The Easter readings are rich with images and symbols. The second chapter of Acts begins with the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles. We see their transformation from a cowering bunch to confident missionaries empowered to proclaim the risen Jesus and to spread the Gospel near and far. At this first Pentecost, believers heard the apostles speaking in their own native languages, symbolizing the worldwide mission of the Church; the declaration that everyone is to be included in the Reign of God.

Acts shows individual believers forming themselves into a community. They committed to putting all their goods in common, sharing meals and fellowship, and memorializing Jesus through the “Breaking of the Bread.” These early believers were working out what his death and resurrection meant in the context of community. Through their joyful witness, their numbers grew exponentially.

Community is an ideal that we hold dear and continually strive for. Community is messy, though, whether it is a parish, a family, a workplace or a religious congregation. It doesn’t take long for our humanity to overcome our ideals – we hurt one another, sometimes intentionally but perhaps more often, unintentionally by failing to do what we could, and should do, for another. We can’t do it alone – we need each other to call us back to right relationships when we fail to be our best selves.

In today’s reading Peter challenges the people of Israel as he proclaims Jesus as Lord and Christ, “this Jesus whom you crucified.” Peter’s words “cut them to the heart.” How will they make amends?

From the beginning, justice and the restoration of relationships have been key to Christian community. Peter admonishes the Israelites to “Repent and be baptized.” Turn away from pride, selfishness, arrogance and exclusion; and turn toward love, compassion, reconciliation and inclusion.

We live in a time when many lives are devalued and life itself is devalued. When we think about the abuses so many suffer in our world today, how can we not be cut to the heart when we acknowledge the structural sin and systems of power that benefit us, but cause harm to so many.

Today’s Gospel gives us Jesus as the Good Shepherd. What does the shepherd do literally and figuratively? He (or she) calls, nourishes, protects and guides the flock. The shepherd is always in relationship with the sheep. Are we not similarly called to be in right relationship with the human family?

Jesus promises life in abundance – for all – now and forever. We taste this now through our relationships and in community. But we can’t stop here. How will we bring this abundant life to others?