

Acts 5:29-42
"We Are All Witnesses"
Second Sunday of Easter

April 16, 2023
Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, West Salem, Wisc.
Pastor Peter Adelsen

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

Peter and his fellow apostles answered the Sanhedrin: "***We must obey God rather than men***" (Acts 5:29).

On this Second Sunday of Easter, the apostles have changed. When we last heard about them, they were hiding away in a locked upper room as they feared the same fate as their Lord: death. Now, the doors weren't just padlocked. They were barred shut. So, no one was getting in, and no one was getting out. The apostles believed the Jewish authorities could arrest them at any moment. But something changed them.

Jesus changed them! With the words, "***Peace be with you,***" Christ's apostles no longer doubted. They saw and – *in the case of Thomas* – touched Him! They are no longer living in despair and fear; they are now filled with hope and assurance.

These same apostles who were slow to faith are now filled with faith. They, who once doubted their Lord's resurrection cannot stop proclaiming the wondrous works of their crucified and risen Lord at the temple. But their proclamation did not come without any conflict.

As the Holy Spirit aided the growth of Christ's Church, not everyone was happy about it. We begin today's reading from Acts with the apostles being called before the Sanhedrin. Now, since the resurrection of Christ, the Sanhedrin and the apostles had met on several occasions. And each time, the apostles were given strict orders to not speak of Jesus as the Christ. The Sanhedrin threatened the apostles. They even jailed them. But nothing deterred them. In fact, the apostles believed that if they silenced themselves, that would be criminal. So, by neglecting their proclamation of Jesus, they would be disobeying God.

Now, among the Sanhedrin, there was division. The Sadducees and the Pharisees did not like each other. Among the members of this highest Jewish court, they argued on various points of doctrine, including the resurrection of the dead. This court was religious, but it also dealt with temporal matters, both political and judicial.

The Sanhedrin was deeply divided, but they did find common ground on one issue: they would seek peace with Rome at any cost. For whenever the Jewish people got out of line, Rome would always respond harshly.

You see, the Sanhedrin would do anything to avoid the riots caused by frauds claiming to be the messiah, since they always resulted with Rome taking more power from them. But Jesus was not like any other person who claimed to be the Messiah. For Jesus was no national liberator as the others claimed. Jesus is the sacrificial Lamb of God who came to take away the sins of the world. Jesus who is risen from the dead now sits at the right hand of God the Father. This too, the apostles witnessed as they stared at Jesus ascending into the heavens.

So, the apostles have a choice: obey God in proclaiming the forgiveness of sins won by the crucified and risen Jesus or obey men and live a peaceful and quiet life by not offending the Sanhedrin through hiding salvation from the world. Since the Sanhedrin commanded them to sin, the choice for the apostles was clear: ***“We must obey God rather than men.”***

Like the apostles before us, we too, are also witnesses of Christ’s resurrection. But we weren’t there! How could we who live nearly 2,000 years after the resurrection be witnesses? Well, Martin Luther believed he was a witness of Christ. He lived about 1,500 years after Christ’s resurrection. He, like the apostles before him, was commanded to be silenced by his churchly and temporal authority: the pope and the Holy Roman emperor.

Why? Because Luther said that popes and church councils have often made mistakes and even contradicted one another. He said that popes and councils should only be obeyed when their pronouncements conform to Scripture. This got Luther into much trouble. He would be excommunicated by the pope. But he was not deterred. A bounty was placed upon him, but he continued to teach, preach, write, publish, and debate. Luther firmly believed that his conscience was a safe guide since it was captive to the Word of God.

Now, due to sin, conscience is often separated from the Word of God. Still, we are all formed in some way. How and who and what we worship forms who we are. If we do not worship God and His Word, we then worship our disordered desires: money, possessions, lust. We get to choose what is right and what is wrong. We usurp God and take His throne.

During Luther's day, the debate was on what was the higher authority: the Holy Bible or the pope. Today's debate is on who or what has the authority on morality: the Holy Bible, government, or yourself.

As the world sees it, today's radicals are Christians. We are the problem, since when our government commands us to sin, we are called to obey God rather than men. You, who are sitting in the pews here this morning, are seen as the extremists. You are the revolutionaries. You are because Christians believe that God's Word never changes, because ***"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever"*** (Hebrews 13:8) and ***"the Word of the Lord remains forever"*** (1 Peter 1:25). The world says all people are inherently good, but we know that ***"no one does good, not even one"*** (Romans 3:12b). We know that we are sinners in need of Christ's forgiveness.

So, if we are the radicals, then what does the world consider normal? Since 2015, America has experienced a fundamental transformation. What was once considered abnormal is now normal: pornography, mutilating children through gender-affirming healthcare, drag queen story hour, same-sex and polyamorous relationships. Now, this isn't a complete list. This is what men – in our government – encourage. Today, in order to protect our children, the world says that we must pervert them.

You have likely heard that we are in a battle for the soul of the nation. We are, indeed, in a spiritual war. But this war isn't between people. This war attacks our soul. We are at battle against cosmic powers and spiritual forces of evil (Ephesians 6:12) that encourage man to disordered desires. But as Ecclesiastes 1:9 puts it, ***"there is nothing new under the sun."*** So, all the issues we have today are not new. Sin is the cause. What's different today is that social media takes the power of sinful desires and amplifies them. The entire focus of social media is turning our attention inward to ourselves. This is, in fact, the same tactic Satan used on our first parents. Satan said, ***"You will not surely die,"*** so go ahead and sin for ***"your eyes will be opened"*** (Genesis 3:1-5).

Today, our eyes are opened to more and more evil. Satan is deceiving us into thinking that evil is good. For many of us, the endorphins given by social media – *as well with other forms of media* – has changed our opinion on what is evil and good.

Each of us are constantly at odds. We must face the choice of following God or following men.

Our Old Adam – our inherited sinful nature – desires to follow men. Our New Adam – our regenerated self in Christ – desires to follow God. This is our constant and daily spiritual battle with sin. Dark, diabolical, demonic forces are at work in this world. Satan is hard at work in destroying marriage, the family, and the love of human life. So, when it comes to life and death, right and wrong, there is no third possibility, no middle ground, no neutral. It is an unrelenting war, Satan against God, and the battleground is the human heart.

But we have a weapon. And let us use this weapon. For this weapon is the Word of God – the Holy Bible. This was the weapon of the apostles, the weapon of Luther, and is our weapon. You see, through memorization, recitation, and prayer we have the weapons needed to hold off the sinful world, our sinful nature, and Satan himself.

And to give us even more ammunition against Satan, the world, and our sinful nature, Jesus gives us His peace through the Sacraments: Baptism, Confession, and the Lord's Supper. This is why being active in church is so important! Here we are given forgiveness of sins and strength for our faith so we can proclaim the good news of God to the world. We need our sins forgiven, since Satan uses our sin to pull us away from God and to him. This is why we are here. We are here to receive God's forgiveness and strength for our weak faith, so we have the will to fight ahead.

As we hear His Word and receive His gifts, we are all Christ's witnesses. In Holy Baptism, Christ called you by name, and through His Word, He inspires us by the Holy Spirit to be His witnesses. We have been sent into this world, this culture, and at this time.

Truly, we must confess that we do not witness as we should. We can be daunted by the opposing words or condemning actions of those who don't trust in the crucified and risen Christ. Out of fear of offending people, we can be tempted to remain silent.

Like the apostles, we cannot be silent. Even though we may receive rejection or dishonor, when we are commanded to break God's Law, we must obey God rather than men. We will proclaim salvation as a gift through the crucified and risen Savior, Jesus Christ. We are His witnesses! Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +