

## **Taking a Beating**

John 20:19-31

Acts 5: 17-42

It's hard to believe that Easter Sunday was just a week ago; already we are leaping ahead to a story about the post-pentecostal church. It is an Easter-Cost story. That's what happens when you mix and match your gospel writers, something the purists would consider a homiletic no-no. According to John, Pentecost happens Easter evening, or at least the actual giving of the Holy Spirit does. The disciples are still huddled in the upper room in Jerusalem, frightened out of their minds, and Jesus comes to them and straightaway breathes his Spirit into them.

In Luke's telling of the tale at the beginning of Acts, though, Pentecost happens at least forty days later. The disciples are still gathered, but no longer huddling. Jesus has been with them for forty days, and it is only some time after he leaves, on the actual Jewish celebration of Pentecost (which is a harvest feast) that the Spirit is given to them.

But the gospel goulash works, at least in this case. Together, John and Luke tell a pretty wild story about what happens in the life of a lowly disciple when two things happen to him or her: when they encounter the risen Jesus, and when the Holy Spirit takes hold of them. But as we hear the story told again, I think you'll find that it isn't simply a story to be inspired by, it's a story that asks us to think about two questions: what is your mission, and what does your mission cause you? What does it do to you or for you?

Other than the resurrection itself, there is really only one thing that all four of the gospel writers agree on: Jesus told his disciples to 'go and tell.' Acts begins exactly the same way Luke ends, with Jesus telling the disciples that they are witnesses, and they are to take their witness into the streets of Jerusalem and on to the ends of the earth. The story of Jesus isn't theirs to keep. Their friendship with Jesus isn't a closed circle.

The book of Acts is about what happens when they do just that. This section is actually a 'part 2' of a much longer story. In part 1 Peter and John are out in the temple healing the sick and telling anyone who will listen about Jesus. The Sadducees aren't happy about that and arrest them and put them in jail, (but not before about 5,000 are converted). When the accused are brought

before the court, the Sanhedrin, instead of defending themselves or promising they'll go away quietly, they use the opportunity to preach to the priests and scribes and rulers! "There is salvation in no one else but Jesus!" The disciples are ordered to cease and desist, threatened a bit, and let go, not because they wanted to, but because the Sanhedrin was afraid those 5,000 new converts would turn on them and things would get ugly. So the disciples go home, tell their new brothers and sisters what happened, and they pray for even more boldness.

Perhaps it was their prayer for extra-boldness that made the disciples violate their injunction in big way. It was rather broad in its scope when it was handed down – no more gathering and preaching. It probably didn't ever cross their minds to be extra clear that the Temple was off limits. Surely the disciples wouldn't dare! First of all, that's where they were arrested to begin with, but the Temple was the Sanhedrin's turf, they were the lords of the Temple; they even had their own police force. But that's exactly where the disciple went. Back to the scene of the crime. Back to the place where the people were who would be hungry to hear about God. And...back to the place where the scribes and Pharisees and priests were also telling the story, but telling it all wrong.

And here's where it gets really exciting. In language that is very telling, Luke reports that the high priest and the Sadducees are filled with jealousy and arrest the disciples( who you and I know were filled with the Holy Spirit) and they throw them into jail again. But a divine jailbreak is staged by an angel, who tells them to go back to the temple get again, and tell the people "the whole message about this life."

And that's when things get comical. At the crack of dawn the disciples head down to the temple to tell the story yet again, and after a couple of cups of coffee and the morning paper the guys in the Sanhedrin head into work and they send a deputy down to the jail to fetch the disciples so they can threaten them some more, clearly oblivious to the fact that the cells their jailer is so competently guarding are securely locked, but very, very empty. And just to rub a little extra salt in their wounds, some guy comes sliding in, making a Kramer-like entrance, and announces that those disciples who have been arrested, jailed, threatened are out there in the temple preaching and teaching again.

All that is the lead-in to today's lection. Infuriated, the priests and elders decide to get really tough with them. They've been ignored. They feel like their authority has been mocked. They've been made to look really dumb. But their biggest fear is that they are about to be de-throned by this little-but-growing band of country Jesus-lovers. This time, when they question the disciples, they mean business (like the guy in the Gene Cochran commercials!).

And here is Peter's response, in a nutshell: 'you can threaten us all you want. You can jail us all you want. But we aren't going to stop. Faced with the choice, we will always obey God, not any human opinion or authority. And God has given us a mission, to tell what we have seen and heard and experienced.' And here's the part that gets to me- after a good sound beating the disciples went back out to the temple, and started all over.

Remember those two questions this story challenges us with? First, what is your mission? Do you even think of yourself as having a mission? You do, you know. The same mission that the disciples had. In fact, last week on Easter you repeated your mission four or five times in the call to worship: *we are witnesses*, just like Jesus said, just like Peter said. And the job of witnesses is to tell what they have seen and heard; to tell the truth about what has happened. Now you and I both know that that isn't how everybody sees it. What passes for witnessing a lot around here really sounds more like what the Sanhedrin was doing: threatening, warning, telling about all the bad things that they and God both are going to do if you keep doing what you're doing.

But that's not witnessing, not as Jesus meant it. What the disciples had been witness to wasn't an angry God going off on people who did things he didn't like. They weren't witness to a new version of the Ten Commandments, a listing of all the things we aren't supposed to do and will get in big trouble for. They were witness to God restoring life; making people well, forgiving; giving people a brand new start. And they witnessed firsthand how God could completely change over a life, make it brand new; turn dull-witted cowards into bold, faithful disciples.

And that leads us to the second question: what does your mission cause you; do to you, or for you? Does it give you joy? Does it cause you stress? Heartburn? The irony is that the disciples' mission caused them joy, great joy, even though it also got them imprisoned and beaten and threatened with

death. The priests' and Sadducees' and elders' mission? (and yes, they had a mission; everyone has a mission in life, whether they think they do or not) To preserve order. To make sure everyone was following the rules, doing what they were supposed to be doing. And it gave them all sorts of heartburn. It filled them with rage. Jealousy.

Ironic, isn't it? The disciples' mission was one that could get them killed, they knew that, and yet they would gladly defy any human authority and go to their grave for it. What they had seen and experienced had given them great joy, and sharing it gave them even greater joy.

So what is your mission in life? Are you a firsthand witness to the grace and goodness of God? Have you seen it and experienced it? Is passing that on your mission? Or is your mission something else? Like maintaining order in your life, or at work, or in the Church? Making sure the rules are followed? Maybe your mission is comfort; living the good life. That can end up being a church's mission, too, you know. If you get the newsletter from the Erwin Presbyterian Church you probably read that Errol Rohr, from King College, asked some Chinese Christians what their greatest fear was. Expecting them to say something about persecution from the Chinese government, he was surprised when they said that their greatest fear was turning out like us - a complacent, closed, comfortable, lazy and un-zealous American Church, Christians.

Fair warning: if your mission is to bear witness to the mercy and grace of God, your life won't be easy. We don't have persecution per se to worry about, but we do have cultural standards and being a vocal witness to God's work and presence falls outside of them. My Aunt Louise turned 90 yesterday, and as I reflected about the things that I have learned from her in life, one of the things that stands out is that as a young girl from Boulder she taught me about the Southern word, "tacky." Sharing your faith, witnessing, may not be illegal, it may not get you into trouble with the government, but for many people, Presbyterians included, sadly, it is considered tacky. We just don't talk about something so personal. So private.

But there is a world of people out there starving to hear a word of hope. Thirsty to hear a gospel that is about liberation and forgiveness and peace and joy. They are desperate to hear that God is a God of love. Will you tell them? As we said in our call to worship last week,

Christ has commanded us

to share this good news with all the world,  
so that all may believe and have life through him.  
**We are witnesses: Christ is risen! Alleluia!**