

Second Sunday of Easter

April 3, 2016

Acts 5:12, 17-32

Men Cannot Stop the Preaching of Christ

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Dear friends in Christ Jesus, “Stones do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage.” So wrote the 17th Century British poet, Richard Lovelace in his poem, To Althea from Prison. His point is that external barriers cannot hold the thoughts and dreams of the mind and heart. We may apply that principle to the apostles imprisoned in Jerusalem for preaching the Name, Jesus. We may apply it to our hearts and minds filled with the good news of the risen Christ although no one is arresting us as yet.

Arrest had happened to Peter and John before. The Sanhedrin had arrested the two after they had healed a crippled beggar and “were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead.” [Acts 4:2] It would happen to Paul and Silas later in Philippi. Stone walls and iron bars could not imprison the disciples’ minds and hearts. They were still free in Christ and prayed and sang hymns to God.

Those stone and iron barriers could not stop the disciples from preaching Christ. In fact, in this case, as later with Paul and Silas, God sent an angel to release the disciples from their cells. When the angels released the disciples, the disciples did not run away but went right back to their work—the preaching of Christ. This is a good lesson and comfort for us as men continue to try and stop us Christians from teaching and preaching the resurrected Jesus.

Men Cannot Stop the Preaching of Christ. The message is too powerful; And, The messengers are too fearless.

There always are people who try to stop the preaching of the resurrected Christ. Some are outside the church. They are against God and against religion. They do not believe in God and oppress those who do believe. Then there are those like the Sadducees, secularists within the church. They wear the outward trappings of Christianity but deny the resurrection, miracles and anything else beyond human reason.

Ancient Sadducees and today’s fellow travelers are jealous and fearful when the truth of God’s Word works its power. They deny and oppose that very power that overrides their arguments. More and more people come to believe Jesus’ disciples’ claims that Jesus has risen from the dead to prove that he is the Christ. This is something they cannot stand to hear and will not abide it.

The power of Christ in the disciples’ message was healing the sick, and curing those tormented by evil spirits. Jesus had given the disciples the power to do miracles to show that they spoke and acted on his behalf. Remember, nobody actually saw the living Jesus between his resurrection and ascension except those who had believed in him before he died on the cross. Jesus continued to act in his power through them.

People continue to come to faith in Jesus as their Savior from sin through our preaching the risen Christ. Men cannot stop the preaching of Christ. For many years, enemies outside the church of Christ and Christians have made Christianity illegal. They have destroyed Bibles and repurposed church buildings. They have executed Christians and continue to do. What has all of this accomplished? It has done nothing except create a greater urgency and commitment to continue to preach Christ and God’s Word.

What about the enemies within the church who deny the resurrection, miracles, and salvation by Christ alone? Have they been able to stamp out orthodox churches faithful to Christ and God’s Word? Not at all. Faithful pastors and members of false Christian churches around the world continue to seek church bodies like ours which have not turned into modern day Sadducees. You can encircle Christians with stone walls and iron bars, real and metaphorical. Yet we remain free in Christ and pray and sing praises to God. The message is too powerful. Jesus Christ is Savior and Lord. He is risen just he said. I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.

The disciples’ message was so powerful and needed by the world that God sent one of his holy angels to set them free from their jail cell so they could continue sharing the message of Christ. There had been nothing secret about their arrest. They were in “the public jail.” The messenger

related God's command to them and that gave them courage. "Go, stand in the temple courts and tell the people the full message of this new life." Fearlessly, at daybreak they did exactly that.

This fearlessness got them arrested again and brought before the entire Sanhedrin. There was no force applied because the people liked what the disciples had been teaching and doing. The high priest reminded the disciples about his strict orders not to preach Christ. The disciples had ignored his words and even continued to tell the truth about who had ordered Jesus' death.

Peter answered the high priest with words that have become a rallying cry for us Christians. "We must obey God rather than men." Peter went on to hold the mirror of the law before their eyes. The Sanhedrin was "guilty of this man's blood." Then Peter preached repentance and forgiveness. What fearlessness by Peter. "We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him." Peter is making the point that what they saw and heard and shared is the truth and God the Holy Spirit can vouch for them. The disciples got their fearlessness from the Holy Spirit not only at Pentecost but also through the Word that strengthened their faith.

We must be sure when we apply Peter's words we do so correctly. We can't disobey men when they tell us to do something we merely do not like, or do not agree with. We are to obey God rather than men only when man commands us to do something God says is sin, or commands us not to do something that is love, like preaching Jesus is the Christ, and salvation in Christ alone, and preaching all the other truths of God's holy Word.

Our fearlessness in our witness comes from the Holy Spirit. Think of Stephen who soon would stand also before the Sanhedrin, had a vision of heaven, and then they stoned him to death. Think of Paul who we heard on Maundy Thursday knew the Father would deliver him from every evil attack. Think of Luther who stood before the secular and ecclesiastical powers of Europe. He continued to preach and teach in spite of a price on his head.

Men cannot stop the preaching of Christ. Its messengers are too fearless. Our fearlessness does not come because we know we will be safe and secure when we witness. It comes from knowing the power of our message, and that God's angels are watching over us, and that God will give us the Holy Spirit as we obey him in faith. Our fearlessness comes from knowing that even stone walls and iron bars cannot keep us from Christ, our Prince and Savior who gives us repentance and forgiveness of sins. He lives in our hearts and minds. Amen. <SDG>