

April 18, 2021

You have killed the author of life – WE have killed the author of life.

Such powerful words. When I read them, I am moved – I feel some sadness because I know I cannot exclude myself from the people that Peter addresses. I have killed the author of life.

In our reading from Acts this morning, Peter is addressing a crowd of people at the temple. The scene seems to be a bit chaotic. Right before we pick up in our story today, Peter and John have encountered a lame man asking for alms. Peter tells him that he doesn't have silver or gold, but he can offer something even better – he can offer him the spirit of God. Peter gives the man his hand and tells him to rise up and walk. And he does.

Wow. First, we have the incredible moment that Peter not only tells the man to believe, but reaches out his hand to help him. Is this a reminder to us that simply telling someone to believe in God is not enough? That we should offer our hand to help them regardless of how desperate the situation might be? It brings to mind missionaries who only focus on spiritual, but not physical needs. Or people right here in our own communities whose message is to “pull yourselves up by your boot straps.” What do people pull on when they don't even have boots?

Second, we have the astonishing faith of both Peter and the lame man that they believe the power of the Holy Spirit will allow the lame to walk. If Peter had not believed that Jesus would act through him, no miracle would have happened. If the man, who had been lame from birth, had not believed, no miracle would have happened. But they both had faith. Wouldn't it be amazing to have even a fraction of this faith?

Let's continue with the story - A crowd recognizes the man walking with Peter and John as the lame man that they have seen often at the gates of the Temple. In their astonishment, they pay more attention to the miracle that they think Peter and John have performed than to coming to the Temple for the Hour of Prayer.

Peter realized that they had missed the point of the miracle. Their astonished admiration was toward the Apostles and not the Messiah who was the one responsible for the miracle. How many times have we made this same mistake in our own lives? Something amazing happens to us or around us and we attribute it to something or someone other than the glory of God.

Clearly this has upset Peter and he addresses them with some anger. “You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk?”

There are a number of contrasts in the sermon that Peter gives this morning:

1. The crowd that Peter addresses have been all too willing to enjoy scriptures that spoke of Jesus' conquering reign, but they chose to ignore the prophecy of His suffering.

2. An innocent man is put to death and a murderer is set free.
3. Those who believed that Jesus was the Son of God demanded his death even though their pagan king, Pilate had sought to release Him.
4. Jesus, whom they had executed as a criminal, allowed the lame man to walk.
5. They killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead.

Most of these contrasts point to some hypocrisy committed by the Israelites. Are we guilty of this hypocrisy as well?

WE killed the author of life. We kill Him every time we proclaim to follow Jesus' teachings, yet behave in a manner inconsistent with our faith.

Fortunately, there is an overriding contrast in Luke's telling of this story. First, Peter delivered a word of judgment. Then he introduced a word of grace. And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, He has already rebuked the crowd because they handed over Jesus to be killed, but now he calls them brothers (or friends) and acknowledges that they acted in ignorance. At first glance, that might seem odd. But, Peter's words of grace were given because Jews considered sins committed in ignorance to be forgivable.

Their ignorance, however, is not sufficient to remove their guilt. Repentance is required. We heard that in the reading - "Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out."

If Peter had simply admonished the crowd, what good would that have done? Judgment without grace has the power to destroy us. How often in our lives do we judge without grace – without forgiveness? Someone we know does something to hurt us or that we find offensive and we are quick to anger but slow to forgive. Such a strategy doesn't seem to help anyone. I used to tell my children when they misbehaved that "Mommy is really angry but I still love you." If I had only expressed anger, what would they have learned? Would I have destroyed their spirit?

On the other hand, what if I had not expressed any anger at all? What if I simply told them that I loved them no matter what they did, but never disciplined them so that they learned appropriate behavior? Bonhoeffer tells us that grace without judgment is, "cheap grace" — "the deadly enemy of our church".

Peter's grace is breathtaking. He acknowledges the ignorance, not only of this crowd, but also of their rulers - all those who opposed Jesus - all those responsible for his crucifixion. We don't even know if the crowd being addressed was at the crucifixion. Does it matter?

I don't think so. Peter is addressing all of us. Through our ignorance, we have killed the author of life.

But there is grace. Jesus suffered and is resurrected so that we can experience that grace.

This morning we hear the third resurrection appearance in Luke's Gospel. Jesus' first resurrection appearance is to Peter; the second resurrection appearance is to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, and now here when Jesus stands among the disciples and eats with them.

Unlike the Emmaus story, in this third resurrection appearance, Luke describes Jesus' resurrected body in a very physical way. Indeed, Luke 24 is the only time in which a gospel author stresses Jesus' physical body in this way; and the only gospel story in which Jesus actually eats something after his resurrection. In the Gospel of John, Jesus cooks a fish dinner and serves it to the disciples, but Jesus doesn't eat with them. The proof Luke provides of the resurrected body is sealed when Jesus asks for something to eat and proceeds to eat a morsel of fish. It is as concrete as the invitation in John that Thomas reach out and put his finger in Jesus' wounds.

Such proof stories are designed to confirm faith in the resurrection: that Jesus has been vindicated by God, is alive, and wants his disciples to continue his work.

For Luke, to fulfil the hope of the resurrection is to tell the story of Jesus. At the same time, Luke tells us to live as Jesus did, by doing good and bringing liberation for all. This includes forgiveness of sins. Indeed, in this morning's gospel, we hear "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name ". It is radically simple.

Unfortunately, some things that seem so simple can be so challenging to do. But we need to try.

One definition of "resurrection" is to "bring back into practice" or to "participate again". We need to resurrect our Baptismal vows each and every day.

Do you believe in God the Father?

Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God?

Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?

Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

The great resurrection of Jesus, our Christ, was the ultimate way that God had of showing us how to bring the world back into the practice of faith and good works. May we in our small way resurrect our faith each and every day by bringing ourselves back into the practice of living our faith, resisting evil, seeking Christ in all people, and striving for peace and justice.