

From Grief Comes a Church: By What Power?

A sermon preached by

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Acts 4:5-12

5 The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem,⁶ with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John,^{} and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. ⁷When they had made the prisoners^{*} stand in their midst, they inquired, 'By what power or by what name did you do this?' ⁸Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, 'Rulers of the people and elders, ⁹if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, ¹⁰let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth,^{*} whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. ¹¹This Jesus^{*} is "the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone."^{*}*

¹²There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.'

About a year ago the Chinese human rights activist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Liu Xiaobo (Lu Schawbo), died a month after he had been granted a medical parole from prison. Liu rose to fame as a literary critic during the 1980's and he traveled internationally, teaching in several universities. But he returned home to China in 1988 to support the Tiananmen Square protests and the next year he was imprisoned for the first time. In the next 29 years he was jailed four times, with his last imprisonment lasting nine years.

His supporters referred to him as China's Nelson Mandela. In his last trial he was charged with *suspicion of inciting subversion of state power*, something that all Christians should be guilty of. It was during this last imprisonment that he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, the first ever to be awarded to a Chinese citizen.

But he wasn't the first to be awarded the prize while he was in prison. Liu was one of three laureates who were awarded the Nobel Prize while incarcerated. I'm sure that a few others, like Martin Luther King Jr., had also spent time in jail before they were honored. The reality is that throughout most of human history, those who stand up for justice, for mercy, or even hope are often the focus of imperial power. There are countless individuals like Liu who were seen as such a threat to the status quo that those in power sought any means available to silence them.

That is what is playing out in this morning's passage from the Acts of the Apostles. Peter and John are required to stand before a who's who of leadership, kind of like the crowd of folks who attended Barbara Bush's funeral yesterday. The author of Acts lists them by name because the readers would have recognized them as the same people that had been complicit in Jesus' arrest and crucifixion.

Earlier in the chapter, we learn that these leaders are annoyed at the persistence of these uneducated fishermen. I think they are annoyed because they thought they had already snuffed out the life of Jesus. But now after Easter, Jesus and his followers are like the whack-a-mole game that you play at the county fair: they just keep popping up, not dead yet. In fact, Jesus is so not dead that it is causing quite a problem for these religious leaders who are trying to convince the Romans that they can keep the locals under control. The result is a confrontation between the powers that thought they had put him to death and these crazy uneducated fishermen who were proclaiming that he had instead been raised to new life. Resurrection is an annoyance to those who would use the power of death in their attempts to snuff out the living, breathing power of God.

So, what is going on here is an announcement that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus will not just be a one and done occasion. It isn't just a traffic court type violation of the Roman authority, quickly put to rest by a ticket, imprisonment, or even a public crucifixion. Instead, in the eyes of the early church, it will be an extended confrontation, one that is likely to take on eternal perspectives.

Often in Acts, Luke is quick to point out that Peter is able to say and do things because he is filled with the Holy Spirit. That's another way of saying that Jesus is still alive, God is still working through him. You might arrest Jesus, imprison him, beat him, even crucify him, but he will not be stopped, he continues to heal, to save, to empower, and to give new life. Later on, this same annoying persistence is transferred to Peter and many of the other early church leaders. They too will not be stopped - death will not have the last word.

After Liu Xiaobo's (Lu Schawbo) death, the Chinese government did all in their power to diminish the impact of the life and witness he had made to human rights and dignity. Many people believe he died at the early age of 61 because of the substandard treatment he had received during his imprisonments. The government had his body cremated and the ashes were

buried at sea because, according to his supporters, they feared that a memorial to freedom would develop if he had a public grave site.

In his writings, Liu promoted non-violent resistance even in the face of this kind of imperial power. He wrote;

The greatness of non-violent resistance is that even as man is faced with tyranny, and the resulting suffering, he responds to hate with love, to prejudice with tolerance, to arrogance with humility, to humiliation with dignity, and to violence with reason.

As I have been saying in the last couple of weeks as I've preached on these passages from the Acts of the Apostles, the power of a grieving people, grieving family, grieving loved ones, grieving followers is on display in these stories of the early church's formation. The imperial powerful leaders don't understand how this power can work, they don't understand that death doesn't have the final word. They ask Peter and the other church leaders, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" Their answer in today's pluralistic society might rightly cause us to stumble over the seeming exclusiveness of Peter's language: "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."

Daniel Kirk¹ has written that this response invites us to ground our understanding of salvation in deliverance experienced not only in the future but also here and now. And this is because Peter's response ties back to the healing of the disabled beggar.

When the leaders ask him, "How did this man get healed?" his response is, "only by Jesus." In that context these words in "name of Jesus" are not given as a passcode to get into heaven. Instead, they are the power for the ongoing healing of every sort of human brokenness both then and now.

All around us are temptations to believe that death has the final word. A loved one dies, a marriage ends, a best friend leaves the neighborhood, an injustice still carries on, children still live in poverty. You certainly have your own list. And every time there is a little resurrection in our lives, someone in the back of the room says, "Who gave you the authority to grieve with the widow, teach these children, or feed this hungry woman, or denounce bigotry and hatred?" By what power did you do this? For me the "correct" response isn't so much a specific faith

¹ Daniel Kirk, Commentary on Acts 4:5-12, Working Preacher Website, 2018 www.workingpreacher.org

tradition. Instead I think it is a recognition that we all need a power outside of ourselves in order to confront death. For those of us gathered here today it is likely Jesus, for others it may be the Torah or the Koran. But I think it is safe to say that all of us need what AA calls a higher power.

So, believing in the resurrection of Jesus is not, at its heart, believing that God did something to a corpse two thousand years ago and that it is now done and dusted. To affirm resurrection is to proclaim the ongoing greatest annoyance that any life-taking power on earth might hear. It says that ultimate, imperial power will not end a person's story. You can crucify it or bury it at sea and it will still live. And ultimately these sacred stories will continue to march toward justice and mercy, will triumph over bigotry or hatred, will not cower to violence or domination. God is greater than entropy and death. God is greater than crushed lives or limbs. This is the power by which the early church was able to grow and claim its mission, and this power continues to be ours today.

Thanks be to God. AMEN