

Easter Continued

Acts 5:27-32

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About this time of year during my first year as Dean of Duke Chapel, a group of students, The South Africa Divestment Coalition, met with me. I had spoken on behalf of their efforts earlier and had been a sort of advisor to them. “We want your help with a letter to President Sanford,” they said. “We have written a letter to President Sanford asking him, politely, to support divestment from South Africa here at Duke. He rejected our appeal, but we’ve rewritten our letter and would like your advice on how to plead our case.”

I, aging student activist and trouble maker from the Sixties, viewed the students with... contempt, thinking, “You little wimps, when I was your age, we wouldn’t have *asked* the administration; we would have presented a list of twelve non-negotiable demands, taken the President’s wife hostage, smoked his cigars, drunk his bourbon, and...” But then I said to myself, “Wait, I *am* the administration.” So I lectured the students on how complicated these matters are, how these things take time, how President Sanford knew so much more than they, etc. On that day the Sixties ended for me, and I also found myself on the wrong side of God.

Hey, it’s the First Sunday after Easter, we’re in the Acts of the Apostles, and once again I’m out of step with God. Something’s afoot. Trouble brewing. The security threat is Orange. There’s been an unexpected shakeup, an in-your-face challenge to the government—the resurrection of crucified Jesus. The authorities, hoping to keep public order, to maintain civility and stability, call a state of emergency. Troublemakers are rounded up and brought to court. The Bigwigs order Peter (otherwise known as The Rock by his comrades) to shut up about Jesus and his resurrection. So here’s the Sunday after Easter Question: Why would the authorities be threatened by a post Easter sermon? I’ve been a preacher for four decades, and no politician has ever been made uneasy by my sermons or threatened me with jail time for talking about Easter.

Well, the bigwigs toss the apostles into prison. But an angel delivers them, ordering, “Go, stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about this life” (5:20). So the apostles go right back to the temple at daybreak (This was the same time of day that Jesus rose from the tomb. Is there a connection? I think so.) and begin to mouth off again about the resurrection.

“We gave you strict orders not to teach about Jesus and the resurrection!” Peter smart mouths, “We must obey God rather than any human authority. We’re going to keep telling people about Easter, keep healing the poor without a medical license, keep stirring up trouble in the ghetto, and to heck with the police.” “When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them” (5:33). Get it? What the bigwigs did to Jesus, they now want to do to Jesus’ followers; what God did to the bigwigs in resurrecting Jesus, God now does to the followers of Jesus.

Why would you want to kill someone to stop an Easter sermon? They’re just preaching. Religion is just a personal opinion. I’ve got my strange personal opinions

about Jesus and you've got yours. Ours is a diverse campus. It's just spirituality. Now, what harm could that do?

If you're surprised by the rage of these Easter-denying authorities, if you think the folks in power are making a mountain out of a molehill, wanting to kill somebody for nothing more than religious words, then that suggests to me that you have never been in authority. You have never borne the burden of power. You have never borne responsibilities for public safety and order.

As somebody who has been an "authority," let me explain it to those of you who have not. What is the most important thing you powerless people ask people in power to do? Public order. Safety. Security from external threats.

In the run up to the last US Presidential election, the candidates had their differences, but one thing united them all. Every candidate claimed to more powerful than the other:

I will protect our borders from *them*. I'll build a wall. I'll give you free college. I'll heal you for nothing! I'll make deals. I'll carpet bomb Syria. I'll punish Doctors! I've been Gov. of Ohio! I'll protect women in restrooms. I'll make sure none of *them* get to a ballot box. I've got big hands! Now, we may have to curtail some of *your* freedom, but you won't mind, because you want security. You won't mind if we authorities overstep some of your rights because we—those of us who are authorities—know that you worship safety, prosperity, and security more than God.

I teach at the Divinity School. I'm a gatekeeper for persons attempting to be ordained as preachers. So I'm the authority who skillfully takes these yokels and makes 'em sweat, take tests (theological and psychological), read books, and write papers to see if they can chin up to the bar.

Some goofy, starry eyed, sappy student says, "God called me into the ministry." I say, "We'll see about that." If you think I'm too severe, I assure you that if you didn't have people like me policing those who presume to speak up for God, you would have ecclesiastical chaos. You should thank me, as a theological authority, for keeping you safe from being victimized by goofy preaching!

Oh it's easy for you powerless laypeople to criticize the governing authorities, to complain about the people who run things up at the front office, but as someone who has been a governing authority, someone who has small hands but a very big desk in the front office, I can tell you it's quite a heavy responsibility protecting you, doing all the things to keep you safe, things that God (I'm sure God's got good reasons) doesn't seem willing to do for you. The Dean of the medical school could explain to you that people can't just go around practicing medicine, dispensing drugs, just because some are too poor to get access to health care. Dispensers of health must be credentialed, vetted, and certified. Without somebody in charge, it would be medical chaos.

And that's what bothered the authorities about Peter and the other apostles speaking up and speaking out, performing miraculous signs and wonders. Acts 5 portrays the governing ecclesiastical authorities as buffoons, keystone cops. Carl Icahn thinks that just because he owns our president, he owns us! The bigwigs up in the front office always think they are in charge, the functional equivalent of God, so

they think they can silence uppity Easter speech, put an end to the Post-Easter commotion among the rabble. And the bigwigs might have gotten away with it if not for Easter when God raised *crucified* Jesus. God only raised one person from the dead—a poor, homeless, unemployed Jew named Jesus, crucified by a consortium of religious and government authorities. Crucifixion was the First Century Roman equivalent of American lynching—public intimidation to keep poor, powerless, voiceless people in their place. Resurrection is when God said to all those who are kept in power by intimidation or flattery or lies or violence, “No!” Resurrection wasn’t just “God has brought a dead man back to life!” Resurrection means “God raised tortured-to-death, poor, powerless *Jesus* from the dead.” Troublemaker, rabble rouser, preacher so truthful the government wanted to kill him, Jesus, the only one God ever raised from the dead. Resurrection was vindication that Jesus’ way was God’s way. It was as if, in the resurrection God said, “You want to know who’s really in charge? You want to know whose side I’m on? You want to know who I’m gonna put down and who I’ll lift up when my kingdom comes and my will gets done on earth as in heaven?”

On Good Friday, the people in charge tried to shut Jesus up; Easter Sunday, Jesus broke out, appeared to his astonished disciples, and took charge of the revolution: “As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted by crucifixion... Go! Get out of here! Go, tell somebody the truth of who God really is, on whose side God is on, and what God’s up to, who’s in charge.” Just like they tried to shut Jesus up, so they shut up Peter with threat of jail. And just like God released crucified Jesus from the dead, an angel freed good-as-dead Peter. Remember? Night before the crucifixion, Peter couldn’t say a word except “I didn’t know Jesus” when confronted by the maid in the courtyard. Now Peter is preaching, strutting his stuff before the most powerful people in town. What kind of miracle happened to make a cowardly, voiceless person like Peter into public enemy number one just because of the way he talks? Not only has crucified Jesus been raised, victorious over the powers that thought they had made a victim of him, but also (Listen up, Donald.) there is a power let loose, a God who works from the bottom up, a divine power for good that cannot be contained, accredited, channeled, or stifled by the powers that be.

Hey, if you thought the resurrection was a one shot deal that happened only to Jesus, think again. *Easter continues*. Those who think they are in control are shown to be powerless. And people on the bottom, dismissed as “ignorant and unlearned” (Listen up, all you trying to get power by beating up on the most vulnerable!) and shouting, speaking up, speaking out, unmasking the authorities, are making them look like fools.

In response to outrage over police shootings of young black men, alleged evangelist Franklin Graham posted this:

Listen up—Blacks, Whites, Latinos.... Most police shootings can be avoided. It comes down to respect for authority, obedience. If a police officer tells you to stop, you stop.... If a police officer tells you to lay down [sic] face first with your hands behind your back, you lay down face first.... It’s as simple as that. Even if you think the police officer is wrong—*you obey*.... The Bible says to submit to your leaders and those in authority “because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account.”

I'm busy right now, but would one of you go tell Mr. Graham to read Acts 5 and oh yes, mention that God raised crucified Jesus from the dead? Listen up! Graham, it's Eastertide. You're on the wrong side! If you were in my preaching class, I would smack you for your abuse of Scripture, were I not such a nice person.

Good, white, church-leading liberals like me, including my predecessor as Bishop of Birmingham, made a public statement urging Martin Luther King to go slow, to back off his pressure on the city, chiding him for fomenting unrest, telling King that there could be violence if he didn't tone down his rhetoric. King responded from his jail cell with some of the greatest words in American history:

There was a time when the church was very powerful—in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed.... Whenever the early Christians entered a town, people in power became disturbed.... But the Christians pressed on, in the conviction that they were called to obey God rather than man (quoting this morning's scripture).... Things are different now.... The contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice... an arch defender of the status quo.... The power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's... sanction of things as they are.

Listen up, church.

I got to ask: *whose side am I on?* Would I be sitting behind the desk, telling the “ignorant and unlearned” to be careful what they say and to act more docile when instructed by their betters? Or, would I be out with the apostles, in the streets, down at the ghetto, going about performing mercy for free among the marginalized and dispossessed? Would I believe so much in the power of the resurrection that even I might get uppity with the authorities, refusing to shut up and pipe down?

Listen up, church. It's Easter. This Jesus thing hasn't ended; it's just begun. Jesus is on the move, and we can't be with Jesus unless we're willing to be on the move with Jesus, talk like Jesus, act like Jesus.

Note

As Hitler rose to power in Germany, Karl Barth urged preachers not to waste valuable pulpit time condemning a “nothing” like Hitler. Barth famously said that we must preach “as if nothing has happened,” aiming our artillery “beyond the trenches of immediate relevance.” Barth was a strident vocal opponent of Hitler, but he thought it important not to unintentionally give the Nazis any undue glory or sanctification by lambasting them from the pulpit.

It's my judgment that in the present political hour, we preachers cannot let Trumpism dominate our pastoral imaginations. Sure, I've interrupted about two dozen sermons in the past year in order to say as clearly as possible that the Trumps, Inc. are unworthy of any Christian support. However, I also think that Trumpism is best addressed by allowing scripture to smack the authorities when it chooses and not to give false sanctity to this kleptocracy by speaking too much about it directly from the pulpit. The Sunday after Easter, with the appointed lesson being Acts 5, seemed to me a time to help a congregation think about politics by thinking primarily about the resurrection of Jesus Christ.