

Pastor Joe Polzin
Acts 5:29-42
“The Workings of God”
Year A – Second Sunday of Easter
April 19, 2020

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our risen Lord, Jesus Christ.

Amen. Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*

It was a tense moment in the history of Christianity. In fact, these were the first days of a movement that was still in its infancy. In Acts chapter 5, the apostles hadn't even left Jerusalem yet after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, and after the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. So far, they had been boldly proclaiming the name of Jesus in the temple, and gaining “multitudes of both men and women” (Acts 5:14), people who were repenting of their sin, receiving God's gift of Baptism, and believing in Jesus as the Christ. But they were about to be tested in a big way: the first time they had to face suffering and persecution for the name of Jesus.

They had been warned previously by the Jewish High Council not to preach in the name of Jesus (4:18), even though the apostles had already proven their message with miracles from God. But now, since they continued to share the Gospel, all twelve of them had been rounded up by the high priest and thrown into prison (5:18). That night, they were released by an angel, and the apostles went right back into the temple to preach and teach. And the high priest couldn't arrest the apostles because of how popular they were with the people, but he summoned them before the council one more time.

The high priest berated them for disobeying his orders, to which Peter and all the apostles famously replied, “We must obey God rather than men.” They went on to confess that this Jesus, whom the council had condemned and crucified, was raised by the God of Israel so that, as their Leader and Savior, Jesus could bring repentance and the forgiveness of sins to Israel. The apostles *had* to be witnesses to these things about Jesus, because the Holy Spirit was too.

And that's when things got tense. Just as with Jesus when the high priest was convinced that he had uttered blasphemy, the council became enraged. They wanted to kill the apostles immediately. Things were beginning to look grim for the early Christians. As quickly as everything started, even with all their miraculous successes, it looked like Christianity was going to be snuffed out right then and there by the same people who snuffed out the life of Jesus.

But that's when a voice of reason cut through all the noise. A Pharisee named Gamaliel spoke up. And Gamaliel was a teacher of the law, someone honored to this day in both Christian and Jewish traditions. In fact, later in Acts, the Apostle Paul mentions that he had studied at the feet of Gamaliel (22:3). And here, we see why he was considered to be so wise.

After referencing two other instances where rabble-rousers rose up but then quickly faded away, Gamaliel suggests to the council to take care with what they decide to do with these apostles. He says, “So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!” (5:38-39). The council ended up taking his advice, and so they beat the apostles, charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.

Gamaliel talks about the undertaking of God, the workings of God. I'm sure in their minds, the council thought they were the ones doing the works of God. And they were convinced this annoyance of a group preaching about a man named Jesus, who was supposedly raised from the dead, was eventually going to fade out, because it was simply the workings of man. It's just how things go in history, like Gamaliel said. Unless, of course, they were wrong, and the apostles were right. And Jesus truly was everything he said he was. Then, they would find themselves opposing the workings of God himself.

What becomes apparent throughout the book of Acts, but also all throughout all of world history, is that the workings of God, that is, the things which God seeks to do through his Church for the sake of the Gospel, cannot be opposed. Not by man, not by this world, not even by the evil one. And even through incredible hardships and persecution, God is faithful to preserve and prosper his Church, so that his purposes would be fulfilled. The good news about God's Son being raised from the dead and seated at his right hand for the forgiveness of sins and for the salvation of mankind went out to the ends of the earth, just as he commanded his apostles to do.

I don't know about you, but I find great comfort hearing about what the Christian Church had to go through in those early days. Every year in the Easter season, we hear the Church's history from the book of Acts, the Acts of the Apostles, as it's known. But more accurately, it's the history of the Acts of God through the Apostles. The workings of God and how he acted in history. How he enabled this small band of Christians to not only make a difference in their day, but to make an eternal difference in the history of our world today.

Sometimes, in our lives, we can get so caught up in the heaviness of the moment that we lose sight of what God is doing. And don't get me wrong, the present moment can truly be heavy. We face all sorts of adversity in this life. Temptation, sin, hardships, financial worries, physical concerns, concern for loved ones, conflicts, wars, pestilences, pandemics, diseases, persecution, and even death. God's people in the Bible, and God's people throughout history, have faced all of these things. And so do we. The present moment is often heavy.

But our God is bigger than any moment, or person, or attack from the enemy. And he is able to work through such things for his own purposes. Consider Jesus. Consider all that we just finished hearing that he went through during Holy Week. The pain. The suffering. The evil he endured. The intense heaviness of the moment. And that doesn't even consider the immense spiritual weight that Christ had to carry as every sin of every person from every time and place was put on his shoulders, and the weight of the condemnation from his Father that he bore in our place.

What looked tense and tenuous at best, especially as Jesus' lifeless body was placed in the grave, this was all part of the workings of God. It was all part of God at work. Because on the third day, on Easter morning, as we celebrated last Sunday, Jesus is alive! *Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!* He overcame all sin. He overcame all death. And he comes to you with the promise of eternal life. That no matter what may happen in this world, in your life, he *will* raise you from the dead, and you *will* live forever, free from worries, pain, disease, or suffering.

The apostles lived through all of that with Jesus. And that's why they were there, standing before the council in Jerusalem, not knowing if they were going to live or die. Of course, it was a heavy and difficult moment in their life, but their faith was grounded in something far greater. They knew they were part of the workings of God, that is, his mission to share the good news of Christ's resurrection with the entire world. And whatever part God had deemed necessary for them to do in his plan, they considered themselves privileged even to be there.

Did you catch what their reaction was? What they did after they were beaten and warned by the council not to say anything? It says, “They left the presence of the council, *rejoicing* that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus” (5:41-42). When the apostles suffered, they *rejoiced*. Because they knew, whatever momentary affliction they had to face, it was all part of something so much better, so much greater, so much more wonderful than the present moment. They were simply humbled that God had had grace on them, and that they were invited to be part of the workings of God.

This is what Peter wrote about much later in his life, probably about thirty years later, in our Epistle Reading from 1 Peter. We’ll be reading from 1 Peter throughout the Easter season in church, and we’re also studying it for our Bible Study online, which I encourage you to join us. But Peter, nearing the end of his life, writes, “In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:6-7).

Peter is saying, trials and hardships and even persecutions will come. This was not going to be the last time the apostles were persecuted. They would have a lifetime of it, and all of them would eventually face death because of their faith. And for us, we constantly live through difficult times. Just look at this pandemic we’re in, not to mention all the other hardships with which we are afflicted. That’s what life is in this world. But like gold being refined by fire, your faith gets strengthened by God, because you realize your faith isn’t dependent on how things are going in the present moment. Rather, your faith is dependent upon Jesus, who was raised from the dead, and who is coming back one day to raise you up to eternal life as well. And so you can face trials in your life, knowing God bringing you one step closer to the day you’ll see Jesus face to face.

And knowing that your eternal life is that secure, that no plan, no working of this world can touch it, God enables you to do some pretty amazing things. Things like the apostles did, like rejoice when they were persecuted. Or as Paul says in 1 Thessalonians, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks,” not just sometimes, but “give thanks in all circumstances.” Why? “Because this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (5:16-18).

We aren’t shaken by the things that happen in this world. Yes, we may temporarily stumble, and sin, and need God’s forgiveness. That’s what we see in our Gospel Reading with Thomas. And like him, we repent, and return to our gracious God, who forgives us and strengthens us. And then, once again, we are simply humbled that God had grace upon us, and that we are invited to be part of what he’s doing in this world, part of the workings of God.

What is God doing? It’s the same as with the apostles. God’s mission is to preserve his Church, to work through his Church to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ, his Son, to the ends of the earth, and to not lose a single one of his saints until the day when Jesus returns again on the Last Day. We may face trials and tribulations, we may even face our death, but God who is faithful promises to work all these things to his glory, and for our eternal good.

There’s no doubt we’re in a difficult time right now, but have you noticed how many positives there are that otherwise wouldn’t be possible? As Christians, difficult times like this drive us even more into God’s Word and into prayer. God can use this time to strengthen our faith, like gold purified in fire, and draw us even closer to him. And this time can also strengthen our witness for Christ. Nowadays, you can easily strike up a conversation about life and faith with just about anyone you talk to. It doesn’t seem strange if you call someone out of the blue

just to see how they're doing, and they may be more willing to share their life with you. You can more easily ask if you can pray for someone. You can give an even clearer witness to this world of what it means to live through trials with true hope, the hope of eternal life.

I know I would much rather be meeting with you in person, in church, and it's difficult not to be. But this online platform has enabled God's Word to reach across state lines and into new places and homes that we would never otherwise be able to reach. Sometimes, we have a hard time sharing our faith, or inviting people to church. Well, it's pretty easy now. All you have to do is share a YouTube link, and say, "Here's something I'd really like you to hear. Please, let me know what you think."

When you consider the workings of God, the way God has worked from the very beginning of time, all the way to how he works in your life now, be encouraged. Be certain of the eternal hope that God has given you, because your Lord Jesus Christ is raised from the dead. And you and I, we rejoice because we are part of the workings of God, of his mission to share the good news of Christ's resurrection with the entire world. And whatever part God has deemed necessary for us to do in his plan, we consider ourselves privileged to be here. And one day, we will see the fulfillment of all of God's work, the day when we will stand in the light and life of our resurrected Lord, when we will praise, glory, and honor him forever and ever. Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed! Alleluia!* In his name. **Amen.**

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our risen Lord. **Amen.**