

Focus: The Holy Spirit empowers us to witness to Christ.

What kind of church do you want to belong to? Some people want to be members of the *family* church. Others want to be members of the *program* church. Still others want to be members of the *traditional* church. Me?

I want to be a member of the *annoying* church.

I'm serious!—Mostly! Of all the words used to describe the early church in Acts, one that rings in your ear like a mosquito this morning is *annoyed*. “While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came to them, ²*much annoyed* because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead. ³So they arrested them and put them in custody.”

But you say—what could possibly be so annoying about teaching the people and proclaiming the resurrection of the dead? Certainly, arresting them seems like an over-reaction! Doctrinal questions aside, the rulers, elders, scribes, and *all the high-priestly* family put all their cards on the table when the first question they ask is not, “What do you believe about the resurrection?” or even “What in blue blazes are you doing healing this man”? but *instead*, “*By what power or by what name did you do this?*”

Their issue is all about authority. By what power? By what name? *Who gave you lowly, uneducated fishermen permission to do this*—because it certainly wasn't us!

Now, believe me, I am not kneejerk anti-authority. The scriptures tell us to obey and pray for our leaders (Rom 13:1; 1 Tim 1:2), but ultimately, even the best authorities may need to be *annoyed* time and again. Sometimes the church has to be the voice of conscience, that annoying pebble in the shoe that makes those in charge pause, stop what they're doing, even...repent.

And the particular authorities in today's reading were no exception. You may remember the names Caiaphas and Annas from our Good Friday readings. These were the same cast of characters, who along with Pilate and King Herod, had Jesus put to death on the cross. Peter knows there's at least a chance that they might do the same thing to him. *Annoying* these guys is no small stakes game. How do we get from Peter the thrice-denier to Peter the bold witness we meet here?

The answer is that there is a new sheriff in town. On Good Friday, Pontius Pilate implored Jesus, “Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you (Jn 19:10)?”

Pilate's authority, like the authority of every worldly ruler, is ultimately backed by the power of force. Even in our day, when authority derives from the people, it is still ultimately backed by the threat or use of military and police power. At the end of the day, Pilate, Herod and the chief priests knew as well as we do: authority is having power over someone's life.

This gets to the bottom of why *resurrection* is so darn annoying to worldly authorities. It flips on its head where true power lies. On Good Friday, Peter and the disciples thought death was the end. “Sorry Jesus, but we gotta scam before they get us, too.” It's only Easter that shows just

how wrong the world is. Power does not belong to the one who can release or crucify, but to the God who raises the dead.

A church that reminds the world of this is going to annoy people. What do I mean? David Maraniss's *Once in a Great City: A Detroit Story* recounts the story of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s June 1963 "Walk to Freedom" in Detroit. It came right after dogs were set on the protesters in Birmingham, Alabama and drew 125,000 people which made it the nation's largest civil rights demonstration up to that time. Today, we remember Martin Luther King, Jr., as a modern-day saint—and it's not a bad perk that many of us get the 3rd Monday of January off in honor of his birthday. But back then, he was, well, *annoying*—and not just to segregationists either. King spoke to other leaders about the march, which was "not exactly endorsed by JFK."

"The president solicited our support of his legislation. He wants Negroes to mobilize to help pass the bill," King said. "The president told me some congressmen feel this would be more harmful than helpful. I insisted it would not be harmful. He expressed concern over the fact that some demonstrations have led to violence. I told him the demonstrations have been amazingly nonviolent and it was spectators and others who were violent."¹

Had MLK listened to the president, the march would not have happened. He would have annoyed far fewer people. He probably would have lived to a ripe old age quietly pastoring his congregation instead of being assassinated. Of course, had he done all that, the civil rights legislation of the '60s probably would've taken years longer to pass. He had a choice to make in his life: lie low and live a quietly good life, or with his words and his feet *witness* to the Gospel of Jesus: love, equality, justice, knowing full well that he was going to annoy a few powerful folks along the way. Thank God that Dr. King in his day made the hard choice.

Acts says that Peter spoke because he was *filled with the Holy Spirit*. Looking back today, we can clearly see that MLK was filled with that same Spirit. Many others in their shoes might have been filled with fear. But being filled with the Holy Spirit reminded them that they lived first and foremost under the name of *Jesus*, and that name means salvation no matter what anyone on earth could do to them. They spoke, healed, marched, *acted* under that name, and let the chips fall where they may.

But Acts is not a story about great Christians in the past. It is the story of Christians of all times and places filled with the Holy Spirit. And that means, it is our story, too. You and I were all baptized in whose name? *Jesus's name*. We too are a Spirit-filled people. We live in the same promise of resurrection, under the same power not of death but of *life*. It may seem a simple—even a silly question—Who are you willing to annoy for the Gospel? But really it's a question that means: Whose name has power over my life? Whose name has power over our congregation? When push comes to shove, are we willing to be the *annoying* church? Because in the end, petty tyrants like Herod and Pilate, jealous big fish in a small pond like Caiaphas and

¹ <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/entertainment/books/2015/09/14/detroit-story-excerpt/72290698/>, accessed on 4/20/2021.

Annas, even celebrated presidents come and go, but Christ our cornerstone endures forever. It is in his name we entrust our salvation. Can we trust him with our lives, too? **Amen.**