

Sermon 4-11-21

Paul Purdue preaching

“With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.” (Acts 4:33) What is your resurrection story? Where has life grown in places once inhabited by death? Has the Crucified One walked beside you in this long, lonely, pandemic valley? Did the risen Christ appear as you fed the hungry, welcomed the stranger, or forgave from your heart? Has the light of Christ shaken you from your slumber and put you to work resisting evil, injustice, and oppression? Has love, mercy, and grace rolled away the gravestones of guilt, judgment, and shame? Is Christ’s Love winning victories over unworthiness, unforgiveness, or fear? Is the risen Christ going ahead of you pulling you into deeper patterns of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? What is your resurrection story? How has Christ raised us up?

This morning, I invite you to consider Peter’s resurrection story. May it be a catalyst to help us find our own Easter story. Some 40 days after Easter, Peter and John were arrested in Herod’s temple “for speaking to the people.” Dragged before the council that executed Jesus, Peter and John refused to obey the rulers, elders, and Bible experts. Peter and John speak up, putting their lives on the line, “It’s up to you to determine whether it’s right before God to obey you rather than God. As for us, we can’t stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

“We can’t stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.” We can’t stop telling our resurrection story. The apostles’ bold words catch the council by surprise. The religious leaders dismissed them as uneducated and inexperienced. Peter and John’s confidence shook them up. Holy boldness always shocks stuck systems.

Released from church prison with threats, Peter and John find sanctuary within the emerging Easter community. Gathered together, they pray, “Lord, take note of the council’s threats and enable your servants to speak your word with complete confidence while You stretch out your hand to bring healing.” Fresh from prison, they do not ask for safety but for confidence to keep speaking out. When everyone said “amen,” the whole place was shaken. Holy courage shakes things up. Inspired, all the people were filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking God’s word with confidence. All people began speaking God’s word!

Where does such holy confidence come from? What is Peter’s resurrection story? We often think of Peter just outside the council courtroom trying to catch news of what was happening inside. Trying to keep warm, Peter stood with the guards by the fire. I imagine as a fishing boat captain, Peter felt more comfortable with the soldiers than the Bible experts and leading preachers. John tells us the guards asked Peter, “Aren’t you one of them?” Then a clerk for the high priest approached Peter saying, “You were also with the Nazarene, Jesus.” Mark tells us a clerk said to the crowd, “This man is one of them.” The crowd soon said to Peter, “You must be one of them, your accent gives you away.” Peter denied knowing Jesus. And as Peter cursed and swore, the rooster

crowed a second time; Peter remembered his promise to Jesus, "If I must die alongside you, I won't deny you." (Mark 14; John 18) Peter broke down sobbing.

Peter broke down sobbing. Broke down. Some preachers are happy to leave Peter broken down. Guilt, shame, and judgement are pretty effective tools to hold us in place, to keep us stuck in unworthiness, or to push us back in line. A deep sense of unworthiness keeps us from rising up, finding our voice, and breaking oppressive yokes. When pushed down or shut out by church bullies who think, we are uninformed, uneducated, unorthodox or unworthy let us pray: Lord, take note of their threats and enable us to speak your word with complete confidence: while You stretch out your hand to bring healing!" Ask God to give you the power to tell your resurrection story.

Jesus did not push anyone down. Well, Jesus pushed back hard against religious bullies and know-it-alls. "How terrible it will be for you Bible experts and legalists! You shut people out of God's kin-dom. You don't enter yourselves, and you keep those who want to enter from finding the doorway." (Matthew 23) "Don't judge, so that you won't be judged. You'll receive the same judgment you give to others!" (Matthew 7) "Come to me, all you who are struggling hard and carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Put on my yoke, and learn from me. I'm gentle and humble. And you will find rest for your souls. My burden is light and easy to bear." (Matthew 11) Jesus grinds no one down. The Risen Christ raises people up.

Don't you imagine that Peter felt so deeply unworthy, so deeply broken down, so sinful, so burdened by guilt, so haunted by a crushing sense of "what ifs" and "if I had onlys". How could Peter face the apostles - Magdalene, Mary, Salome, or Joanna? How could Peter face Jesus? How can any of us really face ourselves, much less God?

Hear Easter's good news: "Do not be afraid! The Crucified One isn't here. Look, here was the place they laid Christ. Christ is risen. Go, tell the disciples, especially Peter, that Christ is going ahead of you into Galilee. You will see Christ there." Especially Peter, especially all who are sobbing, especially all who are broken down, especially all who feel shut out, especially all laboring under oppressive yokes.

On Christmas, the angels fill the skies singing glorious songs of praise to God who is with us- who shares our human condition. Mark's Easter messenger brings a personal note amid God's cosmic message: tell Peter, especially tell Peter, that love has won, that forgiveness reigns. Death is defeated. Christ is risen and going ahead of us all! Especially Peter. Especially all who are broken down, struggling hard, sobbing alone, dismissed as uneducated, labeled as sinners, shut out by the church, threatened, and pushed down. Especially all y'all: counted as least. Christ is risen and going ahead of us. Love rolls away guilt, shame, and fear. Love opens shut doors. And when grace soaks deep enough into our weary souls, Love raises us up with holy boldness to stand up, speak out, and throw open the doors! Love is our victory!

When love wins miracles happen, boldness rises, threats lose their power, healing comes. Doors open. Stuck systems shake free. People are filled with the Holy Spirit. All

people begin speaking God's word with confidence. When we begin to hear God speaking in all voices- our hearts and minds come together. People stop saying, "This is mine!" People hold things in common. People tell their resurrection stories. People sell stuff to meet others' needs. God's grace does its magic in people's lives. So- what is your resurrection story? Let us keep writing our Easter story, for Christ is going ahead of us in Love. Amen!