

A STORY WITH A LOT OF INTERESTING TWISTS AND TURNS

Acts 5:12-42

Sermon presented by The Rev. Richard D. Raum, at Old First Presbyterian Church, Huntington, New York, on April 15, 2007

Last Sunday Ken asked me: “Do you know an old Easter hymn that goes, ‘Up from the grave he arose?’” Know it?! Why, I not only know it, I even know the trombone part, from my teenage days playing in a Baptist Brass Band. (I wasn’t Baptist, but a friend was, and he got me to join the band Sunday nights). So, when Ken asked, “do you know it?”, I thought, “yeah, and let’s sing it, next week. Shall I bring my trombone?”

The words and music to this great hymn were written by Robert Lowry, a Baptist minister who also taught rhetoric and literature, and later served as Chancellor, at the College of Lewisburg, now Bucknell University. Lowry wrote over 500 hymns, including “Shall We Gather at the River?” and “How Can I Keep from Singing?”

These days “Up for the Grave He Arose” has fairly much passed from the repertoire of most churches. I don’t know why for sure, although I think it’s probably considered cheesy. Kevin A. Wilson, an Anglican Bible scholar, wrote an essay recently about how greatly he values the liturgy, beauty and elegance of the Anglican tradition. But, he writes:

There are some things I miss from my Baptist days. Perhaps the biggest is the hymn, [*Up From the Grave He Arose*]. [He writes] The verse starts out low and sad, but then speeds up with the refrain. And to sing it right, you have to get a good glissando on the word ‘up,’ starting down low and sliding up to the right note. It is embedded in my psyche as the hymn of Easter without which there could be no Easter [he concludes, then adds]: it’s just a shame that I can’t get it in the Episcopal church.

Nor in most Presbyterian ones, either. But today, the Sunday after Easter, what’s sometimes called “Low Sunday” (supposedly because attendance is low, but possibly more to the point, because ministers and others who work in the church are exhausted and feeling low), is a good occasion to dust it off. The hymn’s robust chorus is a stirring reminder that, because Christ is risen, there’s no cause to be low. We are Easter people, and Hallelujah is our song!

The text to which we turn our interest today, Acts 5:12-42, reports an incident – actually, a series of connected incidents – which takes place in the life of the early church. The disciples who had been eyewitnesses to the risen Christ are now beginning to declare resurrection-faith and demonstrate resurrection-power to any who are interested. These are the men and women who had walked with him, and talked with him, and been encountered by the reality of his risen presence. “We are witnesses to these things,” Peter declares. And

now he and the others are witnessing to all they had experienced, and to the wonders of God's love.

John Calvin wrote of the over-arching message taught in this passage:
[The risen] Christ bestows the gift of new birth to us, so that he may renew us on the inside, and so that the new life may flow from the renewed mind and heart. . . . We are made new creatures, restored to God's image, and transferred from the slavery of sin to the obedience of righteousness.

That amazing, saving message of this passage may not come across as clearly as it might, though, because the narrative itself is a little tough to follow. New Testament scholar Richard Carlson notes simply: "Acts chapter 5 includes a lot of interesting twists and turns." He's right about that! Let's work our way through this passage together, and hopefully straighten-out some of those "interesting twists and turns," so that we may see and hear clearly the truth declared in the Word of God.

The story begins on an exuberantly upbeat note. As reported in verses 12-16, everything is great, couldn't be better. Peter and the others are preaching in Jerusalem. They witness to the resurrection with power and passion. Word is spreading like wildfire. The crowds coming to hear them increase daily, including many who travel great distances, from way out in the countryside. Large numbers of people become believers. The joy of the first Easter didn't fade, as ours' does, when Easter quickly comes and just as quickly goes. There's Easter Sunday, a day of joy and gladness. Then it's Monday again – back to work, back to school, back to the taxes, back to dreary routines, back to blustery weather which just doesn't go-away this year, back to the "same old same old." Not so at first. The first Easter transformed everyone touched by it. Hallelujah!

But then – and here's the first interesting turn – things suddenly turn antagonistic and menacing. It is written in verses 17-18 that the religious authorities, "being filled with jealousy, arrested the apostles and put them in prison." Jealous? Jealous of what? Jealous of the disciples' influence? Jealous of the truth? Jealous of new ideas that speak to the depths and capture the imagination of people? Why would those in authority, with the power and privilege of the empire behind them, be jealous of Jesus' disciples, a rag-tag bunch, at best? I suppose it doesn't matter, really. Bishop Fulton Sheen had a terrific "take" on jealousy. He used to say: "Jealousy is the tribute mediocrity plays to genius." Here jealousy casts darkness and defeat on the light and victory of Easter-faith. Peter and the others were arrested and thrown in prison.

But, look, quick. If you navigate this story, you have to keep your eye on the road. Here comes another twist, verses 19-21. While the disciples were in prison, "during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors, brought them out," and sent them back into the city, to resume their witnessing. Everything is good again, for the moment, anyway.

And we're left encouraged by scripture to call to mind the times in our lives when we've been imprisoned in one way or another -- imprisoned by fear or by worry, by self-doubt or self-concern, by barriers others place around us or bars of our own making -- and the spirit of God released us, to live free again.

Peter and the others didn't do anything to get out of prison. They didn't bribe officials, sweet-talk the guards, or earn time-off for good behavior. It's God's sovereign love that frees us.

There's the story a man who dies and goes to heaven. St. Peter meets him, and says: "Here's how it works. You need 100 points to make it into heaven. You tell me all the good things you've done, and I give you a certain number of points for each item, depending on how important it was. When you reach 100 points, you get in."

"Alright," the man says, confidently. "I was faithful to my wife all my life, we raised wonderful children, who in turn have blessed us with grandchildren."

"That's wonderful," says St. Peter, "and worth three points."

"Three points," the man replied. "Yikes. I've got to do better. I attended church all my life, sang in the choir, served on the board, taught in Sunday School, gave 10% of my income . . ."

"Terrific," says St. Peter. "That's certainly worth a point."

"One point!?" The man didn't like the way this seemed to be going.

"I helped start a soup kitchen," he said, now with a sense of urgency and concern. "And I volunteered regularly at a homeless shelter."

"Fantastic! That's good for two more points."

By now the poor man was desperate. "Two points!? At this rate the only way I can get to heaven is by the grace of God."

"Bingo, 100 points!" St. Peter declared. "Come with me."

Whatever prison holds you in its walls, and whatever you may be doing to try to break-out, it is the power of God in Jesus Christ – undeserved, unearned, unexpected -- that tears the bars away and sets us free. And Easter declares the most astonishing (and, on the face of it, implausible) release imaginable – release from the prison of sin and death. In the resurrection Jesus Christ springs open the doors of eternal life. Hallelujah. Amen!

This would be a good place to end the story, wouldn't it? Ah, but the time for spiritual "high-fiving" passes quickly. Wouldn't you know it [?] . . . another narrative twist awaits, verses 22-26.

The High Priest wants Peter and the others to appear before a tribunal, to face charges. Police are dispatched to bring them from prison. They discover, of course, that the disciples are not there. They've escaped. The prison gate was locked, and the guards on-duty, as though nothing had happened, but the cell was empty. God had acted in ways beyond human understanding. Word on the streets is that the Christians are now back in the city, witnessing to the wonders of God's love. You'd think that, miraculously freed

from prison, they'd have gotten out of town as quickly as possible. What's the expression [?]: once burned, twice shy. But they feared no one. "The Lord is my strength and my might," scripture declares. "This is the Lord's doing" (Psalm 118:14a, 23a). Now, the High Priest couldn't, shouldn't have taken a deep breath, backed-off, and asked, "what might I learn from this?" But his honor was at stake, such as it was, and the dignity of his office, and all that stuff. So, huffing and puffing and thumping his chest like Mayor Shinn in "The Music Man," he orders that the disciples be arrested again and this time brought directly to the council – not to prison, because there seem to be security problems there, but directly to the council chambers – for a hearing.

This hearing turns out to be extraordinarily unenlightening. It could have been good, if the High Priest had engaged Peter in debate concerning the content and character of faith. We saw a little bit of this in the Good Friday jousting between Pilate and Jesus, with Pilate raising some pointed questions about Jesus' identity and purpose, at one point asking: "what is truth?" But the High Priest in this story is utterly lacking in a philosophical turn-of-mind. This trial became at once a matter of brute power and authority, not of ideas. He said to Peter. "We gave you strict orders not to preach, yet here you are," preaching. Now, I'm not interested at all in what you've been saying. The content of your speech is of no concern to me. What on earth can a mere fisherman have to say that's worth listening to, anyway? No, the only issue is: "who's in charge here?" And, here's the answer to that: "I'm in charge here." The High Priest controls events, not because of the supremacy of his ideas, but because he has the power. He can bully his will to be done. As they used to say in the Old West: a Smith and Wesson beats four aces.

Peter, in turn, decides that if this is the issue on which the proceedings will turn, if it all comes down to "who's in charge here," then he ought to state his point of view. "Peter and the apostles answered," reads verse 29, "we must obey God rather than any human authority'."

One of my favorite stories is of the time President Lyndon Johnson asked Bill Moyers, then one of his key aides, to say grace before a state dinner. Soon after Moyers started, Johnson interrupted: "Louder, Bill, we can't hear you." Moyers retorted: "I wasn't talking to you, Mr. President." Because of their special friendship Moyers could get away with facing-up to LBJ, but Peter and the disciples couldn't speak truth to power without inviting retaliation. Their declaration of loyalty to the reign of God alone so enraged the members of the Council, that "they wanted to kill him."

At this point, things are looking very, very bad. Easter has happened, but it still seems like a Good Friday kind of world. Might makes right. Bullies hold sway. In the strife of truth with falsehood, the false carries the day. The world's darkness seems to be gathering strength to snuff-out the light that shined briefly at the resurrection.

But – have I mentioned that this is a story with a lot of interesting twists and turns? – something wholly unexpected happens next, the final and most remarkable plot twist of

all. A council member named Gamaliel rises. Who would expect this? Gamaliel was a universally revered jurist, held in such high esteem that he in effect takes-over the meeting. He orders the Christians out, so he can address the Council in executive session. Then, citing several examples, he tells them that there are many people out there propounding new ideas that are different from the old ones that they've known and cherished. As a matter of public policy it's probably not advisable to kill people because of their ideas, nor to suppress or silence them. Rather, he says: false ideas will die on their own accord. But the truth will prevail, "and if it is of God," you will not be able to defeat it, nor overthrow those who declare and demonstrate it.

And, it is written, the council was "convinced by him." They let the disciples go. They ordered that Peter and the others be flogged first, mostly for the sport of it, and also to show-off that they're still in charge. And they warned the Christians again, "not to speak in the name of Jesus." But now everything is different than earlier. Everything has changed. Now everyone on both sides knows that this warning will be ignored, because Gamaliel was right: the truth will out. Scripture announces that nothing in life or death, nothing in heaven nor on earth, nothing in all creation, shall be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And so it is with us, as well. Everything is different. Easter day has come and gone, but Easter joy and gladness remain. Forgiven and freed, the gift of new life flows and overflows from within us. We are Easter-people and hallelujah is our song. Yes, we are Easter people, and hallelujah is our song.