

Epworth Chapel on the Green
April 11, 2010
Second Sunday of Easter
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Acts 5:12-29
Psalm 118:19-24
Revelation 1:1-8
John 20:19-31

In this seven week period that comprises the Great Fifty Days of Easter, the lectionary provides us with opportunities to reflect on the impact and significance of Jesus' death and resurrection.

During this period, the customary Old Testament lesson in the service is replaced with lessons from the Acts of the Apostles, where critical events surrounding Jesus' death and resurrection are recalled. As we explore these lessons from Acts in the coming weeks, we will gain a renewed understanding of how Easter relates to the Church's mission, and what it means for *us* to be faithful witnesses to Jesus' resurrection.

Our lesson from Acts today introduces us to a pattern that is typical of the Book of Acts.

First, there is a powerful display of the Gospel, both in word and deed. Luke tells us that the apostles are performing signs and wonders and great miracles among the people in the wake of Jesus' resurrection. People are gathering in the Temple area at Solomon's Colonnade, and the apostles are carrying on Jesus' ministry of healing and teaching.

To give you an idea just how powerful this healing ministry was, Luke tells us that persons were coming from the surrounding villages outside of Jerusalem, bringing those who were sick both in body and spirit and taking them into the streets, in the hope that Peter's shadow might fall across them as he walked by, so that they might be healed (vv. 15-16).

The result of this activity, says Luke, is that "more and more people believed and were brought to the Lord -- crowds of both men and women" (v. 14).

Such high-octane activity cannot go unnoticed for long, however. The high priest and the Sadducees react immediately. This forms the second part of the pattern in Acts, namely, the resistance that comes in response to the powerful display of the Gospel.

The apostles are arrested and put in jail. Their incarceration is short, however, as an angel visits them at night and frees them. He instructs them to go right back to the Temple and to keep sharing the message of Jesus' resurrection.

This reveals to us the third stage of this pattern typical in Acts: once the Gospel message is met with strong resistance, the Gospel message and its messengers are vindicated, setting the stage for an even more powerful display of the Gospel. And often, matters come to a head when the apostles or messengers confront authorities and say, "we must obey God rather than human authority."

This pattern of proclaiming the Gospel truth of the resurrection, followed by stiff resistance and opposition and then vindication of the message, plays itself out throughout the remainder of the book of Acts. And by the end of the book, one truth becomes unmistakable: *The Gospel is irrepressible. Nothing is able to obstruct the progress of God's Word.*

Now this is a marvelous truth. But if we are not careful, it can lull us into a false sense of security. By that I mean that we can be tempted to believe that because Christ is triumphant and the will of God cannot be thwarted, any opposition to the Gospel (and the Church which proclaims it!) is only a token opposition, an opposition without real “teeth” as it were.

The book of Acts, and the rest of Scripture, show us that this is not true. The experience of the apostles shows us that there may be times when we are called on not only to *celebrate* our faith, but also to *defend* it.

When the apostles say to the authorities, “we must obey God rather than human authority,” it is not rhetorical speech. It reflects a reality shown to us by our epistle lesson from Revelation, that the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ, and that Jesus is the Lord of *all* the rulers of the world. Time and history has its beginning and its ending in Jesus, whom God has raised up.

Now here in Boise, ID, in North America, we celebrate this truth today in relative peace. But in other parts of the world, some of our brothers and sisters are proclaiming this message at great cost, and encountering stiff opposition. There are places in the world today where human rulers are not prepared to give up their authority to anyone, let alone Jesus.

Part of our task, then, is to pray faithfully for our brothers and sisters in those parts of the world where the Easter faith is being *defended* more than merely *celebrated*. We can pray for their safety; for the vindication of the Gospel message and its messengers.

As we come to the Table this morning, let us be clear about something. The resurrection of Jesus truly reminds us that as believers our loyalty and allegiance is not to be found in any earthly power or ruler. We take our places along side Daniel and the Hebrew children, the apostles, Paul, Polycarp and other Christian martyrs, in saying that our ultimate loyalty is found in Jesus Christ. And like them, we must be prepared to go where that might lead us.

As you come to the Lord's Table this morning, come as grateful citizens of Christ's kingdom. Come and receive grace to follow him *after* he is risen, even as you followed him *before* he was risen.

I cannot predict where that may lead us in the short term. But I do know one thing: in the long term, it will lead us home.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.