

Jesus turned the world upside down. He told his followers that to be the greatest, they need to serve others. He challenged the thinking of the time by teaching: **“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”** This was a drastic change for a culture that viewed wealth and power as the things a person should work and strive for.

But then, he died on a Friday afternoon. All that talk, all his words now seemed like everyone else who could talk, but not deliver. That is until Sunday morning rolled around. When Jesus rose from the dead he placed a great big exclamation point on everything he taught and did. The Resurrection had a huge impact on the lives of the early Christians. **Easter Makes a Difference!** That difference was demonstrated by the Christian congregation in Jerusalem.

The book of Acts paints a picture of that church, and it's clear that something dramatic happened in their lives. The Christians who came to Jerusalem from all over the world brought with them a variety of backgrounds, interests and languages. Yet, Luke, the writer of Acts, observes: **“The whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul.”**

Experiencing God's grace in Jesus' empty cross and empty tomb, they focused on one Lord, one faith and one baptism. The truths that brought them together were greater than the things that made them different. A new kind of life flowed from their faith. We don't read of a generation gap or of cliques in this Jerusalem congregation. What we find is believers who were one in heart and mind.

Luke identifies 2 things that set this congregation apart from others. First was the testimony of the apostles. That's saying something considering they had been arrested for preaching that message. They weren't discouraged by the opposition from the Jewish leaders. In fact, it made them preach with even greater passion and courage.

They were bold to talk about his resurrection. Through the power of the Holy Spirit their message changed hearts for Jesus, lots of hearts for Jesus. I mean lots of hearts.

This Jerusalem congregation was a large one, really large. If the number of men was 5,000, like it says in Acts 4:4, then the total number of members must have been at least two or three times that number when you include women and children. In spite of the challenges of a group of this size, they enjoyed a special connection. Their hearts and souls were one because of their connection to Jesus. **Easter Made a Difference.**

The second thing was their generosity. They shared what they had. Faith led them to loosen their grip on their possessions and not hold onto them so tightly. They were big-hearted and generous with their property and possessions making sure fellow their believers had enough.

Yes, some in that congregation were in need and others were able to help. Not all the believers were of the same economic and social class. And yet, they still had this special connection to Jesus. **Easter Made a Difference.**

They saw their **“possessions”** as gifts. Luke writes: **“No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had.”** This is definitely the work of the Holy Spirit. The concept of *“mine”* is deeply imbedded in our DNA. One of the first words kids say (without any coaching) is *“mine.”* The early Christians had a noticeably different perspective. Everything they had was a gift. Since their possessions were gifts, there was no *“mine,”* or *“yours.”* There was only *“ours.”*

The level of giving by these early Christians was amazing. They didn't drop extra change in the offering plate. They didn't pay attention to the age-old guideline of a tithe, or 10%. Luke writes: **“From time to time those who owned land or houses sold them.”**

These were not a summer cottage, or a rundown shack. Selling the places they called home, would require a life-style change. These were not useless lots. Selling income producing land would also require a life-style change s.

Luke makes a special note that the living Lord and God's grace **was powerfully at work in them all.** This was voluntary. The apostles didn't force anyone to do anything. Nor, was this a commune or cult where the leader demands the followers to become poor so they could get rich. Those who sold their homes and lands (not everyone, but some) did so because of what had happened in their lives. **Easter Made a Difference!**

So it's no surprise that **Easter Makes a Difference** and impacts our lives as his followers today. We see how a life of gratitude and generosity is based on God's grace. While it's true, we give to a specific need, request or budget, but our motivation for giving always needs to come from what God has first done in our lives ... his unwavering love and overwhelming grace.

We develop an attitude of gratitude because of God's grace. That's what leads to a life of generosity. But we can ask: *"Why should we give to the church?"* Our lesson gives us a reason: **"They brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need."**

The combined gifts of the early Christians were able to do much more than their individual gifts. We combine our congregation's gifts for outreach with the other 1,300 congregations of the Wisconsin Synod, and the other 56 congregations of the Wisconsin Lutheran High School Conference to accomplish our mission of baptizing in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe what Jesus has taught. By *"Walking Together"* which is what the Greek word *"Synod"* means, we are able to make a bigger impact for Jesus beyond the walls of our own church and school, than what we could accomplish on our own.

Among the believers who provided for needy fellow believers, Luke mentions one in particular. His name will come up in later chapters as a missionary. The Apostles gave him the nickname: *"The Encourager."* As a Levite, Barnabas would have had some duties at the temple in Jerusalem. Maybe that's what brought him from the island of Cyprus. And Barnabas did accompany Paul on Paul's first missionary journey. The first stop they made was on Cyprus.

Easter Makes a Difference! Our lives have been touched with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Because of that, we spend our time to God's glory, use our talents in service to others, and give generously to reach people with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The early Christians weren't tied up to their things. They knew that nothing could compare to the relationships Christ offered with God and with each other.

Easter tells us that our time of grace here on earth is only a tiny dot on God's time line for us. Easter tells us that our troubles and trials here can't compare to what God has in store for us in eternity. When we view our life in that way, how can anything in this world compare with **Easter and the Difference it Makes?**

Easter Makes a Difference ... for you. Are you so weighed down with worry and fear, doubts and pain that you can't see beyond today or tomorrow?

- Because of Easter ... we know that there is so much more to life. We may not have all the answers why God allows us to endure suffering, but, we are assured that the risen Christ knows all about our worry, our fear, our doubts and our pain.
- Because of Easter ... we know that God brings life to hearts that are dead in sin, and he'll empty every grave one day.
- Because of Easter ... we know that we'll see the day, when face-to-face and hand-in-hand we'll be with Jesus.