

THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

Christ Our Savior Lutheran Church

The Courage to Witness is Found in Easter

Acts 4:8-12

⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! ⁹ If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, ¹⁰ then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. ¹¹ Jesus is

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which has become the cornerstone."

¹² Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."

Easter five hundred years ago was a celebration of mixed emotions. Portuguese navigator Ferdinand Magellan and crew marked Easter Sunday, March 31, 1521 by celebrating the first documented Catholic Mass in the Philippines. No doubt it was a day of rejoicing not only because Christ had risen but because they were grateful to have survived crossing two oceans thus far on their uncharted epic journey to sail around the globe. On that same day on the other side of the world in Saxony, German theologian Martin Luther celebrated Easter with a distinct seriousness. He was about to embark on an epic journey of his own, one also with a very uncertain outcome.

A week later, while in transit through cheering crowds in Erfurt after preaching to them on the Second Sunday of Easter, Luther is said to have remarked, "I have had my Palm Sunday. I wonder whether this pomp is merely a temptation or whether it is also a sign of my impending doom [passion]." As wildly popular as he was with the crowds along the way, he was headed to the Imperial Diet at Worms and a very uncertain outcome.

The Diet had actually begun meeting on January 28 to address several issues plaguing Emperor Charles V. Luther was one of those issues because the Papacy had already decided he should be excommunicated and executed but his elector, Frederick the Wise, didn't think an Italian pope had the right to condemn to death a German subject. Only the state could do that. So an imperial guarantee of safe-passage was arranged and Luther was summoned to appear before the Emperor at the Diet to plead his case.

On April 16, 1521 Luther and his traveling companions reached the German city of Worms with much fanfare and crowds in the thousands cheering him on. On April 17 at 4:00 pm Luther was led into the Diet. The hall was filled with all the politically powerful of Germany and the papal representatives of Rome. In the middle of the room was a table, piled high with Luther's books.

Luther and Frederick had hoped this would be a fair hearing. The Catholic cohort, however, was not interested in debating theology with Luther and neither was the Emperor. All that mattered was Luther's answers to two questions: First, had he written the books on the table? And second, was there a part of them he would now choose to recant?

The answer to the first question was simple. Yes, Luther acknowledged his authorship of the books on the table. The answer to the second question, however, was more than procedural. His very life hung in the balance. He answered: "This touches God and his Word. This affects the salvation of souls. Of this Christ said, 'He who denies me before me, him will I deny before my father.' To say too little or too much would be dangerous. I beg you, give me time to think it over." Grudgingly, Luther was granted 24 hours. That night his friends urged him to remain true the God's Word, but then it wasn't their lives that would be on the line the next day.

It was not until 6:00 pm on April 18, exactly five hundred years ago this Sunday/today, that Luther was led back into the presence of emperor. He was again ask to recant. To which he responded with a careful and conscientious answer about his writing not being all the same kind and about how Scripture ought to be the standard by which they were judged. And if by that standard he could be should to have erred, he would recant. "Once I have been taught, I shall be quite ready to renounce every error, and I shall be the first to cast my books into the fire."

The answer was not acceptable to the emperor and Luther was pressed for a more explicit statement, which he famously gave:

“Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me. Amen.”

The hall erupted in a mix of emotions. Luther’s friends were overjoyed. The Spanish soldiers of the emperor’s guard, however, shouted, “to the fire with him!” Luther was escorted out of the hall, raising his arms in victory once outside.

The story of Luther’s Easter Spring in 1521, of course, doesn’t end there. But in the trying moment I just described to you, as well as others that were looming in his future, Luther found the courage to stand on the truth of God’s Word alone.

Where he found it exactly is probably what you’d like to know. For even though we are not being brought before royalty with our lives literally hanging in the balance, we too are also called to humbly and honestly give careful and conscientious confession to the truth of God’s Word. It’s not the imperial might of the Holy Roman Empire or the ecclesiastical power of the Roman Catholic Church that stand against us but a time and culture that have no intention of discussing God’s Word with us but have already decided our message can no longer be tolerated and ought to be canceled. Additionally, there’s a sense that the peril this puts us in is growing as the years go by, not waning. And that there are other uncertainties looming on the horizon.

When risen Jesus said in today’s Holy Gospel that those called to confess the truth about him are “witnesses” (Lk 24:48), he did not mean detached bystander type witnesses who are merely asked to relay what they saw - “On the morning of March 31, while you were on your way to work, did you see the defendant’s vehicle rear-end the plaintiff’s vehicle that was stopped at a red light?” He meant the type of witness that will speak the truth even if it is dangerous to them ... even if it costs them dearly. We know this because the word he used for “witness” is the Greek word “martyr.”

Where did Luther ... where does any faithful Christian get the courage to be that kind of witness? The answer is Easter itself! That’s where the Apostle Peter found it when he was led into a meeting of the politically powerful of his day who had voted to condemn Jesus just months before and now wanted to erase his name from the memory of the Jewish people. Peter and John knew their lives were in the balance when they were asked “By what power or what name did you [cure the crippled beggar in the temple yesterday]?” (Ac 4:7). Yet because of Easter Peter answered, “It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed” (Ac 4:10).

“Jesus Christ ... whom God raised from the dead.” That’s Easter! That’s the message, the Word of God, that captured Luther’s conscience and that fills our hearts and minds as well. It’s great news! But it’s also great power! God the Holy Spirit’s power! Power to make sinners believe its message. Power to make believers like Peter and the other Apostles, like Luther and others down through ages courageously confess it, no matter how dangerous or deadly it was for them.

Because they did, you and I are able to celebrate Easter with joy in 2021. Joy that the Lord has risen. Gratitude that there is even now light at the end of our pandemic tunnel. But let’s also add a sense of serious urgency too to our celebration. For the resurrection of Jesus Christ remains the truth that must be told. “Salvation is found in no one else” (Ac 4:12) and we now are the ones called to be the courageous the witnesses of it.

Amen.

Rev Matt Kiecker’s April, 2021 “Four Branches” article was the source of this sermon’s Luther material.

Prayer of the Church

M: O God, as you breathed new life into the world through the resurrection of your Son, so now by your Holy Spirit breathe new life into the people of your Church that, freed by his Gospel, we may be empowered to courageously confess the name of Jesus Christ, the only name given to mankind by which we must be saved.

Lord Jesus, receive our thanks for working courage in Martin Luther to faithfully confess you before his Emperor five hundred years ago this day. We are humbled to share in his legacy of faith as members of the Lutheran Church. Continue to guard and protect us with your pure doctrine and the fire of your love in the Word and Sacraments.

Eternal Lord, by your gift of good government, grant peace and good days also to our citizens and between the nations of the world, that we and all our neighbors may lead quiet lives in godly contentment.

Heavenly Father, by the firstfruits of Christ's resurrection from the dead, you secured forgiveness for our troubled consciences. Bless also with temporal health and well-being those who suffer among us [*especially* _____]. Grant them aid in this moment and, even more so, true, immortal health in the world to come.

Graciously receive our prayers, deliver and preserve us, for to you alone we give all glory, honor and worship, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Lord's Prayer

C: **Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.**

Acts 4:8-12

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Luke 24:36-49

³⁶ While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”

³⁷ They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. ³⁸ He said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? ³⁹ Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.”

⁴⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. ⁴¹ And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, “Do you have anything here to eat?” ⁴² They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³ and he took it and ate it in their presence.

⁴⁴ He said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.”

⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶ He told them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” +