

## **A Surprising Turnaround**

April 28, 2019

Scripture: Acts 5: 27-32

*27 When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, 28 saying, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us." 29 But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority. 30 The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. 31 God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. 32 And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him."*



Today we begin a new sermon series from the Book of Acts called "The Unexpected Acts of God". The resurrection of Jesus Christ sets off a host of unexpected events and changes for His followers. During our last sermon series, the focus was on how God first moves within us and then seeks to move us out into the world to share our faith with others. The idea of moving out into the world to share faith is certainly one of the central themes of the book of Acts. As we journey with the early church, I hope and pray that it will awaken a new desire in each of us to experience God's work in the lives of unsuspecting, ordinary people like ourselves. In the process, I hope that we learn to welcome an unpredictable God and come to expect the unexpected. I hope you can join us for this seven-week series as we explore how God continued to expand the

church's understanding of faith and the scope of His love and how God sought to include more and more people in the family of faith. Let us pray...

In the last chapter of our Lenten study entitled "The Gift of New Creation", author Paul Miller plays with this idea of being Easter or event people versus being Jesus people. For a moment of two, join me as we ponder if we as individuals and if we, as the body of faith, are event people or Jesus people. Miller would argue that the folks in churches today are mostly all event people. Event people fall along a spectrum. On one end of the spectrum, Miller places the folks who come every Sunday morning to church or every Wednesday to MYF or once a month to Trustees or whatever. People who see faith as being present because you are supposed to be present are labeled as event people. On the other end of this spectrum Miller places those who attend on Christmas and Easter, who want to stand up front when it is time to say "I do", and who want to lie up front when it is time to depart from this earth. These too are event people. While "event people" are no doubt present in every church, I disagree with his assertion that most Christians are event people. Here, in this church, I look around and see many people who have a much deeper and richer faith and seek to live out the relationship they have with Jesus.

Miller believes that the church in general became about events as soon as it began to function as an institution instead of as an ongoing circle of friends. The early church, as an institution in an unwelcoming world, needed both a hero and a compelling narrative. The hero of the story was Jesus. The compelling narrative that formed was around the events of Holy Week: the last Supper, the

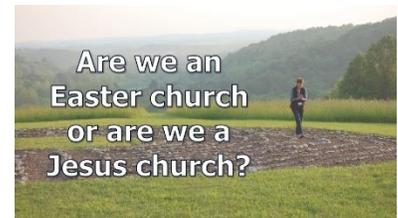
crucifixion, the empty tomb, and so on. Early on, Miller believes that most Christians became Easter people. Do not get me wrong, I truly believe that the events are important. Last Sunday we celebrated Easter. The resurrection of Jesus Christ was one of the greatest surprises the world has ever known. Jesus defeated both the power of sin and the power of death in one event - the resurrection. The resurrection changed human history forever. The simple fact is the story of the passion and the resurrection continue to lead people to faith. It is a powerful event.

Miller calls the resurrection the “catalyst for the spread of Christianity”. It set Jesus’ followers in motion as they lived out the commission to make disciples of all nations for the transformation of the world. This is what we will study in the book of Acts. The first believers were deeply moved by the life of Jesus, by His character, and, likewise, by His death on the cross. The early followers focused in on the humble servant who became obedient to death on the cross and they wanted their lives to look like Jesus’ life. They made their life about being Christ-like in the world. Some even sought to suffer as Jesus had suffered – to suffer for the world and for one another. The early disciples and followers of Christ were clearly Jesus people. When I think about our congregation, I see many who are also Jesus people. As we talked about this idea at the back table this week, many of your names came up.

The earliest church lived with the resurrection as one of their central beliefs but, even more so, they lived as people of love in the world. The world looked at the early church and they were amazed by their love. In the book of Acts, we will

see that the growth of the church was fueled by Jesus people, not by the institution that would come later.

Today, Christians can still struggle with this idea. It is the idea of “we are the church” versus “being the church”. Put another way, it is the idea of the church being the people versus the church being the four walls and all the stuff inside. As we were invited to look within and to contemplate our faith and our personal relationship with Jesus during the season of Lent, during the season of Easter we are also invited to personally consider the question: are we an event person or are we a Jesus person? Put another way, do we belong to the church or do we belong to Jesus? Our individual answers to these questions lead us to our corporate question: are we an Easter church or are we a Jesus church?



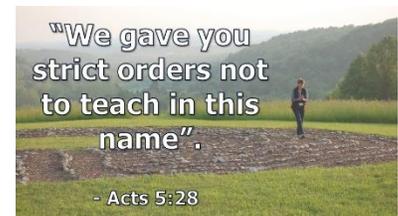
If we step back to Holy Week for just a moment, we recall that right after His death, Jesus’ followers were fearful and unsure of themselves, their faith, their future. They were terrified by watching what Jesus went through on His journey to the cross. If it could happen to Jesus, what about them? Some of Jesus’ followers hid and others scattered. The disciples knew that to associate with Jesus during this time could mean a cross for them as well. In a general sense, we all find ourselves here at times. We worry what standing up for our faith and for our Jesus might bring. We hide our faith when we are with certain people or in certain situations. We have all made the decision to keep quiet or to lay low at least once in our walks of faith.

In the early church, Peter quickly emerges as one of the leaders. But what a change this was from the Peter we saw in the courtyard of the high priest in the passage that we read last Thursday night. In one of Jesus' greatest hours of need, Peter denied even knowing Him, just as Jesus had predicted. Far from being an isolated event, this is the same Peter who slept in the garden when Jesus asked him to stay awake and pray. This is the same Peter who doubted when Jesus asked him to let down the nets. This is the same Peter who, along with the other disciples, told Jesus to send the people home because there just was not enough food to feed all of them. Perhaps you can relate to Peter. At times in my faith life I have pretended not to be a follower, I have failed to act, I have doubted, I have wanted to send people away rather than trusting God to do the miraculous.

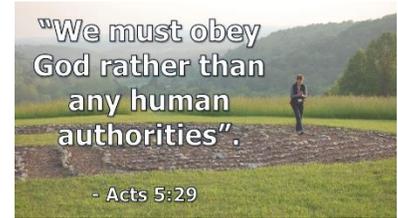
In each and every case, though, Peter saw a surprising turnaround as God did the unexpected. We remember that the nets were filled with fish, that the 5,000 were fed (with plenty of leftovers), that the tomb was empty, and that Jesus could use a guy like Peter – one who had denied even knowing Him. God surprised Peter again and again by doing the impossible, the wonderful, the unexpected, the miraculous. In the same way, our God can use even you and me. In the same way, God can and will guide us through our doubts, failures, insecurities, whatever to use us too. When we become willing, God will show us the impossible, the wonderful, the unexpected, and the miraculous too.

As the book of Acts unfolds, Peter becomes more and more sure of his faith in Christ alone. In today's passage, it is Peter who had makes an amazing turnaround. Just to catch you up to where we are today in Acts 5, a little review of what has been happening. In the opening verses of Chapter 5 the apostles have been boldly proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ and, as a result, were thrown into jail by the high priest. But during the night an angel comes and releases them from jail. Upon being released, God tells them to go to the temple the next day to preach about the resurrection of Jesus. The apostles go to the heart of the Jewish faith, to the temple, and begin to preach. They do again what they were just arrested for. Talk about being bold for your faith! Instead of running away or hiding, Peter and the other apostles obey God and then stand up to the high priest and other religious leaders when questioned.

The temple guards arrest them once again and bring Peter and the apostles before the high priest and the rest of the ruling council. The high priest reminds them, "*We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name*". We are in charge here. Listen to what we say! Do not keep spreading this good news!... Have you ever been there? Have you ever found yourself in a position where you were told not to talk about faith or had the feeling that it would be better if you did not bring up the subject of faith? Have you ever been called into the principal's office to be reminded that teachers are not to talk to their public-school students about faith and Jesus? We can relate to how Peter and the apostles must have felt.



When confronted with doing exactly what they were told not to do, Peter and the other apostles respond by saying, "*We must obey God rather than any human authority*". What a surprising turnaround! From running in fear from the cross to standing in the temple courts proclaiming Jesus' name

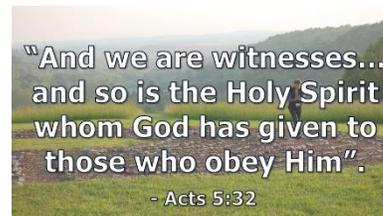


and the story of His resurrection. From denying and abandoning Jesus to standing up for what God is calling them to do. Peter has been surprised by God over and over - so much so that he has learned to expect God to surprise him. No matter how bad the situation appears, Peter has learned to trust in God because God always has something up His sleeve, God always is there. Because his trust has become absolute, Peter has become a new person. Peter has gone from being afraid to even identify with Jesus to standing in the heart of the opposition's territory, preaching in Jesus' name in the temple. He, like the other apostles, are great examples of a complete turnaround in faith.

Peter and the apostles are so bold that they go on and explain the situation to the religious leaders. They inform the leaders that God has raised Jesus up and that He sits at the right hand of God "*so that He might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins*". The same forgiveness that Jesus Himself extended to the outcasts, to the lame, to the adulterous woman, to one and all, continues to be offered, yes, to Israel, to one and all. This is part of the good news that the apostles have been proclaiming. This must have stung the ears of the religious leaders. The apostles were saying that faith in Christ alone leads to repentance and brings forgiveness. Therefore, there is no need for the temple sacrifices and the priests who administer them. The disciples are implying that even the religious leaders and all else that is connected to that world of ritual and tradition

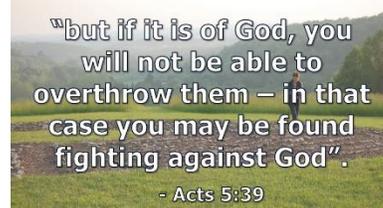
are not necessary for the forgiveness of sins. Pretty bold statement to make to the men who have just had you arrested. But they do not even stop here either.

Peter and the apostles continue speaking boldly, saying, *"And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him"*.



The apostles are starting to claim their authority. They were there – firsthand – they are witnesses to the risen Lord. As proof of the truth of their witness and as testimony to their obedience to Christ alone, God has given them the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Even the religious leaders saw Jesus as one who had the Spirit of God upon Him. Now they have a roomful of men who have been indwelt by that same Spirit.

If we press on in Acts 5, we read in verse 33 that the religious leaders are *"enraged and wanted to kill them"*. But one of the Pharisees, a respected scholar of the Law, steps up and speaks. After having the apostles removed from the room, Gamaliel offers some words of wisdom. In verses 35 through 39 he advises them to trust this situation to God. He rightly asserts that *"if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail"*. Gamaliel then goes on to remind them of this truth: *"but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them – in that case you may be found fighting against God"*. The Jewish ruling council sees the wisdom of Gamaliel's words. The council calls the apostles back in, has them flogged, and orders them once more



not to speak in the name of Jesus. As we sit here roughly 2,000 years later, you can probably guess that the apostles did not follow these orders either.



Now hear the rest of Acts 5, verses 41 and 42.

*"As the disciples left the council, they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name. And every day in the temple and at home they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah".*

They are Jesus people. Because the apostles witnessed the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and because they had received the gift of the Holy Spirit, the apostles make an amazing and surprising turnaround. The apostles will boldly continue to preach the good news of Jesus Christ. Many of them will do so until they suffered what they saw as the supreme honor, dying as martyrs for their faith. Through the scriptures, we too have witnessed the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We too have received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus has worked a surprising turnaround in our lives as well. We were once people of the world. We are now Jesus people. Like the early church and like the first apostles, may we too go forth to boldly proclaim the name of Jesus, bringing healing and hope, light and love to the world. May we be courageous Jesus people, being Christ to all we meet. Amen.

**GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve**

- 1) Grow. Where are you being called to obey God rather than the laws or words or ways of the world?
- 2) Pray. With whom or where have you felt inhibited to share your faith?  
Pray that the Holy Spirit would show you the way to share.
- 3) Serve. Allowing our faith to work is a great way to witness. How can you boldly share the good news of Jesus Christ through a good work this week?