

“Easter Politics”

“To clasp hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world.” ---Karl Barth

This is the fourth Sunday of Easter. Today’s scripture lesson from the Book of Acts dramatizes the impact ... the power that Christ’s resurrection had on the world ... on the people at that time ... and ultimately the force that Resurrection has on us. Easter is about change. Most importantly, change in God’s relationship with all people ... change in the way that people understand their relationship with God. No longer is salvation a matter of keeping the Mosaic Law. Salvation is now a product of grace ... God’s grace ... grace alone! Change implies power ... some sort of force that moves the world in a new direction ... moves people’s thinking toward a new reality. For example, the message of the empty tomb reminds us that Jesus’ resurrection is the heart of the Christian faith. Without the Resurrection ... there is no Easter ... and if there is no Easter, there is no Christian faith.

That fact directs and reorients every believer’s life, so that they become channels ... vessels ... vehicles for working out the agenda of the Spirit of God. Another example from the Acts’ lesson is the healing of the lame man. As significant as that miracle is for both the man himself and for all who witness it, the healing is only a symptom of the new reality that has broken in upon humankind as a result of Jesus’ resurrection. Resurrection destroyed the old and comfortably held ways of knowing and doing to the point that the religious rulers of the time felt a direct threat to their authority. The new reality of the Resurrection released fresh energies ... energies that had the ability to restore human life ... the power to heal ... the power to make whole ... the power to make new.

Make no mistake ... Easter is a force to be reckoned with! Easter is the sign of God’s great victory over the powers of sin and death. After Easter, the world is flipped upside down. A new history ... a new mark in time begins. Ordinary folks, like Peter and John, are unleashed onto the world as powerful agents of change. One might think that when Peter and John healed the crippled beggar that such an act of goodness would elicit gratitude and praise. Think again. The religious authorities are not amused by this unlicensed ... un-credentialed act of mercy. They demand to know: “By what power do you do this?”

Here, just a couple of weeks into Easter, we are forced to confront politics. You say religion and politics don’t mix? Oh contraire! Politics is about power. And because Easter has “political implications,” such as the power of death is confronted by a greater power in the resurrection of Christ ... because Easter has political implications, we must talk about Easter politics. A new power has been let loose upon the world ... a power not limited by governing authorities. That power is being exercised by ordinary people like Peter and John. To be a follower of the Risen Christ is to be a member of the Easter people who raise political questions ... questions like: Whom do we serve? Whom do we worship?

When Jesus broke the bonds of death and escaped from the tomb on Easter, it was not *just* a “spiritual” event. It was also a “political” event. On Easter, the living God went head-to-head with the powers that be and defeated and disarmed those powers ... for what is politics but the exercise of power? Politics is about power --- who has it and for what purpose? Easter is very political. Today’s lesson from Acts makes this plain when simple, ordinary people, like Peter and John, heal, speak up for Jesus, and stand up to the powerful leaders of their time. How does this happen? From where does such courage come? A power has been unleashed. Not only is Jesus resurrected, but also Jesus raises up a people who challenge the religious status quo. Easter is not only something that happened to Jesus. Easter also happened to his followers ... it happened to Peter and John. Look at them how they heal ... how they preach! They have the power to do what Jesus himself did and their speech and actions ... their witness ... shows forth the power of God in the world.

From the beginning, Christianity exemplified a clash between religion and politics. Matthew says that when Jesus was born, the moment King Herod heard about it, he called together his political advisors and *was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him*. Herod had been in office long enough to know a threat to his rule when he saw one.

Herod knew that, in this baby at Bethlehem, everything his kingdom was built upon was in mortal peril. So Herod responded in the way rulers usually respond: violence. Herod called out the army and they massacred all the Jewish boy babies two years and under ... ethnic cleansing ... genocide.

Every Sunday when we pray the Lord's Prayer we say, "Your kingdom come." When we pray this, we are in a power struggle with the kingdom of this world over who is Lord. To be part of Christ's kingdom is to acknowledge who is in charge, whose will ultimately counts in this world. There may be some faiths in this world that detach the individual believer from the concern about earthly matters ... faith that strive to rise above the outward, visible concerns of sword and shield ... wine and bread ... politics and power. My friends Christianity is not one of those faiths.

C. S. Lewis once noted: *Jesus spoke and acted in such a way that one either had to follow him or else decide that he was crazy. There was no middle ground in Jesus' kingdom. One either has to move toward it, risk letting go and being caught up in Jesus' mission, or else one has to move on, like the rich ruler, who couldn't sell all that he had and become a member of Jesus' kingdom.* Peter and John moved toward that kingdom. Their healing of a crippled beggar is a sign that a new power is loose in the world.

As Christians, we have been given the grace to know that we live between the times, having seen the fullness of God in Jesus Christ, having witnessed, in Easter, the great triumph of God over the powers of evil. Yet, we also live with the knowledge that the entire world is not fulfilled as God's world. There is a tension between what is ours in Christ and that which is promised to come to us in our role as God's people. But we can take great comfort when we read the Scriptures, like the one from Acts, and know that the answer to the question, "by what power, by what name do you do these things," lies in the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus. This is the source of any power we have in the face of the world's power. The real Easter miracle is these two men: Peter and John ... lowly ... powerless ... un-credentialed ... uneducated men ... standing up to the authorities and witnessing the power of God. Such a witness is the real miracle!

You and I are living, breathing evidence that God has not abandoned the world ... and that Easter keeps happening ... that God continues to triumph. We are able continually and fervently to pray that God's kingdom comes because we know that God's will has been done. We are able to be honest about all the ways in which this world is not the kingdom of God in its fullness and to hope for more because we know that God's will has *yet* to be done ... God's kingdom has *yet* to come. We can live in this world without despair even in the face of various, present world situations because Easter power is working and changing us ... even us! For it is God's power that heals you when you're sick ... strengthens you when you are weak ... lifts you up when you are down ... moves you forward when you are paralyzed with fear ... sustains you when you have done all that you humanly can do in some situations.

In our postmodern world, it is easy to feel like a number rather than a real human being. It is easy to feel like a mere cog in the great clanking machinery of the modern state ... to feel powerless before the forces of evil ... whether they are embodied in a cancerous growth inside your body ... or in a judicial process that is lost in legalism ... or in a health care system that is governed not by need and practice, but by the bottom line. Today's lesson from Acts says that in Easter a new counter power has been unleashed ... set loose among ordinary men and women like you and me. It is a power of life against death ... it is a power of truth against lies ... it is a power of the living God against the idols we create for ourselves, including the idolatries of government and power.

When living our faith, acting and witnessing what we believe to be true, when people ask us "by what power, by what name do you do these things," the answer is plain: By the power of the crucified, resurrected Christ and the new people Jesus Christ has created. We bear his name before the world.

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