

## FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER | APRIL 25, 2021

ACTS 4:5-12 | PSALM 23 | 1 JOHN 3:16-24 | JOHN 10:11-18

We're spending some time in this Easter season thinking about the relationship between belief and practice. Last week, we heard a story from the book of Acts of Peter and John healing a man outside the temple and giving a speech about how Jesus has been raised from the dead. A belief in Easter leads us to practice witness. And this week we're going to continue that story as we hear about the fallout.

What happens to Peter and John after they heal this man? Luke tells us that they are arrested by "the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees." And this arrest isn't an orderly or professional affair. In the Greek, Luke tells us that Peter and John are *ephistēmi*. The emphasis here is on the speed and physicality of the arrest. Literally, Peter and John are "stood upon." Overpowered. Assaulted. Thrown into prison.

It's a pretty dramatic scene. And you would imagine that the religious leaders would have had some very strong reasons for reacting so violently, right? Maybe they feared for their lives? Or they thought Peter and John were a threat to public safety? Well, no. Luke tells us that they were "annoyed."

Before we get to Peter's famous speech about cornerstones kept and rejected, it's worth stopping here to reflect on the leaders' annoyance. Because so often when we read scripture, we expect to find these dramatic binaries. Life and death. Darkness and light. Good and evil. Saints and sinners. And we live our lives trying to get on the right side of that line. Trying to perform noteworthy acts of charity and avoid easily recognizable acts of malice. And if you're not sure what to do, well, just don't do anything. Keep your head down and try to stay out of trouble.

But that isn't how Luke views the world at all. For Luke, the thing that prevents people from entering the kingdom of God is not their tendency to make bad choices when faced with difficult decisions. It's their indifference. It's not a coincidence that in his gospel and in Acts, the people Luke has the harshest words for aren't the people who commit sins. Not the people who try to get involved in the world but keep messing up and falling short. No, the people he's harshest with are the people who, at the end of the day, really just don't care.

To put it in this story's terms, the people Luke tells us are a real threat to the good news aren't the ones who hear Peter preaching the resurrection and start theological arguments about whether the resurrection of the dead is theoretically possible. The people Luke is concerned with are the ones who hear Peter preaching the news of the resurrection and call 311 to put in a noise complaint.

Part of the point Luke seems to be making here is that the even though we live in the light of the resurrection, we still live in the shadow of the cross. Jesus has been raised from the dead and the powers of death have ultimately been defeated, but the world goes on looking pretty much the same. In fact, it shouldn't be lost on us that the trial Peter and John undergo sounds an awful lot like the one Jesus underwent. The process is orderly and someone ends up dead, but it is never anyone's responsibility. The soldiers can blame Pilate. Pilate can blame the religious leaders. The religious leaders can blame Judas. And at some point, people just stop caring. The road to Jerusalem is lined with crosses, but people just want to talk about the potholes.

No one benefits from that more than these religious leaders. Who create a world, a system in which they never have to be judged or held accountable or challenged in any meaningful way. But it's by shutting themselves off from human judgement that they open themselves up to divine judgement. Which is exactly what happens in Peter's speech. Peter's speech reveals that this is not a

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contest of Jews versus Christians.<sup>1</sup> This is not a contest of people who think the resurrection is theoretically possible and people who think it isn't. It's a meeting of people who believe that God can transform the world against people who believe the world they inhabit is of their own making.

Peter begins his speech by announcing, "The stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone." This is a callback to Psalm 118. But he doesn't just quote the psalm verbatim. He changes it in this super interesting way which only becomes evident in the Greek. You would think that "rejected" would be *apodokimao*.<sup>2</sup> That's the word you use when you take a close look at something and decide it isn't what you want. You pick it up, you study it, and you decide to set it aside and use a different a stone. No, Peter says that the religious leaders *exeutheno*. The literal translation is "considered it naught." You didn't even look at it. It's as if they threw it out with the packaging. The problem isn't that the religious leaders set all the evidence before them and, after careful deliberation, make the wrong choice. The problem is they're not even paying attention.

And that ends up being their undoing, Peter says. Because the stone that you overlooked, Peter tells us, was actually where God was creating a new reality. The religious and political leaders crucified Jesus, rejected him, and threw him on the scrap heap outside the city. And that is precisely where the kingdom of God begins to manifest itself. By pushing God away, they bring God closer. And by making Jesus weak, they reveal God's power.

And the same thing happens in this story from Acts. Peter and John are just two guys when they get assaulted and thrown into prison. But when they emerge from prison the next day? Suddenly they have five thousand more people. Whenever anyone tries to drive away or intimidate or throw away the people of God, they only come back stronger. And the power of God only becomes more evident more evident.

When we started getting into Acts a couple weeks ago, I said that one of the ways to approach these stories from Acts was by asking what the resurrection had changed. Don't just read them as one story strung along after the next. But ask *What does Easter make possible in this story that wasn't possible before?* Today's reading from Acts gives us one subtle but surprisingly powerful answer. Easter makes it possible to care. It frees us from the prison of indifference. It prevents us from comforting ourselves to death. And it enables us to see one another the way God sees us. That there is no one who is disposable or expendable and without whom the kingdom of God can flourish.

That might not seem like much, but it's the foundation of our life together. After all, St. Luke tells us, the danger to our own salvation is not that we will try to create a more just world and fall short of our ideals. It is not that we will follow Jesus and discern our callings but then make the wrong choice. No, Luke tells us, our souls are imperiled when we see injustice around us, the stomachs emptied, the eyes blinded, and the bodies stood upon, and merely become annoyed.

Because it is among those whom we find it easier not to regard, those whom we consider naught, and those whom we find it difficult to care about that the kingdom of God emerges in our midst.

After all, the stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of "Christian" really doesn't exist at this point.

<sup>2</sup> Since the psalm is written in Hebrew, these are the Greek translations based on the Septuagint.

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