

Following Jesus Above All

Acts 5:27-32

Farmville Baptist Church

April 24, 2022

What a Sunday we had last week! Easter Sunday is always a big day in the church year. Often, we have special events and special music, we have a larger-than-usual congregation that gathers together, there's a spirit of joy in the air and celebration – it's just a good day! And last week was no exception. It was a true joy to see many of our friends and family that we hadn't seen here at Farmville Baptist for a while, there were elements of the service that highlighted the special nature of the day, and we had a young man let us know that he wants to follow Jesus through baptism. That's a pretty special day all the way around, and

a fitting way to remember and celebrate the incredibly good news that Jesus is alive!

If we aren't careful, though, we can find ourselves thinking of Easter as one glorious day of worship, praise, celebration, and fun – and that can leave us, on the other side of Easter Sunday, feeling a bit let down. Do you ever get through a highly-anticipated, wonderful high point in life and feel a bit down on the other side of it? Happens to me all the time! And Easter can be that way for us as we follow Jesus, both as individual Christians and as a church: a time where we come down from the high of the empty tomb to the cold, hard realities of a life with too many things scheduled and problems clamoring for attention, and a church with, perhaps, a few too many challenges to be entirely confident in moving forward with excitement and hope instead of worry and fear. Easter Sunday can leave us wondering why

the power of the resurrection seems impossible to see around us, or, maybe, if we're honest, content that we can set all of that aside for another year and get back to the real business of life.

But here's the thing: Easter isn't a Sunday at the culmination of a story or the end of a period of greater spiritual focus. Easter is the beginning of something incredible, something new, and something that lays claim to us day-in and day-out.

And if we ever needed proof of that, we just need to look at the book of Acts, where we find what happened after the resurrection.

The book of Acts is the second half of Luke's project of telling the story of Jesus. In the first part, the Gospel of Luke, he tells how Jesus arrived to share the good news of the kingdom of God: how God is involved in saving the world

from sin and death, and how that salvation comes about somehow through the life, death, and (most importantly) the resurrection of Jesus. But if we end the story there, we miss an equally important component of the story: how the resurrection of Jesus led to a world-changing movement centered on the idea that God was already opening the way to a new form of life, both here and now and forevermore.

For the next three decades or so after the resurrection of Jesus, his followers began to share his message and expand the community of people who trusted, or believed, in the resurrection power of God through Jesus Christ. That power was on display in the preaching of the apostles, or those who were sent by Christ with his message of grace and love and mercy, and it was on display in the lived actions of the little Jesus communities that began springing up, first in Jerusalem, then in the surrounding area of Judea, then in

places like Samaria, and then anywhere and everywhere followers of Jesus, eventually called Christians, went.

And at the center of this movement, every step of the way, were messages like what we read in our passage today. It's a message that Peter and some other apostles gave before the Sanhedrin, or the council of Jewish religious and cultural elites who were running Judea, including the Temple in Jerusalem, under Roman oversight. From the beginning, as the Jesus movement began to draw interest and adherence from growing numbers of Jews in Jerusalem, the Sanhedrin, sometimes called the Council, remained wary. The Sanhedrin had been part of the condemnation of Jesus to death, after all, and they were no less interested in keeping the peace and squashing any challenge to the status quo in the aftermath of Easter as they were in the run-up to Good Friday. So when Jesus' disciples began to heal people and

preach a message of God's new kingdom brought about by the resurrection of the Galilean rabbi they'd helped condemn to death, the Sanhedrin decided to clamp down.

Turns out, they weren't too good at keeping the disciples shut up or shut out of the public discourse.

First, Peter and John were brought before the Sanhedrin when they healed a lame man near the Temple and then shared the message of the crucified and risen Jesus ~~with~~^{to} the crowds amazed with this miracle. On that occasion, the council warned Peter and John not to preach anything more about Jesus – but they did anyways.¹ Then, as more people were healed and more people heard the message of Jesus and followed him, the Sanhedrin brought the disciples back. They were locked up in jail awaiting examination, but an angel of God freed them and told them to return to the

¹ Acts 3-4

Temple courts to preach. That did nothing to endear them to the Sanhedrin, of course, and they were brought right back to answer for their actions.

The answer Peter gave could have been the tagline for the church throughout the book of Acts: “We must obey God rather than human beings!” Then they went on to proclaim a short summation of the Gospel – that Jesus had been killed, at least in part, by the men in that room, but that God had exalted him, and that the apostles themselves were witnesses to that exaltation. As witnesses, it was their responsibility to share what they had learned, both because of the command of God and because of the vital importance of what they had seen.

The story goes on from here in Acts 5, but today we are just looking at this one showdown, this one encounter. As I said, it is at the core of what the church is all about in the

book of Acts...and it is, perhaps, one of the most misunderstood pieces of what the Bible teaches about the church.

From the beginning of Acts, the followers of Jesus are learning about and living into a new reality. They had seen the resurrected Jesus, but still thought he was going to overturn the regime in Jerusalem, kick out the Roman occupiers, and restore the kingship of David's house. Yet Jesus says that he is about something utterly different – and that they will understand that, soon. Pentecost arrives, the Spirit is poured out, and the disciples do begin grasping what this new reality looks like. It's a kingdom not like what they imagine – it doesn't set up a throne in Jerusalem, for example, or drive out all evildoers at the point of the sword – but it also isn't some future promised land of heavenly glory alone. It begins now; the light of the resurrection of Jesus

means that his followers need to start living differently now, and their community needs to start operating with a different set of priorities and goals now. And that's just what they do.

This, as we have already seen, gets them in a bit of trouble, and it'll get them in more trouble as they go along.

But the reason I say this is perhaps one of the most misunderstood parts of the story of the early church and its implications for us is because we tend to want our cake and eat it, too. We want the benefits of living differently than the world – living in light of Jesus' resurrection, with all the blessings and joys that come with that – without any of the problems of living differently than the world. We like having a privileged position in society, for example, even though we don't want society telling us what we can and cannot do as a congregation. We like the assurance that we have access to

God now in prayer and the promise of life eternal without wanting anyone to look down on us for being different or our faithfulness meaning we miss out on anything else we want to do in life.

In short, we want the benefits of the resurrection without it costing us anything.

But that's not what Peter means when he says, "We must obey God rather than human beings!" Peter, after all, had already endured imprisonment for his faithful obedience to God, and he would again, multiple times. If we read on in Acts 5, we discover the disciples don't get off easy this time, either. Peter and the other disciples would only be let go in this instance after flogged and ordered not to preach in the name of Jesus ever again. Some of them would soon be executed, others would be imprisoned or beaten in other places.

And it wasn't just the disciples. Soon enough, persecution would break out that caused many in the church of Jerusalem to flee for their lives. Almost from the start, the church has been a refugee church. Yet they would continue to speak up with the message of their Risen Lord in new towns and cities, places like Damascus and Antioch, Caesarea and Joppa. Missionaries like Paul and Barnabas would go throughout the eastern Mediterranean, preaching and healing and serving and bearing witness, often provoking opposition. Yet in most of those places, congregations sprang up and continued the work of the church in the face of difficulty, even long after the missionaries had moved on.

The early church was committed to following God, even when it conflicted with the ways of the world, and even when it cost them.

What could inspire that sort of devotion? What could inspire that sort of loyalty? The bedrock belief – the trust of what they had seen and known and learned – that God had raised Jesus from the dead and, because of that, life was different. It wasn't that early Christians were looking for ways to flout the authority of the worldly powers, much less work the world's system to find loopholes that benefited them. They were just committed to following Jesus above all – even if it cost them, even if it made life more difficult, even if it demanded their all.

I'm not sure we get that in the modern, Western church. We can tend to equate persecution with any treatment by the surrounding culture that doesn't give us a privileged position in society or that treats us the same as everyone else. Whenever I hear this passage, especially the verse, "We must obey God rather than human beings," I think about a

character in a novel series I enjoy. The man in the story, named Dale Henshaw, is a bit of a grumpy stick-in-the-mud, with a very strict interpretation of Scripture that just so happens to put him on the right side of everything that he sees is wrong in the world, and he is constantly pulling the verse out to badger his fellow church-members into some scheme of dubious legality or of obstinate self-righteousness. The character exists in a work of fiction, but I've known many real-life Dale Henshaws. You probably have, too.

And, to be honest, I have had times I don't know if I got it any more right than Dale did. I can tend to be very certain of my own beliefs, my own understanding of the Scriptures and of God, my own perspective on the world – and that perspective is not always leavened with a clear focus on the resurrection power of Jesus Christ. In part, it's because I don't think I have often found myself in the position of the

apostles – given the opportunity to bear witness in a hostile situation. Instead, I pick and choose – sometimes being lenient in my interpretation of what teachings of Jesus I follow because it is easier or more selfish, other times standing on my Christian principles because it benefits me or makes me feel more “right” or “spiritual.” Sometimes, I think I don’t need to live in reliance upon a Lord who has been raised from the dead.

But the disciples understood they had to – they could only do their task, and indeed only live a life worth living, if they lived in the light of the resurrection. So the resurrection was utterly central in their preaching and their living, and they remained loyal to Christ above all, risking real retribution and true difficulty to point others to Christ as well. As they did so, often with the stripes on their backs of the vindictive or authoritarian powers-that-be, they found

that many others heard their words, saw their example and their lives, and decided to follow the Risen Jesus themselves.

The disciples believed that the resurrection of Jesus had changed everything, and ^{so they} started to live that out in their lives.

That reorientation of their lives brought them into conflict with the world, but it also bore powerful witness to the new reality of the kingdom of God – and lots of people saw that witness and chose that new reality for themselves.

That can still happen today. As many of you know, the Baptist General Association of Virginia has been a significant part of my own journey of faith, and the executive director of the BGAV, Dr. John Upton, has been a mentor and friend in my life for about 20 years. John has been all over the world and heard stories of the faith of Christians in all sorts of cultures, and he tells those stories well. One of my favorites is one he heard while visiting one of the largest and strongest

Baptist churches in Beijing. As he was walking the grounds with the pastor, he noticed a tree that looked about ready to fall down, it was so decrepit. John asked the pastor, “Why is that tree so bad-off, and why don’t you all cut it down?” The pastor replied, “We couldn’t do that! That’s the place where they burned all the Bibles and Christian books when the Communists took power. That tree is too special.”

Then the pastor grew a bit wistful. “Dr. Upton,” he said, “I want to tell you a story about those days. This was back in the late 1940s when Mao and the Communists took power, and the church was forced underground. It was illegal to be a Christian, and especially illegal to gather together. They burned our books. The pastor of this church was arrested, and he just disappeared, never to be heard from again. Church leaders were forced to deny the faith or be imprisoned themselves. The church here was shut down.

“There were these four women, though, widows in the village, and they just kept coming. Once a week on Sunday, they would come and slip in the sanctuary. They’d sing hymns and pray. And the police chief and the enforcers of the village left them alone. ‘They’re just four old women,’ they said. ‘What harm could they do?’

“This went on for about a decade. Then one of the women said to the other three, ‘You know, there’s more to faith than singing old hymns and praying old prayers. We need to do something to help someone. That’s what Jesus would do.’ They thought about it and prayed about it, and they decided to help someone. There was a young man in the village, a gifted boy from a poor family. He would never go to university. He would never be anything more than a poor farmer eking out a living in the rice paddies...unless someone

helped him. So these four old women pooled their few funds and paid for the young man to go to university.’

“After he finished school, the young man came back home. ‘Thank you ladies so much!’ he said. ‘You have been so good to me! How can I ever repay you?’ And that was his first mistake! The ladies said, ‘You know, we’ve been meeting for about 15 years now, singing and praying, but we would really like to have a Bible. Could you get one for us?’

“Now, they might as well have asked for the moon! Bibles were dangerous to own, and even more dangerous to seek out. Didn’t they know that? The young man told the four ladies this, and they said, ‘Well, okay. We just thought we’d ask.’ Torn between patriotic commitment to the nation – which had declared Bibles illegal – and his gratitude to these four elderly women who had made his education possible, the young man eventually decided to help them.

He found a Bible and smuggled it to them. Then he made his second mistake! He said, ‘Here’s your Bible. Is there anything else I can do?’

“They said, ‘Well, now that you mention it...We are grateful for the Bible, but none of us can read. Would you read it to us?’ Now, this was too much! Not only was it illegal to own a Bible, but this young man had no interest in what it said. He was a committed Communist, completely opposed to religion in any form. But he felt he still owed these women a debt, so he began meeting with them on Sunday mornings, reading to them from the stories of the Scriptures. Soon, he was reading the Bible even when he wasn’t with them. Eventually, he became a follower of Jesus. And do you know what, Dr. Upton?” The pastor smiled.

“This was that church that those four old women and one young man met in...and I was that young man.”

Those four elderly Chinese women understood something about following Jesus: that allegiance to him comes first, and that living faithfully bears witness to the resurrection of Christ and the kingdom of God. They did their best to be faithful to him, even when explicitly told not to by the powers-that-be, and their faithfulness bore witness to a gifted young man, one who would eventually be one of the most influential pastors in China.

Those four women were walking in the footsteps of Peter and the other apostles – because they were living in the light of the resurrection that changed everything. While we may never live where gathering for worship or reading the Bible are outlawed, and while we may never suffer imprisonment or threat of violence for our faithfulness to Christ, we are constantly faced with the challenge to live by the way of the world instead of the way of the kingdom of God. In this

Easter season, let us remind ourselves daily that Jesus Christ, our Lord and Leader, is alive. Let us recall his commands to love God, love neighbor, and make disciples. Let us remember that he has commissioned us, each of us, to be his witnesses in the world. And let us go forward each day committed to the way of our Risen Lord, no matter what comes, living each day with the choice to follow Jesus above all.