

Resurrection Power

Acts 5: 27-32

John 20: 19-29

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, in our lives and in the values and aspirations of the community of God's people everywhere. As I said on Easter, there is no indication that Jesus intended us to regard the resurrection as opening the portal to the next life, to an afterlife.

I did say that there is power to the resurrection. However, it is a power that one may not actually want. Yet that power is the culmination of a life of practiced faith.

I've been reading books about community, faith communities in particular. The collection of authors in the book I'm reading now give interesting counsel. Communities are important because frankly there is no such thing as a follower of Jesus apart from a community of faith and witness. Yes, I know there are plenty of people who insist that they are committed to Jesus but have no church affiliation. But the awareness from its beginning is that the journey of Jesus and for us to journey with Jesus is an experience shared in community. It is our modern emphasis on individuality that enables the corrupt notion of an individual Christian. Consider the first question you ask when a person discloses that they're a Christian: 'what church do you attend?' In other words, 'with what community do you affiliate?' There is a lot loaded into that question, but the assumption is that if you're a Christian, you're affiliated with a faith community.

With Jesus focused on the Kingdom life, and that Kingdom life being lived and practiced now, the idea of community – the shared existence of all of God's people – is the center of it. True community requires meaningful relationships with all kinds of people. One relevant criticism of the typical church is that it fails to embrace diversity on one or more levels, leading to an artificial or false sense of community. It isn't too real when we celebrate community and the community is made up of people who are just like us in a whole lot of ways.

With community requiring relationships, we can also stipulate that true community requires certain sacrifices of self for the good of the whole. People wrapped up in their individualism usually stink at doing community, and probably relationships in general as well. They aren't willing to sacrifice or compromise or find meaning in the higher purpose of the community; it is all about themselves more or less.

The path of growth in faith is in large measure the progressive experience of self-sacrifice for others. Community should be the training ground for this to happen. If you are not connected to a community, you will never truly be confronted with the need for genuine and progressive self-sacrifice. The more demanding that a community is in

terms of its ethic of inclusion, caring and compassion, grace and love, then the more one will experience, struggle with, and ultimately get reconciled to sacrificing a bit more of self for the other, surrendering more elements of individualism for the benefit and blessing of the whole community.

Resurrection power comes in the form of recognizing that self-sacrifice is not only possible but *required* for the journey of faith with Jesus. It is the assurance that what you surrender for the sake of the Kingdom will bring new life not only to you but to the community, its witness and its mission. Resurrection power is the blessing that leads to self-sacrifice and draws you closer to understanding and experiencing the Kingdom of God.

As we read in Acts (and in other parts of the New Testament), disciples of Jesus need to discover resurrection power, resurrection faith, and become resurrection witnesses who bring that resurrection power to others and enlarge the blessings of the Kingdom for all.

Turning to our reading in Acts 5, the apostles had created a serious buzz around town with their ministry about Jesus and the Kingdom. This angered the high priest and his associates who were Sadducees. Sadducees disavowed the possibility of resurrection, so you can see where the rub is going to be. They call out the Temple guard, have 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 next morning, the high priest convened the Sanhedrin, the Jewish religious governing council, and summoned those 'Jesus people' from the jail ... except they were not there. Wow, somebody is in big trouble.

It really wasn't hard to find them; they were in the Temple teaching and stirring things up. The temple guard dragged the naughty 'Jesus people' before the Sanhedrin for questioning. The 'Jesus people' 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. When you're the High Priest and Sanhedrin, you get to decide these things. Putting unapproved ideas in their heads was very problematic. And worst of all, people were listening and paying attention to their ministry. Really, the worst offense was a certain degree of popularity.

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 people' 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'; they know who instigated the arrest and the death sentence.

Peter boldly says to the religious authorities: *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 crunches 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 what 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. You can see from their unbending determination that self-sacrifice in their circumstances is a real possibility, and resurrection power works on anyway.

And that's it: the 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 power of new life in the resurrection is at the center of their work and authorizes their ministry. The resurrection without that 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!* There's a 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 were intended as the closing words of Jesus in the gospel of John. Except that a couple of other stories of Jesus appearing to the disciples were too good to be left out, and chapter 21 added on. Whatever.

The point of this closing is that doubt is not empowerment, but inertia. Doubt denies empowerment or new life. The demand for Thomas to commit himself 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 self-sacrifice. That's the goal, generating servants of the Kingdom, not 'individuals saved' or securing a ticket to the good place when you die.

The resurrection celebrated at Easter is empowerment to act boldly, daringly, and to be witnesses to resurrection power **now**. The good news is that life is empowered to give itself, to sacrifice itself fully and completely in faith. Such sacrifice brings blessings.

In the resurrection, life conquers death, belief conquers doubt and inertia, faith moves mountains, and the Kingdom of love and grace, of justice and peace comes closer. May we discover new ways to be witnesses to the resurrection, empowered to serve the Lord, progressively sacrificing ourselves, and be his blessing for all.