

Resurrection Witness: Spiritual Empowerment

Acts 5: 27-32

John 20: 19-29

Following Easter last Sunday, the weeks between now and Pentecost in May will typically have selections from the Book of Acts. The focus on Acts is oriented to understanding how the earliest church came to terms with the resurrection.

As was noted last week, a lot of our understandings about the resurrection come from tradition, from understandings that come out of the earliest church and that were developed, revised, and codified by the greater church over the years and in different time periods and world circumstances.

We should be forgiven for believing that everything doctrinal – codified in doctrine - is totally what Jesus was all about. That's pretty unlikely as a blanket statement since events unfolded in ways that Jesus never imagined. For instance, I noted to a church member recently how Jesus never intended to form a separate religion that might be called Christianity. He had no intention of doing that whatsoever. The apostle Paul probably had an inkling of things moving in that direction as he led the mission to reform the beliefs and practices of Judaism well beyond the boundaries of Jewish engagement and into full flung mission to the non-Jewish, or Gentile, world. That alone creates a whole new dynamic in the development of our faith traditions.

The point is that the church has struggled to understand, or at least come to terms with the resurrection from the date of the resurrection. It is the task of every generation, not to utter it and praise it as if it is a truth that stands alone unto itself. Rather, the community of faith is summoned to engage the resurrection as God's work with God's people, and definitely in the context of God's Kingdom. It is to recognize the resurrection as a contemporary event of meaning and purpose here and now. As I said on Easter, there is no indication that Jesus intended us to regard the resurrection as mere transport to the next life without any currently meaningful context.

With this contemporaneous quality to the resurrection, disciples of Jesus need to plumb its depths and discover resurrection power, resurrection faith, and become resurrection witnesses.

Turning to Acts 5, we have a selection of an extended account with some unfortunate jailers. The apostles were creating a buzz around town with their ministry, and this angered the high priest and his associates who were Sadducees. Sadducees were distinctive for their total disavowal of the possibility of resurrection, so you can see where the rub is going to be. They called out the Temple guard and had them arrested and thrown in jail.

However, during the night, an angel opens the jail and tells them: *Go, stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about this new life.* They did as they were told, unbeknownst to anybody.

The high priest convened the Sanhedrin, the Jewish religious governing council, and summoned the Jesus people from the jail. Of course, the apostles were gone, and you can imagine that someone in the jail department was looking for a new job.

It didn't take too much effort to find them, and the temple guard brought the naughty Jesus people before the Sanhedrin for questioning. The Jesus boys were not strangers to the Sanhedrin. Back in chapter 4, they were arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin and told explicitly to stop this teaching about Jesus having been resurrected. This resurrection stuff was wrong because it was contrary to Sadducee teaching, and being High Priest and Sanhedrin, you get to decide these things. It was problematic because it was getting people all stirred up and putting unapproved ideas in their heads. And worst of all, people were listening to their preaching and paying attention to their ministry. Really, the worst offense was a certain degree of popularity.

Unsurprisingly, the exchange starts off: *We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us.* They don't like that Peter and the Jesus freaks seem to have been blaming the religious rulers for the death of Jesus. In fact, it was entirely the decision of Pilate and the Roman administration. That distinction is lost on the Jesus people, and their charge has gotten under the skin of the high priest.

Peter is always the vocal respondent for the group, and he says: *We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. [Peter just had to get that dig in.] God exalted him at his right hand as Prince and Savior, so that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.*

As you can imagine, this ticked off the religious elite really well, as Peter apparently intended. They get away with it again, but we ought to see the insights that it provides.

Peter affirms that they're servants of the Kingdom who must obey God. Their ministry of taking care of the weak and the outcast, of teaching the people about Jesus and the new life promise of resurrection takes them directly against the authorities of the day. The threat of punishment and execution is not an idle one. We may want to look at the apostles' work in Acts and call them "good deeds." The problem is that such "good deeds" as you might regard them do not typically earn scorn, punishment, imprisonment, and invite execution. When the stakes are of that magnitude, we should upgrade our notion of what's going on.

Clearly, Peter and the apostles are defiant and unbowed. Their service to their Lord and his Kingdom trespasses on the toes of the powerful. Shouldn't these bad boys and girls be more careful, get along with others, and obey the rules? Isn't that what we do in the church? Isn't that we endorse in the church? In fact, those values have no real value for the purposes of advancing the Kingdom. They only have value in maintaining the status quo, and that is not what Jesus' ministry was about. In this, the apostles have

figured out that they're called to love, to heal, to be compassionate, to seek equity and justice, and to invoke the spiritual power of new life in the resurrection at the center of their work.

And that's it: the spiritual power of new life in the resurrection is at the center of their work in ministry. It makes them indifferent to crossing boundaries, to threats of imprisonment or violence, and indifferent to the worldly power of worldly authorities. The spiritual power of new life in the resurrection is at the center of their work and authorizes their ministry. The resurrection without that spiritual empowerment misses the whole point.

Let's consider the story of "doubting Thomas" that's unique to John's gospel. You know the story. Preceding our passage, Jesus has already appeared to the disciples who were within a locked room, likely scaring the sandals off their feet. This tradition in John obviously hasn't learned about the Holy Spirit coming at Pentecost in Luke-Acts since here in John 20, *Jesus breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."* Whatever.

Anyway, disciple Thomas was not in the room with the disciples when Jesus appeared. Guess what the other disciples told Thomas about when he returned? That's right: 'Jesus appeared right here, and you missed it!'

Thomas is quite doubtful about this report. Unless he can touch the marks of crucifixion on the body, he isn't buying it. He is feeling pretty smug until a week has passed, enough time for Thomas to dismiss the whole story from awareness. Once it's no longer at the front of Thomas's mind, that's when Jesus appears.

Like the first time, Jesus says to all: *Peace be with you!*" Then, as if aware of what Thomas had responded a week before, Jesus invites Thomas to put his finger here, to put his hand there. Jesus ends by telling him: *Stop doubting and believe!*

Thomas promptly answers: *My Lord and my God!* That's a pretty clear statement of faith.

Jesus told him: *Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*

These words can seem to chastise Thomas for requiring physical proof of the resurrection. Jesus knows that this appearance to Thomas is something that those who come after Thomas will not be blessed to experience. For them, it will simply be a matter of believe or not.

These were intended as the closing words of Jesus in the gospel of John. Chapter 20 then ends with these terminal words: *Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.* Boom! End of gospel. Except that a

couple of other stories of Jesus appearing to the disciples were too good and too important to be left out, and there is another add-on chapter 21. Oops.

The point of this closing is obviously written to draw those who have heard the story of Jesus and his Lordship and his resurrection life to commitment. Doubt is not empowerment, but inertia. In doubt, one cannot experience the spiritual empowerment or the new life. Doubt leaves the hearer short of the goal. The demand to believe made to Thomas gets made to every person who identifies the life and story of Jesus as a source of inspiration and aspiration. While inspiration and aspiration may make it a good story, it does not lead to commitment, to action, to belief. That's the goal, generating workers for the Lord, servants of his Kingdom, active players in the ministry that Jesus inaugurated with his work and teaching.

The teaching of this encounter with Thomas, like the story of mouthy Peter and the apostles before the Sanhedrin, illustrate the spiritual power of the resurrection. It is spiritual power to be seized by believers and turned into the blessings of ministry in Jesus' name. Doubt is a dead end where rational understanding holds the resurrection at arm's length, unwilling to risk, unwilling to commit, and therefore unwilling to break free and serve in ways that pose risk, that challenge established ways, that invite the believer to truly trust and be faithful as a servant for the Kingdom.

The resurrection celebrated at Easter is spiritual empowerment to act boldly, courageously, daringly, and to be witnesses to the good news in Jesus. The good news isn't simply that there is life after death; it is that life is empowered to live, life is empowered to give itself fully and completely in faith.

It is the equally held article of faith that death has no power any longer to constrain or bind or enslave. In the resurrection, life conquers death, belief conquers doubt and inertia, faith moves mountains as the spirit is empowered beyond its former boundaries, and the Kingdom of love and grace, of justice and peace comes closer, in Jesus' name. May we discover new ways to be witnesses to the resurrection, spiritually empowered to serve the Lord and be his blessing.