

*Sermon delivered by Pastor John V. Carlson on April 29, 2012*

Acts of the Kingdom: Preaching the Resurrection

Yr. B, Easter 4

Acts 4:5-12

Every so often, an event occurs that burns itself indelibly into our minds. Let me see a show of hands: How many of you can remember where you were when you learned that Pearl Harbor had been attacked? How many can remember where you were when you learned President Kennedy had been assassinated? How many of you can remember where you were when you heard that the planes had hit the World Trade Center?

These are events which not only change history, but also change the way we think about the world. They shape our perception of good and evil, of what's important, of what we truly value, of how we're going to live from here on.

I'm quite confident standing here today that Simon Peter and John and Thomas and the other disciples could all tell you where they were when they first heard Jesus had been raised from the dead. Now to be sure, the impact of that information went to a whole new level when they actually encountered the Risen Lord. When you have a little time, go back and look at the end of the gospels of Luke and John and review those stories.

Suffice it for now to say, as I said to you last week, the Resurrection of Jesus is the defining event for the Apostles, and for the early church. And their preaching shows it. And that's the subject of this sermon today.

And our text from Acts picks up not far from where we left off last week: It all stems from the miracle performed by the Apostle Peter in restoring the ability to walk to a man who had been lame from birth. We saw even then, in Chapter 3 of Acts, that Peter doesn't want people to focus on the miracle so much as he wants them to hear the message of the resurrection. Because just as the power of God to raise Jesus from the grave can also bring strength to the legs of a lame man, that same power can bring forgiveness and new life to all.

What followed that sermon given by Peter was the appearance of the priests and the Sadducees, accompanied by the Captain of the Temple guard. The Sadducees in particular play an important role here; a distinguishing feature of their theology was a passionate opposition to any doctrine of resurrection, and so Acts 4:2 tells us that they were "much annoyed" with Peter and John for teaching that "in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead." The net result of this confrontation is that Peter and John are thrown into prison.

That's where our story today begins: After a night in jail, Peter and John are brought into a meeting of the Sanhedrin, the supreme legal and religious court of the Jews in Jerusalem. To give you an idea of the power arrayed there, it would be like coming into court and finding not only the prosecutor and the Judge, but also the mayor and the city council and all the elders of your church, waiting to hear your case and judge you.

Why this effort with two men who have only done the good deed of helping a lame man walk? Well, we've already noted that some of them are concerned about the disciples' practice of preaching resurrection, and perhaps some are also suddenly worried about the rapid and remarkable growth of the Christian community that was taking place. But uppermost in their minds is that they are suspicious of the power they have demonstrated in healing the lame man. Remember, the Sanhedrin is the same group that actively plotted to have Jesus arrested and killed: among those who have gathered are Annas and Caiaphas, names we heard during the time of Jesus' trial. Remember that fact: we'll come back to it in a little bit.

And so their main question to Peter and John is: "*By what power or by what name did you do this?*" What they are eager to know about is their authority for doing anything, whether it be healing or preaching. We saw last week in Peter's testimony that he denied any power or authority on his own merits, but rather performed the miracle "in the name of Jesus." Because this is a Jewish council of officials well-versed in the law, they would know that the second commandment states: You shall not take the "name" of the Lord your God in vain. They know that name and power are intimately connected, and they are looking for any opportunity to short-circuit the apostles' activity. Are they taking the Lord's name in vain?

But now something completely unexpected takes place. A new, unseen character makes an entrance into the story. It is the Holy Spirit, and it is one the single most important presence in the Acts of the Apostles. In fact, if you were to go back and begin reading Acts from the beginning, you'd find that the Spirit has already been mentioned nine times in the story. As he is taken into heaven, Jesus promises that the Spirit will come to comfort and empower the disciples. That coming occurs at Pentecost, sending the disciples into the streets to testify about the Risen Lord. And that same Spirit comes now:

"Then Peter, *filled with the Holy Spirit*, said to them, 'rulers of the people, if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man was healed, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that *this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead.*'"

And now we are at the main point of Peter's sermon, and the main point of this sermon. And for that matter, in one way or another, it is the main point of all Christian preaching: For here is the central feature of Christian faith: the resurrection of Jesus is the foundation for Christian theology and preaching, and it is the basis on which Christian ministry and mission are carried out.

If you were here during one or more Sundays during Lent, you'll remember that during those weeks we focused on the human suffering that Jesus predicted, embraced, and underwent, because the sin of the world inevitably tries to overcome the power of God's goodness. Jesus enters our frame of reference, is tempted as we are, suffers as we do, and dies as we all must. But on Easter, we get the startling and unexpected good news that in spite of the worst that the world can dream up, crucifying the Son of God, sin and suffering and death will not prevail. And because Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead, *everything* changes.

And so, resurrection means not just life beyond death, but new life now, within this life we are living. It means new life for the lame man carried every day of his life to beg at the gates of the temple. And it means new life for all who have been incapacitated by life: through alcohol or drugs, through abuse from family or authority figures, through negative self-esteem and anxiety and depression.

The resurrection means new life and forgiveness for Peter and the other disciples who turned and ran as Jesus was arrested and crucified; and it means new life forgiveness for us, a second chance to make something ourselves--and yes, it also means learning to forgive as we have been forgiven.

The resurrection means that God is not satisfied to let sin and death be the final word, and so it means that what the church is about is making life better, restoring those who have been hurt or wounded or abused; it's about healing the sick, comforting the grieving, sharing sacrificially with those who are poor or disadvantaged. And perhaps most of all, the resurrection is about overcoming fear in this life: fear of not having enough, fear of others getting ahead of us, fear of loss, and especially overcoming the fear of death. The resurrection of Jesus means that God has taken care of all of that. The angel at the empty tomb says to the women, "Do not be afraid." When they meet Jesus on the way home, he says, "Do not be afraid." His message to his disciples when

he sees them again, is "Peace be with you." This, to men huddled behind locked doors, for fear that they might be next to suffer the fate of Jesus.

And yet here they are, Peter and John, standing face to face with the same men who had engineered Jesus' death, telling them that they dare to heal in the name of Jesus, the crucified, Jesus, the risen Lord. Only the resurrection of Jesus can give them the authority and the authority to do such.

So, yes, Peter and John could tell you where they were when they heard Jesus had been raised; even more importantly, they could tell you where they were when they came face to face with the Risen Lord.

And my friends, I make bold to say to you today I want *you* to remember where you were today when you heard the words the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the defining moment of history, and the most important truth of life and faith for you. I want you to remember that you were here when you heard this preacher say that the Spirit is able not only to comfort you in your time of need, but also to empower you to face the fears that this world stirs up in us, and to overcome them.

And one more thing: I want you to remember that you were here when you heard it said from this pulpit that the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is also the fundamental truth of life in the church. Peter says to Annas and Caiaphas and their posse that Jesus is stone which you builders rejected, but it has become the head of the corner. And what that means is that we are all about second chances in the church. It means that forgiveness is the principle on which we seek to base our attitudes and our behavior towards one another. Because as you sit here today, you and the persons around you and the persons across the sanctuary from you, we are all here because we have been forgiven for the big things, the little things, and the things for which we cannot forgive ourselves.

And so when we think about what it means to be a community, a family of believers, what it means to be part of the body of Christ, we have to be thinking forgiveness. We have to be thinking that we are a company of people whose main reason for being is based on the fact that sin does not have the last word, and so with one another, how are we going to communicate that when we make mistakes, when we fall short?

And especially when we think of our mission and our ministry, it is the resurrection which tells us who we are and what we are to do. Because of the resurrection, the Apostle Peter was able to give new life and strength to a man lame from birth. In this story, he symbolizes all those whom we are called to serve: they are the people who come to our clothing closet, the patients in the nursing homes where we minister, the folks who come to the county homeless shelter or to the Mason Dixon food locker; they are children on a Lakota Indian reservation.

The resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is the single most precious truth entrusted to the church, and it is to be shared liberally with the entire human family. The resurrection of Christ is our answer to those sweeping changes of history, and to those day to day happenings, large and small, to which each of us must respond. May it be for all of us together the great good news which alone can sustain our faith and empower us to serve others in his name. AMEN