

*Sermon for 2 Easter, Year C
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The word is out in Jerusalem and around the country. The one called Peter wields the power of God, and so do his companions. They heal and work miracles. People have begun to bring their sick out into the streets on pallets, just so that Peter's shadow will fall on them as he passes by. They are bringing their sick from the towns around Jerusalem to Peter and the Apostles. And St. Luke tells us that all of them were healed.

But instead of rejoicing that God was healing the sick, the high priest and the Sadducees are "filled with jealousy". You see, they thought they had the corner on the religion market. They weren't interested in getting people healed, in getting people in touch with God. They were only interested in their own power, prestige, and affluence. And the apostles aren't merely a rival religious brand, they are followers of the Nazarene, the one the Sadducees are directly responsible for getting executed. This is deep trouble, and they are going to control it.

So they turn to their usual answer, the power of the state. They simply round up all the Apostles and throw them in jail for disturbing the peace or some such thing. Then they can have a trial and dispose of the problem somehow. It's amazing what one can accomplish with the power of the sword.

So here are all the apostles, in prison and awaiting the pleasure of the Sanhedrin. Peter and John have already had a couple of run-ins with that crowd. Who knows what they'll do this time?! But into the midst of this anxious night breaks a miracle. The angel comes and breaks them out of prison. Praise the Lord! Let's get out of here!

Not so fast. The angel also gives them their orders: "Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life." Back into the lion's mouth. Back into a collision course with the authorities. Back into the battle. But they don't need any more explanation than this. They know what "this Life" means. These are the guys who stood in the upper room when Jesus breathed on them and gave them the Holy Spirit. These are the ones who have touched the risen Jesus yet know that there is greater blessing in store for those who trust without seeing. "This Life" is the life they have with and *in* Jesus. They know themselves. They know that they had no life before Jesus; only what passes for life in the land of the dead. And they know that others are just like them, dead until they are in Jesus.

Jesus has taken away their fear. He has given them peace. And he has given them a mission. "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." Now

Jesus was sent to do one thing. He had many activities and accomplishments along the way. But there is only one purpose for which he was sent into the world. Earlier in the Gospel of John he said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." So if the church is sent as Jesus was sent, our mission is clear. It has been truly said that the church exists solely for the benefit of those who are not yet members of it. We are sent that they may have life, and have it abundantly. And if we do not live accordingly, we have no claim to be the church of Christ.

The apostles don't need any more prompting. They go immediately and do what is asked of them. They tell people about Jesus, in whom they can have true life. Of course, the council is alerted and sends for them again. But that's OK. They can preach to the Sanhedrin as well as to the crowds. And that's what they do. "We must obey God rather than men." is just the first sentence of their response. They go on to point to that inconvenient evidence that we talked about last week. "After you killed him, God raised Jesus from the dead. And we are witnesses to these things."

There is nothing that can stand in the way of our witness to Jesus Christ and his resurrection. Do we abide by and respect the government under which we find ourselves? Absolutely. St. Paul tells us that it is an instrument of the Lord to restrain the worst excesses of sin and evil. But can the government demand that we disobey God? If it does, we must break the law, and if necessary go singing to our imprisonment and execution, rejoicing in the privilege of following in Christ's footsteps. Absolutely nothing must stand in the way of our witness to him.

In his Revelation, John writes of Jesus, "the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. ... Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him ...; and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him." But he is also the one "who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father". He has an ecstatic vision of the ascended Lord, with the sword issuing from his mouth and his face shining like the sun. This is the one to whom we witness.

But in the vision, he stands in the midst of seven lampstands. And the lampstands are the seven churches to whom the message is sent. But seven is also the number of completeness, and the seven stand for the whole of the church militant in all its many localities. A lampstand is merely a receptacle for the lamp. It produces no light of its own. And yet there is no need for a lampstand, unless there is darkness.

There is no light or life in us. But the darkness is all around. And if we would be the church of Christ, then we must hold his light high in the dark. With his life in us, we have an obligation to bear witness, both in words and in deeds, to the love of the cross and the power of the Resurrection. So that others may have the life that we have in him.