

Selected reading:

Acts 5:27-32

Theme:

On Easter, God achieves a massive victory. The resurrection is a victory of life over death, and yet it's even more. The resurrection of Jesus has political and economic significance. In raising crucified Jesus from the dead, God has dramatically revealed God's intentions for God's world, bringing our world from the grip of death into the power of life.

Introduction to the readings:

Acts 5:27-32

Peter is ordered by the council not to preach Jesus and his resurrection. Peter resists, declaring that he will obey God rather than human authorities.

Revelation 1:4-8

John declares the triumphant return of Christ in glory when God shall bring to completion God's intentions for the world.

John 20:19-31

Jesus returns to his frightened followers who are hiding in fear behind locked doors. Jesus appears, stands before them, and offers them peace.

Prayer:

Lord, you have appeared to us in your resurrected glory. You show up among us, in spite of our inability to come to you.

Lord, we confess that we are fearful because we live in the grip of death. Our lives do not go on forever. There are limits to what we know, limitations upon what we can do in our world. Amid sickness and tragedy, we learn the power of death among us. There are lots of dead ends, brick walls, and many necessary losses in our lives. Death seems to have the last word among us.

In our worship today, give us faith in your resurrection victory. Help us to see your light at the end of our tunnels. Convince us of the surety of your final resurrection victory so that we might live our lives with confidence, with boldness, and with a sure sense of where we're headed. As in our beginning, so at our end, *you*.

Speak to each of us today; give us the grace to hear and, in hearing, the courage to live, to follow you forth into the bright light of Easter. Amen.



April 3, 2016

Second Sunday of Easter

Acts 5:27-32

Psalm 118:14-29

Revelation 1:4-8

John 20:19-31

Easter Disruption

Encountering the text:

Think of the Acts of the Apostles, Luke's second volume, as "Jesus continued." If you thought the resurrection was a onetime event that occurred in the dead body of crucified Jesus, think again. Resurrection, God's wrenching of life from the grip of death, continues. But now, Jesus is present among these ordinary men and women, working wonders through disciples, turning the world upside down.

Peter, the "rock" of the church, is hauled before the authorities who, after hearing him, order him to shut up about Jesus and his resurrection. Why would these powerful authorities be threatened by talk about resurrection? Who would be afraid of words about Easter? Easter Sunday is, in most of our congregations, the happiest, most well-attended Sunday of the year. Joyful throngs singing full-throated "Hallelujah!" Lots of lilies. What's unnerving about that?

Peter refuses to shut up, testifying that, "We must obey God rather than humans!" The authorities are enraged, perhaps because they are the religious leaders. *They* should be obeying God, too. "When the council members heard this, they became furious and wanted to kill the apostles" (5:33). Like many leaders, they think of leadership as keeping a lid on any disruption, quelling the commotion, preserving law and order.

The good news of Jesus' resurrection is received as bad news by those in authority. Luke shows that the resurrection of Christ provokes a crisis in power: Who is really in charge? Where are we headed? Who holds power?

Here, in the Sunday right after Easter, we are given the opportunity to reflect on the resurrection as a "political" challenge—as a challenge to the status quo. This is the Sunday we are reminded that the resurrection is not simply the raising of Jesus' dead body. The resurrection

is a divine demonstration of authority and power, a divine challenge to all the powers that hold us in their thrall. The resurrection is not simply something that we might look forward to someday; it's a statement about power and rule today.

The resurrection of crucified Jesus is a demonstration of who God is, who is in charge, where we are headed. The resurrection is not only a miracle; it is a victory. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit don't only mean to love, they mean to rule. Death, defeat, sin shall not have the last word after all.

People in power make way. These "uneducated and inexperienced" (4:13) people testify that a new king is in town, and he means to put all death and sin under his feet! The crucified lamb now reigns. That's today's message as Easter continues.

Proclaiming the text:

Something's afoot. Trouble is brewing. The security forces are skittish. The world has been shaken. There has been an unnatural disaster, an unwarranted intrusion nobody expected—the resurrection of crucified Jesus. The authorities, hoping to keep public order, call a state of emergency. The troublemakers, those who attempt to capitalize on the disruption, are rounded up and brought to court to account for themselves. This resurrection commotion must be quelled.

In the Acts of the Apostles, the resurrection is depicted as a veritable explosion that propels Jesus' once disheartened followers into confrontation with the authorities. The bigwigs are not amused. They have the disciples tossed into prison. But an angel delivers them, telling them, "Go, take your place in the temple, and tell the people everything about this new life" (5:20). So the apostles go right back to the temple at daybreak—the same time of the day that Jesus rose from the



April, May, June 2016

tomb—and began to tell the people news about the resurrection.

“In no uncertain terms, we demanded that you not teach in this name. And look at you! You have filled Jerusalem with your teaching” (5:28).

But Peter and the apostles defiantly answer, “We must obey God rather than any humans!” Peter tells the authorities that they will keep telling people about Easter, keep healing the poor without a license, keep stirring up trouble in the ghetto, no matter what the police say.

“When the council members heard this, they became furious and wanted to kill the apostles” (5:33).

Now if you are surprised by the rage of the authorities, then perhaps you have never been an authority yourself. You have never borne the responsibility of power. What’s the most important thing we ask the people in power over us to do? We ask them to provide for public order. Safety. Security. People in power provide us security from external threats.

In the current run up to the US presidential election, candidates eagerly proclaim that they will protect our borders from foreign incursion. They ensure us that we can sleep well knowing they are holding the reins to power.

Long ago, Thomas Hobbes said that this world is such a poor, brutish, and sorry place that we must exchange some of our freedoms for the power of the state to rule over us in order to protect us. Leading up to the invasion of Iraq a historian noted that American women had historically been unwilling warriors, much less convinced than men that we ought to go to war. But when it came to this war, George W. Bush had convinced American women that the security of their families was endangered. An equal percentage of women and men supported the invasion.

Government and the rules under which we live, while they may occasionally curtail some of our freedom, are expected to provide order. For instance, people can’t just go around practicing medicine, dispensing drugs, and doing surgery just because they want to help sick people. No, our caregivers must be credentialed, educated, vetted and approved. Without somebody in charge, without a few people exercising power over the rest of us, it would be medical chaos.

And that’s what bothered the authorities about Peter and the other apostles performing miraculous signs and wonders. We can’t have unlearned, ordinary people running loose, healing, taking

power into their own hands, proclaiming a power let loose in the world greater than the power of the federal government and its functionaries. These things must be done in order, through the accredited and proper channels.

I have served on my church’s Board of Ordained Ministry. We have pages of requirements that people must meet in order to be ordained to leadership in our church. They must take tests, theological and psychological. They must go to seminary and earn a degree. In other words, I have sat where those Jerusalem religious authorities sit. It’s fine for someone to think that they are called by God to be clergy, but this call must be examined, vetted, and the person must be properly credentialed.

Or we will have ecclesiastical chaos.

Oh, it’s easy for you laypeople to criticize the governing authorities, for you to complain about the people who run things from the front office, but as someone who has been a governing authority and occupied the front office myself, I can tell you that you should be thankful for the way we so skillfully protect you from ignorant, unqualified spiritual leaders!

Trouble there is, this is exactly the resurrection-denying mentality that’s being attacked here in Acts 5. Acts portrays the governing ecclesiastical authorities as a bunch of buffoons. The bigwigs up in the front office think they are in charge. They think they can put an end to the post-Easter commotion.

But Luke, the author of the Acts of the Apostles, asserts through these stories that there is a power let loose in the world, a power that God raises from the bottom up, a divine power for good that cannot be contained, accredited, or channeled by the powers that be.

Those who think they are in control are shown to be powerless. And these people on the bottom, these “uneducated and inexperienced” people like Peter and the other apostles, are unmasking the authorities and making them look like fools.

After a long, grueling Board of Ordained Ministry meeting in which we had laboriously accepted and rejected candidates for ordination, in the midst of us feeling rather good about ourselves, one of our younger members asked, “Do any of you worry that in our examining and vetting we are in danger of producing clones of ourselves, robbing our church of the risk-taking, creative leadership our church needs to have a future?”

I ask you: Who would have been offended, maybe even angered by this story? Who would have taken heart and been encouraged, energized, made more faithful by this story? I expect we powerful people in charge would have been as enraged as those members of the council who wanted to kill Peter and the apostles.

I also expect that the lowly and disposed—probably the people who occupied the first fledgling congregations to whom this story was scripture—I bet they would have heard this story of the political tables being turned as nothing less than gospel.

By implication, the story implies a question: *Whose side are you on?* Would I be out with the apostles, going about performing mercy among the marginalized and dispossessed, being audacious with the authorities, refusing to pipe down and be quiet, or would I be sitting behind the desk, telling the “uneducated and inexperienced” to be careful what they said and to act more docile when faced by their betters?

It’s all too easy to think of historical examples of ways in which even the church, maybe especially the church, has allied itself with the forces of death rather than risk life after Easter. I’m thinking of a church I visited in Birmingham, Alabama. In that church, guards were hired to stand at the door of the church on Sunday morning in order to terrify any African American who might attempt to worship Jesus there. I say that I visited a “church” when more accurately I mean to say that I visited an abandoned building. That church died. Of course, you could say that it died due to its racial prejudice and practice of injustice. And there would be truth in that. But I prefer to say that it died due to a lack of faith in the truth of Easter.

Easter: Jesus is on the move, and we can’t be with Jesus unless we’re willing to be on the move with Jesus.

So I guess this Sunday is one of good news and bad news—good news for all those who suffer under the heel of death-dealing authorities who oppress others under the delusion that they are in charge; bad news for any of us who have exchanged the disruptive, life-giving truth of Easter for the lordship of death.

See Peter standing before the authorities that day, the authorities who can’t figure out a way to keep him locked up in quiet, the powerful who have such contempt for Peter’s lack of education and refinement? See the authorities nervously attempting to keep a lid on the commo-

tion, dismissing the claims of the apostles as hysterical babblings of the ignorant?

This Sunday after Easter, where would *you* be seated?

Relating the text:

In *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage, 1979), Elaine Pagels argues that whereas the Christian gospels stress the bodily appearances of the risen Christ, Christian Gnosticism ignored the resurrection of Jesus as a historical, bodily fact and instead depicted the resurrection as an inner, personal experience of enlightenment.

The gnostics were wrong. Easter is more than private, personal, and out of this world. Easter has political significance as God confronts the earthly powers that receive their legitimation from the kingdom of death. These “uneducated and inexperienced” folk know something that destabilizes the principalities and powers.

God wins.

The resurrection is an explosion that casts “witness to his resurrection” beyond all boundaries (1:22). At Pentecost, Peter testifies before the scoffing mob in the street, “This Jesus God raised up. We are all witnesses to that fact” (2:32). Kevin Rowe titles his wonderful book on Acts *Turning the World Upside Down*. Rowe amply demonstrates that the resurrection “is the fount of new reality out of

which the *novum* that is Christian mission emerges.”

If you will note, in the resurrection Jesus is on the move. Jesus, always so peripatetic in his earthly ministry, moving out, going from place to place, is even more in motion in his resurrection. The resurrection is a veritable explosion that propels disciples in mission into all the world.

The church, the missionary explosion into every corner of the world, is all an aftershocks of the resurrection.

Sometime between 177 and 180 CE, with the emperor Marcus Aurelius already persecuting Christians, the pagan philosopher Celsus wrote his *True Doctrine* as an intellectual attack on their religion. When he discusses Jesus’ virgin birth, he never says that such an event is incredible in itself. What is incredible is that it could happen to a member of the lower classes, a Jewish peasant, somebody like Jesus:

“What absurdity! Clearly the Christians have used the myths of the Danae and Melanippe . . . in fabricating the story of Jesus’ virgin birth.”

It was not absurd, in Celsus’s mind, to claim that Jesus was *divine*, but it is absurd to claim that *Jesus* was divine. What was *he* or what has *he* done to deserve such a birth? Class snobbery is the root of Celsus’s objection to Christianity:

“Taking its root in the lower classes, the religion continues to speak among the

vulgar: nay, one can even say it spreads because of its vulgarity and the illiteracy of its adherents. And while there are a few moderate, reasonable, and intelligent people who are inclined to interpret its beliefs allegorically, yet it thrives in its purer form among the ignorant.”

—John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1993), 27.

Easter is presented in today’s passages from Acts as a vindication of poor and ignorant people by a God who acts in their behalf in the resurrection of Christ. In his *Church Dogmatics*, Karl Barth said this:

“The human righteousness required by God and established in obedience—the righteousness that according to Amos 5:24 should pour down as a mighty stream—has necessarily the character of a vindication of right in favour of the threatened innocent, the oppressed poor, widows, orphans and aliens. For this reason, in the relations and events in the life of His people, God always takes His stand unconditionally and passionately on this side and on this side alone: against the lofty and on behalf of the lowly; against those who already enjoy right and privilege and on behalf of those who are denied and deprived of it.” Quoted from *The Doctrine of God, Part 1*, trans. T. H. L. Parker et al., vol. 2 of *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1955), 386.