

Scripture Reading:

Acts 5: "17 Then the high priest rose up, and all those who were with him (which is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with indignation, 18 and laid their hands on the apostles and put them in the common prison. 19 But at night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, 20 "Go, stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life." 21 And when they heard that, they entered the temple early in the morning and taught. But the high priest and those with him came and called the council together, with all the elders of the children of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought. 22 But when the officers came and did not find them in the prison, they returned and reported, 23 saying, "Indeed we found the prison shut securely, and the guards standing outside before the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside!" 24 Now when the high priest, the captain of the temple, and the chief priests heard these things, they wondered what the outcome would be. 25 So one came and told them, saying, "Look, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!" 26 Then the captain went with the officers and brought them without violence, for they feared the people, lest they should be stoned. 27 And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest asked them, 28 saying, "Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this Man's blood on us!" 29 But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: "We ought to obey God rather than men. 30 The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree. 31 Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. 32 And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him." 33 When they heard this, they were furious and plotted to kill them."

'Peter Preaches to the Council'

Again we have a very appropriate morning to consider what should be a beautiful passage for us all! As I mentioned last week our journey through the Book of Acts and the Church calendar have come together very nicely this year...

As our children reminded us of the triumphal entry of the Lord Jesus into Jerusalem on Psalm Sunday we noted how once again these same religious leaders were upset that the name of Jesus was filling Jerusalem. To stop the growing impact of Jesus, this same council condemned Jesus to death and delivered Him to Pilate to be crucified as we pondered Friday night.

Now, in order to stop the disciples of Jesus, they are ready to kill them as well: As Luke tells us, "they were furious and plotted to kill them." I will leave you hanging a bit this week and Mike will bring us the end of the story next week.

In our text this morning we see Peter and all the Apostles brought before a hostile council and Peter presents a defense that declares the message we declare each year on Resurrection Sunday! These religious leaders cannot even bring themselves to speak the name of Jesus, referring to "this name" and "your doctrine." Peter gives them a direct answer telling them that they must obey God who told them to be witnesses for Jesus in Jerusalem & then proceeds to give that witness to them:

"The God of our Fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree. Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins."

Just as we do at the beginning our Lord's Day service each week, Peter is making the point that Jesus is Risen... He is RISEN INDEED!

I want to unpack what Peter has said here for a moment and then consider the lessons for us today:

Peter begins by grounding his defense in history and the covenant:

- **The God of our Fathers raised up Jesus!**

Bringing Jesus back to life and establishing the Church that would go to the Gentiles was not a "plan B" that God had to turn to after His people rejected their Messiah. NO, Peter is proclaiming what God's plan had been from the beginning:

- **Jesus had come to Jerusalem at His appointed time to save His people from their sins.**
- **He was raised in power proving He was the Son of God and Savior of His people!**
- **Jesus is now seated at God's right hand ruling in power just as He told these same religious leaders during His trial.**

Peter pulls no punches in establishing their guilt by saying:

- **Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree.**

They had condemned an innocent man and that amounts to murder. These leaders should have been cut to the heart knowing that under the Law false witnesses received the same punishment they intended for those they falsely accused! Peter also uses the Old Testament reference to hanging on a tree to describe the crucifixion. These leaders did not just want to stone Jesus, as they are thinking about doing to the Apostles or will do to Stephan in short order...

- **NO, they wanted to make sure that Jesus and all that He stood for was stopped and that meant a death that clearly communicated that He was cursed.**
- **Peter reminds them of this!**

But what they intended for evil, God meant for good: The high priest Caiaphas had declared that it would be better for one man to die for the nation, thinking it would protect their rule.

- **God used those very words he spoke as the high priest to give us the final prophesy of what Jesus would accomplish.**
- **His life would be given for His people, the price for sin would be paid in full!**

And that is the point that Peter now makes to these same leaders: Jesus, who they murdered, has been raised up by God!

- **Not only has He been raised from the dead, He has been exalted to God's right hand where He is prince and Savior!**

Most of these religious leaders are going to harden their hearts as we see at the end of our text, but we must remember that Peter and the Apostles have been proclaiming this same message in the City of Jerusalem and THOUSANDS have been saved.

- **Did Peter give better sermons in the public square than he does here before the council?**

No, it is the same Good News and Peter explains to these leaders and to all of us why we see different reactions to the same message:

Peter says that Jesus, who is our prince and savior, "gives repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins."

- As Paul proclaims to the Roman Saints, our salvation is from faith to faith
- Our redemption is God's work from beginning to end!

Those who respond to the Good News with repentance and belief have been given the gift of repentance and the gift of faith to receive the forgiveness of their sins based on the work of Jesus!

Those who harden their hearts have not... What we also see here is the message of Luke's orderly account given in reverse order: Jesus, the Prince whose Kingdom is going to fill the earth, is the Savior who has given repentance to Israel, His Church and thus they can know that they have been saved from the penalty of their sins.

Peter declares that the Apostle's, "are God's witnesses of these things and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him." Jesus told the disciples to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria and then to all the world and that is what we are seeing here!

- As we celebrate Resurrection Sunday we should be reminded that we are to His witnesses today

There are several lessons we can learn from this short passage that will help us to be better witnesses: The first involves Peter's declaration that is often quoted: "We must obey God rather than men!"

- Now if we step back and think about this, the religious leaders would agree with that principle!

They would not have argued that Peter should obey them rather than God, no they would argue that **THEY** were the ones who were really in touch with what God was doing!

- We see this often today when we are told that it is OK to have our beliefs, but please don't impose them on others.

These leaders were fine with the Apostles teaching morality and such things and even doing some miracles, they just could not do it in the name of Jesus! A bit later in Church history the Romans had no problem with religions and religious practices as long as you remembered to worship Caesar at the same time.

- Today we can believe just about anything we want as long as we are willing to tolerate what everyone else believes and teaches as well.

When we proclaim the resurrection of Jesus we get the same reaction the Apostles got from these leaders... **STOP IT:** Meaning do not speak the name of Jesus as if it were the only name by which men must be saved!

Our response must be Peter's, but it must be in the same way that Peter handles his critics: Peter does not just say he is following his idea of what God wants, but rather makes the case that he is the faithful witness of the truth!

- We must see that saying "We ought to obey God rather than men" can be a very dangerous statement if it is not grounded in God's revealed truth.

Suppose someone comes up after the service and tells me that God spoke to them in their private devotions and said they should rob a Wells Fargo bank in the morning to help some needy families. I should properly tell them this is wrong because it is stealing, but what if they said in reply, "Who should I obey, you or God?" In this case, I guess my answer would have to humbly be 'both,' because I would argue that I am being the true witness what God has really said.

This is why Peter grounds his response in the history of God’s covenant, reminding them of the evidence that Jesus has been raised from the dead and that thousands have been given the gift of repentance and know the forgiveness of sins.

As Paul instructed the Saints at Colossi, we must let our speech “always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one.”

- **Please remember that Peter and the Apostles have been respectful of this council’s authority even after they crucified their Lord!**

They did not stir up the crowds and try to get the soldiers stoned. They came willingly to this trial and in this way have shown great grace. BUT Peter’s speech is certainly seasoned with salt as he tells them they have murdered the Lord of Glory and what God is now doing in spite of them!

While presenting God’s Good News gracefully and forcefully IS our job which we must carry out faithfully... We must remember at the same time, that the results are in God’s hands.

- **It is legitimate for us to ask why thousands are saved when Peter preaches at the Temple and here before this council we see no fruit.**

The answer is given in Peter’s defense: It is God who grants the gift of repentance and the forgiveness of sins...

- **This should give us great comfort and comes with a warning**

Understanding that it is the Spirit of God who moves the hearts of sinners should bring comfort and confidence to us when we have the opportunities to share the Gospel!

- **The eternal destiny of the person we are speaking too does not depend on how well we formulate our presentation!**
- **We are responsible to be prepared to give an answer and to share the Gospel when we have the opportunity...**
- **God will reward or discipline us accordingly**

BUT we need not be anxious about having the right words to say at any given time because Jesus has sent the Spirit to be our helper.

- **The results are in God’s hands!**

However, we must also heed a warning about pride or presumption:

- **Pride on the one hand where someone like Peter sees thousands saved and thinks to himself, ‘boy, that was one great sermon!’**
- **Presumption on the other where we begin to think we know exactly what God is doing, like hardening the hearts of these religious leaders!**

Sure it would have been easy for the Apostles to write them off and even to rightly fear them as the enemies of the faith...

- **BUT, God had other plans for some of them like the Apostle Paul who may have attended this meeting and who we know watched the stoning of Stephen.**

It should not surprise us to see hard hearts rejecting the Gospel...

- **But we must also know AND remember that God is in the business of turning hearts of stone into hearts of flesh!**

And finally let me say just a few words about ‘evidences’ which is relevant to our text and very appropriate for Resurrection Sunday.

- We proclaim the resurrection of Jesus out of faith and based on the facts of history!

We must remember that we cannot separate these two:

- Again it is God who gives the gift of repentance!

We are not going to be able to argue anyone into the Kingdom or convince them to join with Jesus based on the preponderance of the evidence! *[tell the Schaeffer story about the young man who admitted Christianity was true]* In a similar moment of honesty, these religious leaders might have said something similar: ‘You know, you Apostles are right, Jesus really is the Messiah, but it is not for us.’

Let us consider for a moment the hardness of the hearts we see here this morning in the face of overwhelming evidence: Remember that the council has passed over the miraculous escape from prison that had just happened... Don’t bother me with the facts! But this should not surprise us:

- These same leaders attributed the miracles of Jesus to Satan
- These leaders refused to believe the testimony of God Himself as He stood in their courtroom!
- They mocked Jesus at the cross saying, come down and prove to us you are the Son of God, when they knew better than anyone that God’s Messiah would come as the suffering Messiah as the Scriptures so clearly taught.
- These same leaders refused to believe the first hand witnesses to the resurrection who came to them...

Instead of saying, perhaps we were wrong after all, they simply bribe the soldiers so they will lie about what happened! *[As a side note on evidences, IF the resurrection had not happened there would have been no need for the bribes!]*

-- These same leaders ignored the resurrected Saints who came back into Jerusalem after Jesus was resurrected to be His witnesses. Think of those skeptics who say, ‘well if someone came back from the dead and told me the truth then I would believe’

- Finally, they have refused to believe what their own eyes saw at Pentecost, and the miraculous changes in the people who are now living as the Bride of Jesus.

As we reviewed the Words of Jesus from the cross on Friday night we heard again how Jesus asked the Father to forgive them for all they had done to Him

- AND they could be fully forgiven based on the great sacrifice that Jesus Himself was making on that cross!

However, now they stand in danger of hell fire because they are sinning against the Holy Spirit by refusing to hear the testimony of the Church, the Bride of Jesus which the Spirit came in power to establish after the ascension of Jesus. It is the same with anyone who is presented the Gospel today:

- It does not matter what our load of sin might be when we hear the that Jesus paid the price for all of our sin:

Some of those who responded in these early chapters of Acts had gone so far as to cry out for crucifixion of the Son of God Himself. The thief on the cross who asked for forgiveness was obviously guilty of various capitol offenses and yet he could be forgiven on the spot.

- **The only sin that cannot be forgiven is the refusal to heed the call to salvation from the Spirit!**
- **This is true for those in the world who we need to evangelize...**
- **AND it is true for those in God's covenant who come under discipline from God's Church.**

So is there any value in evidences?

- **Each year as Easter rolls around we see various lists about the proofs for the resurrection of Jesus**
- **Many good books have been written like Josh McDowell's Evidence That Demands a Verdict**
- **We spend a lot of time here at Church of the King learning the facts of history and what they mean!**

So yes, evidence is important and we simply must remember to keep them in the proper perspective. Moses reminded God's people near the end of his life that, "The secret things belong to Jehovah our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law."

- **ALL of the evidences that these religious leaders refused to believe have been revealed!**
- **As such, they belong to us and to our children that we may do all the will of God in our lives.**
- **The overwhelming evidence for the resurrection of Jesus informs and emboldens our faith and makes us better witnesses!**

We are to know the power of the resurrection:

- **We are to know that power intellectually and practically**
- **It is to be a matter of the heart and the mind**

BUT we must remember that it is so in our lives because God has granted us the gift of repentance and the forgiveness of sins!

- **Unless God exchanges a heart of stone for a heart of flesh, a person cannot know the power of the resurrection in either their heart or their mind**
- **AND we will certainly not be able to win their heart of stone by convincing their mind!**

We are here this morning to celebrate the resurrection power of Jesus! As our church calendar focuses our attention on the passion week with Palm Sunday and Easter it is good to remember the facts of history! However, we must also remember that we gather each and every week as the people of God to celebrate the resurrection power of Jesus.

We must remember that we still heed the call of Peter where he declared: "We are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him!"

We will continue to proclaim: He is Risen!

Communion Meditation: Psalm 23:

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me All the days of my life; And I will dwell in the house of the Lord Forever."