

Delivered: Saint Paul UMC (Lincoln, NE) on April 25, 2021 (4th Sunday of Easter)

SERMON: A COURAGEOUS COMMUNITY

Series: “A Resurrected Community”

Text: Acts 4:13-22

By Jed Linder

OPENING PRAYER

Let us pray... Gracious God, we thank you for this time together to worship, to pray, and fellowship with one another. And we thank you for this privilege to proclaim Jesus Christ in a safe place. Pour out your Spirit upon us now, and prepare our hearts and our minds for your message to us this day. In Jesus name we pray, amen.

I. INTRODUCTION: LIVING AS A RESURRECTED COMMUNITY

Well, we are in the midst of Eastertide – the season of 50 days after Easter, before Pentecost – and we are taking this occasion to focus in on what the Easter event – the foundational event for the Christian church – means for us as the church.

Remember, the Easter event 2,000 years ago changed things forever. It changed the lives of the followers of Jesus forever. It changed the society in which they lived forever. And it changed the trajectory of history forever, as the world was introduced into a new way of life, a resurrected, Christ way of life, coming from the very first resurrected community.

And during this Easter season, we are looking at this resurrected community in its infancy. We are looking at the life of the very first church as it’s recounted by Luke in the Book of Acts. A small collection of Jewish men and women who were made up of Jesus’ closest friends, family, and followers, all who witnessed the resurrected Lord, and were now telling people about it throughout the city of Jerusalem.

Now last week we looked at the first snapshot of this church community, and we saw it operating at it’s finest. Specifically, we saw the church flourishing as it practiced four hallmarks that distinguished this church as the resurrected community. They all come from Acts 2:42, so I’ll read that verse again [SLIDE: Acts 2:42, without my comments in the brackets]:

⁴² The believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching [that’s one], to the community [that’s two], to their shared meals [that’s three], and to their prayers [that’s four].

Last week we talked about number 2, and the believers’ devotion to a radical kind of koinonia, or fellowship, which featured a loving, equitable generosity guaranteeing there were no needy people among them... everyone had what they needed to live, and to flourish together.

And now this week, we are going to be talking about number 1: the apostles’ teaching. Specifically, we’ll be looking at the tremendous courage with which this community witnesses to the Easter event.

SCRIPTURE

So that brings us to our Scripture for today, but first, let me summarize the order of events that led directly to what we are about to read...

Acts 3 begins with Peter and John heading to the Temple to pray when an older man – who had been crippled since birth, and had been sitting at the temple gates for decades asking for money – asked Peter and John for a gift. But instead of getting money, the man was actually healed, in the name of Jesus Christ, of his disability. And this led to the man jumping for joy and praising God for all to see. Which, of course, amazed all the people there and they begin listening to Peter preach about Jesus and the resurrection. Not surprising, then, this whole thing infuriated the religious leadership, the same group who wanted Jesus dead in the first place, so they seized Peter and John and threw them into prison overnight. The next day the two apostles are brought to trial before the Jewish high court, and there, Peter essentially asks the court, “are we on trial because a man was healed and a good deed done? Or is it because he was healed in Jesus Christ’s name...?”

So now, we finish the narrative with our Scripture for today, Acts 4:13-22 [Begin **SLIDES** of the **scripture**]:

¹³ When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. ¹⁴ But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say. ¹⁵ So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together.

¹⁶ “What are we going to do with these men?” they asked. “Everyone living in Jerusalem knows they have performed a notable sign, and we cannot deny it.” ¹⁷ But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn them to speak no longer to anyone in this name.”

¹⁸ Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. ¹⁹ But Peter and John replied, “Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! ²⁰ As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

²¹ After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. ²² For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old. (NIV)

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church. Thanks be to God.

II. PERSECUTION

If you were with us last week, you undoubtedly recognize that this scene is quite a departure from last week’s passage! The Easter honeymoon we saw the first church community enjoying last week didn’t last long. In fact, it takes just one chapter in the book of Acts for the two most prominent church leaders to already be thrown in jail and have their lives threatened because

they won't stop talking about this guy Jesus! Jesus was supposed to have died on a cross weeks ago, why is he still coming up? Well, that's what this trial was supposed to deal with.

Peter and John had been dragged before the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was kind of like the Jewish Congress and Supreme Court back then, all rolled up into one. And it was made up of many of the most powerful, and the wealthiest, Jewish leaders around. In other words, this was *not* a jury of Peter and John's peers, but the religious, political, and cultural elite of Jerusalem. The same elite who had already helped take care of that Jesus problem the first time before these two uneducated, nobodies showed up. In the elite's eyes, Peter and John are just a couple of fishermen hicks who never went to college, certainly didn't attend graduate school, and had no special training whatsoever, so what do they know?

But what these men in the Sanhedrin failed to recognize back then was the power of the Holy Spirit to raise up anybody to speak the truth. God raises up people from the roots to change the world, to speak out in Jesus' name! It's not, generally, powerful elite, forcing change from the top down. And we need to keep this in mind today just the same! You cannot judge someone on the basis of their education or so-called pedigree. And, yes, I know I say that as someone with a rather extensive educational background myself, to a very educated church congregation with many ties to the University (Go Big Red!) [SLIDE: Go Big Red!]. But, seriously, we can't forget that just because someone doesn't have an extensive, educational background, or meet the qualifications our society seems to prize most right now, doesn't mean they don't have something to say worth listening to. And it certainly doesn't mean, they are not following God's way, and that they can't lead us along that very way.

And so, this reality of how God works, and raises up leaders, forces the elite in the Sanhedrin into a dilemma.

III. CONTROLLING THE NARRATIVE

What they want to do, their first instinct, is just to deny it. We see this all the time, throughout history – when the facts on the ground don't fit someone's narrative, their first instinct is to just deny it. And there are so many examples I could give of this from right now... so many outright denials or lies from the powerful, so many propaganda campaigns from governments or major industries, so many examples of spin and damage control to try to deny what should be clear to all... The problem is not finding an example of this defense mechanism, the problem is the ability to humbly recognize that we are all guilty of this ourselves. We all have our biases, and the narratives we cling to, and they lead us into denying the truth or even denying that there is such a thing as truth. This is one of the biggest problems with partisanship! It invites our loyalties and vision into a narrative, often making us blind to all others. And this is obviously most problematic when it leads us to deny what God is doing right here, right now, in front of us.

But, hopefully and eventually, there ultimately will come a point when the truth simply can't be denied any longer, and that is where the Sanhedrin found themselves. They could't deny that this man who had been sitting at the Temple gate for decades, completely unable to walk, can now stand up, walk, jump, dance, all the while praising God for all the people to see. And they can't

deny that these two men healed this man in the name of Jesus Christ. People had seen it for themselves!

So, what do they do? They turn to the tool of oppressive regimes everywhere; they try to suppress the message from spreading any further. They must silence the voice of dissent. Because any voice of dissent, or any alternative narrative to their own is a threat to their power. The message of Jesus was a threat to their power... that's one of the reasons they sought to have him killed. And now, the empty tomb is a *huge* threat to their power, so they seek to cut off the source of that message – the witnesses to that empty tomb, the witnesses speaking out about that empty tomb, the witnesses speaking out in the name of Jesus Christ!

And at least this time, they seek to silence these witnesses by threatening Peter and John to stop talking about Jesus. Next time they'll end up beating them to try and get them to shut up. And, eventually, Jesus' followers will start being killed in order to shut them up. It's exactly what Jesus warned when he said [SLIDE: of the verse]:

“A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.” John 15:20 (NIV)

IV. COURAGE

So, knowing this, how will Peter and John answer? After all, they don't have the first amendment to point to and protect them. Judging by what happened before, Peter will deny he knows Jesus and they'll all turn and run away, abandoning Jesus because they were frightened by the hostile forces working to silence him... **But this isn't before.** Something big has happened since that last time. When these men went to inspect that tomb after the women told them it was empty, and when these people met with Jesus face-to-face, resurrected and alive, after they had seen him die on that cross, they had come to realize that this movement isn't going to be stopped by the Sanhedrin or anyone else in this world. God has got plans, and they have been called to be a part of them. And so, empowered by the Holy Spirit, these two men turn the tables and ask the most powerful body of elites in Jerusalem, “You're all judges, so judge for yourself... should we listen to you, or should we listen to God?” And that, friends, is the definition of a loaded question! No matter how the Sanhedrin answer, their answer will imply that they are on the wrong side of what God is up to.

And so this is the part of resurrection we're hitting on today: resurrection means courage. It's the courage to speak out in the name of Jesus. It's the courage to stand up and speak out to the forces in the world that seek to silence Jesus and his followers. It's the courage to live out this new way of life, this resurrected way of life, and not be ashamed to tell people about it.

After all, we need courage to actually follow through and live out all of these things we're talking about. Courage is the fount of virtue. It's as C.S. Lewis wrote [SLIDE: C.S. Lewis quote],

“Courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point” (C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*).

And we live a society right now in desperate need of some courage.

V. CONCLUSION: SOMETHING TO SAY

And so, to close, and I mentioned this last Sunday that I'll close like this each week, I believe that as a resurrected community following Jesus today, we have something to say to the world... and... we have access to this deep, transformational courage to empower us to say it – to empower us to live it. We can call on the Holy Spirit to empower our voice – next week we'll actually talk about prayer and doing just this – and that voice is desperately needed right now.

We are surrounded by a world that constantly sends messages of division, selfishness, domination, and refusal to forgive. But ours is an alternative message, a message of unity, generosity, justice and love for all, and we need to share it! Don't be ashamed to speak out in Jesus name. Don't be bullied into silence, or listen to those that say Jesus should only come up inside the walls of the church. Being a part of the church, a part of a resurrected community, and following Jesus, is an awesome thing, we are privileged to be a part of it! So, take the courage you need to go out and tell people about it, and go tell them. And invite them in to this resurrected community themselves. Because the good news of Easter, the good news of Christ, and the good news of being a part of Jesus' church, Jesus' resurrected community, is worth being shared!

CLOSING PRAYER

Allow me to pray...

Gracious God, what a blessing it is to be a part of this church, to live out the message of Easter, and to share that message with those around us. We thank you for it. And we thank you for the privilege to live in a country that allows us the opportunity to go out and speak freely. Of course, despite that freedom, boldly proclaiming the way of Jesus can still be very intimidating. So please, empower us now, as we go forward, with real courage and real conviction, to live out your will for our lives, and the power to tell people about the good news of Jesus Christ. In his name we pray, amen.