

"Christ is Risen!—A Generous Life"

Second Sunday of Easter

Acts 4:32-35

“And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all” Acts 4:33

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! We have at least this one truth in common with the early Christian Church as it is described in the Book of Acts. We believe and trust in a risen Lord. He alone has conquered Sin and death, the greatest enemies you and I and the world will ever know. And it changes everything.

Particularly, we see in our Scripture readings this morning that risen Lord and the Spirit of God that rests upon him and now lives in us has the power to drive out all fear. The risen Lord and the power of this Gospel has the power to drive out fear of death, fear of failure, and even fear of financial insecurity. All because the Spirit of God works through the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection to create a bold, courageous trust in the risen Lord.

Throughout the season of Easter our sermon will be based on readings from the Book of Acts. This Book gives a detailed description of the life of the early Church within the first few decades following the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. As we consider the Book of Acts we see the reality of persecution, especially against the Christians in Jerusalem. The early church felt persecution acutely. The reality of Christian persecution is also felt in parts of the world today like the Middle East and Africa. Glance at the latest newspaper headlines and you can even find evidence of Christian persecution here in America as individuals and business owners are being bullied and labeled as bigots for having different opinions regarding issues like same sex marriage. The Christian Church as described in Acts faced persecution as well. A climate and environment of persecution.

We read that through Peter and John, the Lord worked a miraculous healing for a lame man. But because they proclaimed the risen Christ, the Jewish officials did not thank them. Instead, the officials interrogated and threatened Peter and John. The same people who had not long before put Jesus on trial were now persecuting his followers (4:1-22). Later, the apostles were thrown in jail, threatened again, and finally beaten prior to their release (5:17-40). Things were going from bad to worse.

The Book of Acts mentions that the church initially enjoyed favor from the people (2:47; 4:21; 5:13, 26). But the fiercer the persecution became, the less mention Acts makes of favorable responses to Christians from the people of Jerusalem. At this stage of church history, the climactic episode of persecution was Stephen's stoning by an enraged Jewish Council (7:51-60). Persecution threatened to knock the infant church out of existence.

Amid all of this trouble we observe some remarkable behavior. In our reading we see the early Christians giving their testimony in the face of danger. What is their testimony in the face of such danger, in the face of death? Oddly enough . . . they share. They give to those in need. They sell their property and offer the money to those among them who are hungry and poor.

So what do they believe about God that would lead them to behave so radically and recklessly? Of course they believe that in Jesus of Nazareth God has risen from the dead and ultimately holds the victory over any enemy or persecutor of the Church. No enemy or circumstance, great or small, has power over them because of Christ. And that bold and courageous faith in the resurrected Christ inspires a bold and courageous testimony that expresses itself in how they handle all possessions that God has given them.

But aren't they paying any attention? Don't they know what could happen? Shouldn't they be stocking up for the storm, preparing for the onslaught, bracing themselves against those who are persecuting them? But they don't do any of these things. Their actions are not governed by fear of death, but by freedom . . . the freedom of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. "Sure there's a lot of strife"—but Christ is risen!—and the enemy doesn't run their lives. Belief in the resurrection then does not lead these early Christians to retreat from this life, but their faith in the risen Lord propels them into this life. Putting to death the uncertainty of tomorrow, the resurrection set them free to give lavishly, even recklessly.

Great grace. We read that great grace was upon the early Christians as they boldly gave their testimony through their words and their generosity. We too have received great grace in the risen Christ. Great grace that has the power to radically flip our life and values upside down. That is to say, Easter—by definition—turns everything on its head. And it seems that what we see in the description of the early Christians from the book of Acts is a glimpse into what life can look like when you actually believe in "the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come." It is a striking picture of fellowship and community—"the full number of those that believed were of one heart and soul...they had everything in common...there was not a needy person among them" (Acts 4:34). And this passage comes on the heels of violent threats and impending persecution.

Great grace in the risen Lord. The great grace of the crucified and risen Lord empowers our service, our generosity. The God who overcame the greatest obstacle of life, death itself, now lives eternally in you and empowers your life and actions—today! What then shall we fear? Who shall we fear?

We are resurrection people. And the resurrection changes everything for us. It brings with it the sure and certain confidence that the enemy does not run our lives. The enemy of Sin. The enemy of death. Satan himself. Defeated! The resurrected Lord now lives in you and you in him. Receiving great grace in the risen Christ our actions are not governed by fear but by freedom. So let us be free to serve. Let us be free to serve generously. Let us be free to give cheerfully (2 Corinthians 9:7). Let us be free to support the work of the risen King in this place with a portion of the time, talents, and treasures he has given us. He is the one who won our freedom in the first place. Christ is risen! Great grace that empowers a free and generous life! Amen.