,**

**The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,**

**And the power of God known in the Spirit.**

**Amen.**

Easter Sunday at St. Cyprian’s was a glorious day! We celebrated the Resurrection with joyous music and beautiful flowers and wonderful fellowship. Yet Easter Sunday was also a significant day in the life of this particular congregation … last Sunday was the 115th anniversary of the consecration of this building. Today is the Second Sunday of our Easter Season, and every year on this Second Sunday of Easter we hear the story of Doubting Thomas from the gospel of John. I have lots of sermons about Doubting Thomas … good sermons … at least I think they are good … but I’m not going to preach this morning about Thomas … or about doubt. Instead, I want to preach about faith, community, justice and compassion. I want to focus on the passage from the Acts of the Apostle which describes the earliest Christian community, and I want to consider our particular community of faith … St. Cyprian’s … and its earliest history.

I am sure many of you know that the author of the book of the Acts of the Apostles is also the author of the Gospel of Luke … these two books in our bible are a two volume set. The first volume … the Gospel of Luke … tells us the story of Jesus, and the second book … the Acts of the Apostles … tells us the story of the early Christian community. The followers of Jesus were convinced that "God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 2:32, 4:20).

These unschooled and ordinary followers of Jesus proclaimed their message with courage and boldness. According to the author of the Acts of the Apostles, converts joined the movement *en masse*, first 3,000 people, then 5,000. And the reading this morning describes this emergent Jesus-community and it helps to explain the appeal of their message and its consequent expansion:

*All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was with them all. There were no needy persons among them. From time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need (Acts 4:32–35).*

The author of the Acts of the Apostles emphasizes the signature characteristic of the Jerusalem believers … in a word, generosity. Their spiritual generosity was marked by radical hospitality. Their social generosity expressed itself in community. And their material generosity was seen in their compassion which treated the other as each of them wanted to be treated. The power of Rome boasted many things … military domination, economic supremacy, political peace, a system of carefully engineered roads, and spectacular architecture. But the genuine community and human compassion of this early Christian community were much more radical and powerful than all these glories of Rome.

These first Christians broke down social barriers. They disregarded religious taboos that distinguished between the ritually clean and the unclean, the worthy and the unworthy, the respectable and the disreputable. They were "one in heart and mind," writes the author. They lived a radical hospitality. They subverted normal social hierarchies of wealth, ethnicity, religion, and gender in favor of a radical egalitarianism before God and with each other: in Paul’s letter to the Christians in Galatia he describes the community: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

A community of radical hospitality that accepted all who wanted to be a part of it, and a compassion expressed in the sharing of resources, was the mark of the earliest Christians … and is part of the DNA of the Christian faith today when it is at its best. This congregation’s commitment … St. Cyprian’s commitment to radical hospitality and compassion isn’t an accident. It is part of our faith heritage … a gift from our spiritual ancestors who worshipped in this sacred space, and it is a part of the origins of this particular expression of a Christian community we call St. Cyprian’s.

Most of you know this history yet I think it is worth repeating in this context. St. Cyprian’s congregation was formed in the late 1800’s when people of color in St. Augustine wanted to worship as Episcopalians but could not attend Trinity Parish because of the prevailing norms of racial segregation. By 1900 they had built this building and on April 5 of that year … 115 years ago ….bishop Edwin Gardner Weed consecrated this holy and sacred space. In 1901 the first fulltime clergy was appointed to serve St. Cyprian’s, the Rev. Peter Williams Cassey. Cassey led St. Cyprian’s during its formative years until his death on April 16, 1917 … 98 years ago this coming Thursday. His legacy of justice and peace, hospitality and compassion is a part of the DNA of this congregation a century after his words reverberated off these walls.

Peter Williams Cassey began his ordained ministry in the Episcopal Church when he was made Deacon in 1866. Cassey was the first African American ordained in the Episcopal Church in California, and it is believed he was the first ordained west of the Mississippi. However, Cassey had years of ministry as a lay person prior to his ordination, and he came from a family that was passionate about justice and took seriously their commitment to their faith community. Peter Williams Cassey’s grandfather was the first African American ordained priest in the Diocese of New York and went on to found St. Philip’s Episcopal Church in Manhattan. Cassey’s family, on both his mother’s and father’s side, were strong abolitionists and were close associates with Frederick Douglass and Horace Greely. Their home on Delaney Street in Philadelphia, where Peter Williams Cassey was born, is on the National Register of Historic Sites.

It was his family’s passion for justice, community, and acts of compassion that Cassey took with him when he first went to California. He established a school for African American, Mexican, Native American, and Chinese students who did not have access to public education because of racial segregation. St. Philip’s Mission School was the first secondary school for African Americans in the West. After his ordination, under the direction of his bishop, the Rev. Peter Williams Cassey established Christ Episcopal Church for Colored People in San Francisco. The congregation later divided into two churches, one of which was named St. Cyprian’s.

In 1881 the Rev. P. W. Cassey returned to the East to serve a congregation in New Bern, North Carolina. The name of the church was again St. Cyprian’s. Interestingly, it is just a few miles from where, as a very young child at my grandparents’ home, I used to play on the banks of the Neuse. In 1894 the Cassey moved to Florida and became Rector of the Church of the Good Shepherd in Fernandina Beach, and then St. Philip’s in Jacksonville, before coming to this St. Cyprian’s in 1901 … the third congregation by that name that he served.

I can only begin to imagine what St. Augustine and this Lincolnville neighborhood were like 100 years ago. I do know that this is the Deep South and racial segregation was the societal norm. And although I have no old sermons or other records Of Cassey’s upon which to base my assumptions, I would also imagine that he brought to this church his passion for justice, compassion, and community. The Rev. Peter Williams Cassey died on April 16, 1917 … 98 years ago this week. At his funeral Bishop Weed remarked that Cassey was “a broad-minded Christian” and “that the example of his life will live to lead many.” I should also note that although Cassey had been ordained a Deacon in the Episcopal Church when he was in California, he was never ordained a priest … again the norms within the Church in the south did not allow a man of color that position.

As described in the Book of Acts, the earliest Christians were known for the way they lived in community, and for their compassion which included the world around them. This community of faith, St. Cyprian’s, was formed to be an inviting community of radical hospitality when the world of St. Augustine and the South divided people by the color of their skin. One hundred years later we stand on the shoulders of people like the Rev. Peter Williams Cassey, and we are called to continue his legacy of justice, community, and compassion. Our commitment to a radical hospitality which welcomes all into this community of faith, and our dedication to a compassion that treats the other as we would want to be treated, is built on the inheritance we have received … the inheritance of the earliest Christian communities, and the inheritance of people like Peter Williams Cassey.

Today is also a sad day in the life of this community since we will be saying goodbye to Barbara and Doug Hepler as they move to Golden, Colorado in a couple of weeks. I will say more about Barb and Doug later in our liturgy, but I thought I’d end with a short poem … a sonnet that Doug wrote after a sermon about St. Cyprian’s history and our commitment to radical hospitality:

Come in. You may have found yourself at last

Within this silent, sunlit sacred space,

And listen as I whisper of the past,

Of those like you I welcomed to this place.

The first were outcast blacks who were denied

Their share of pious Protestant grace,

For guilty hearts could not abide

To pray with Christians of another race.

Then came the ones whose love the church denies

And those whose sin is just not fitting in

Who won’t agree that truth be told with lies

And any one whose soul stirs deep within.

The dark patina of these sacred walls

Every song and every prayer recalls.

*C.D. Hepler June 13, 2012*

Amen.