

Easter 2
April 3, 2016

Text: Acts 5:12, 17-32

Theme: We are witnesses of these things

1. Though the wicked try to suppress it
2. It's preaching will succeed

Last Sunday we gathered here in the joy of resurrection. As we did so, news broke of the bombing in the park in Pakistan that targeted Christians. There was also an article posted online by Robert Hutchinson entitled *Why Christians (still) Believe in the Resurrection* in which the author boiled down our faith in Jesus' resurrection to this statement, **Where does this belief come from? I would argue that it ultimately comes from the Christian community itself—and from the faith that life in this community engenders... This is where belief in the resurrection arises, from Christian worship itself.** That puts the cart before the horse at best and is down right sacrilege at worst. So from blatant persecution and violent attacks from outside to misinformation and distraction from within, the truth is under attack. But **we are witnesses of these things.**

In the months after Jesus' death, the disciples faced tremendous physical persecution. In chapter 4 of the book of Acts, we see Peter and John put in prison because **they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead.** (*Acts 4:2*) But they weren't deterred. They continued to preach and do miracles in and around Jerusalem, until in our text we see all the apostles arrested this time. Those who hate the message of the gospel that the perfect life, innocent death and resurrection of Jesus brings forgiveness of sins for all, simply can't tolerate that it should be proclaimed. It makes them jealous, we're told. Maybe because of the attention that was drawn to the apostles. Maybe because many of them were Sadducees who denied the resurrection of the dead. At any rate, they wanted to stamp it out.

So too today. Many people wish to silence by ridicule if possible, threats and actual violence if necessary, any one who proclaims the truth of the gospel. You see it in the jihad being carried out in the name of Islam. You see it still today in the charges of bigotry that are leveled against faithful, Bible-believing Christians. The goal of these is to suppress the fact that we are witnesses of these things, namely the risen Lord Jesus, who was crucified for us. They want us to be intimidated. They want us to be quiet. Because then they win and the message that crushes sinful hearts of self-reliance is silenced. They want us to be quiet so that they can remain blissfully ignorant and push the threat of eternal consequences to the deepest recesses of the human mind. They want to suppress the thought that there is any moral absolute and a Supreme Power in heaven to whom all people must ultimately answer.

But what they miss in suppressing the universality of sin and it's consequence is the far greater gift of God's grace in Jesus whose perfect life, innocent death and glorious resurrection opened heaven for all. There is no one for whose sin Jesus didn't die and pay for. There is no one for whom his resurrection can't stand as the guarantee of their own resurrection glory. It's only unbelief, either willful or in ignorance that keeps people from receiving these gifts of God. And then enemies of the cross are happy to suppress that testimony about what Jesus has done.

But, the apostles had it right when they said, **We must obey God rather than men!** And so must we. This message that he gave them to preach was as powerful as it was glorious. And this is what he told them. **Go, stand in the temple courts, and tell the people the full message of this new life.** Would the one who told them to proclaim the message fail to support and protect them as they did? Would the one who send his Son to deliver them from sin and it's consequences fail to bless their proclamation?

In the current climate in which we live where people call you bigoted, sexist, weak-minded sheep, you and I have that same call to go and proclaim the message. It's not easy. The devil seizes on every tentative thought and every fear-filled heart and wants us to shut up in favor of peace. Timidity wells up inside. A desire to maintain peace. A fear of the unknown or offending others wells up and we'd rather just keep busy with ourselves. But to you, as to the disciples, Jesus said, **Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.** (*John 20:21*) To you

he says, **I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.** (*Revelation 1:8*) To you he has given the promise of Easter and the surety of the resurrection. To you he has given the privilege and honor to serve as his mouthpiece whether before princes and kings as Paul, or the chief priests and governors as Peter, or to your neighbor or friend or co-worker as countless Christians before you, God has set this work before you.

The message is simple. Jesus lived for you. He died for you. He rose again and now lives and reigns for you. We are witnesses of these things. Not with the physical eyes with which Peter and John and the women and others saw him on that first Easter. And we cannot, as did Thomas, put our fingers where the nails were or our hand into his side, but we gathered last week filled not with doubt but with joy and gladness. We live today for the one who lived and died to rescue us from sin and death and the blindness and emptiness of life lived without God.

Proclaim that message. It cannot fail. As these disciples testified and the Sanhedrin was infuriated and wanting to put them to death, a man named Gamaliel stood up and told them to consider what they were about to do carefully. Because he said, **For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.** Folks what we have is not some political campaign message and promise that is up for debate. What we have is the truth of God for salvation. It cannot fail. Martin Luther put it this way, **One of these two things has to happen: either the Word of God will abide and conquer them; or at least they will be unable to suppress it, even if they refuse to accept all its grace and goodness and salvation.**

And he sets that work before us as a congregation too. It's not enough that we should gather weekly for strength against persecution. He calls on us to stand up in the public square and not yield to the pressures of a world lost in their own ignorance and unbelief. Working together we have this precious privilege too of proclaiming a glorious and powerful message to a world that naturally rebels against it. But it's not ours to save the world. It's God's, we are merely required to proclaim and to reach as many as we can, because the proclamation of the Word cannot fail. No persecution, no threat, no terror can overcome it.