

That's the Answer; What's the Question?

Eastertide

Text: Acts 3:12, 16; Acts 4:12

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

I suggested to you last week that, in the wake of the resurrection, the Jesus Movement was dynamic, alive, confident, joyful, vibrant, and on the move, spreading across the ancient world like a burning fire, and that the Jesus Movement had eventually become institutionalized and that we are, down the pike 2000 years, a part of the institutionalization of that spirit of fire that broke out in the wake of Jesus' resurrection. Spirit needs form. Movements always become institutions, and institutions initially flourish and then they flounder and fail. They have a period of youthful exuberance, of middle-aged mediocrity, and finally weariness and defensiveness. They become sick of soul. It can be traced in all sorts and conditions of human organization and institutional life, and we just happen to be at the tail end of what was a great story - the story of the Christian Church.

Israel had its story, its day in the sun. The Christian Church has had a 2000-year run. There's something breaking and the future form isn't yet evident, but out of the ashes of the Church's present sickness of soul will arise the Phoenix that will have a luster and a glory far beyond anything of which we have yet dreamed. I announce it ahead of time. How else could I be a prophet?

The authorities, the guardians of the tradition, the temple crowd thought that they had gained themselves some time and some peace. They weren't bad people and they weren't really into crucifixion but, if need be, they would let Jesus die in order that the status quo might be maintained. Like the High Priest, Caiphas, said, "Better that one man die for the people that the nation be spared." Spoken like a true pragmatist. The kind of thing that you would expect some wise, old head in the councils of power to say. Not really wanting anybody to bleed, but better that one bleed that the status quo might be maintained.

Institutional leadership is a burden. You sort of carry the whole world on your shoulders. You're responsible to keep everything together, responsible to keep the natives from getting restless, that life can go on with a modicum of civility and decency and comfort. And so, sometimes you have to make tough decisions.

"Jesus? Well, Jesus will have to die, and then we can get on and this uneasy tension with our occupying power, Rome, and particularly those of us who are in the clergy, high priesthood will be able to maintain our position and our privilege because the perks aren't what they used to be, but they still aren't bad."

So, Jesus dies and then, lo and behold, that crowd is convinced that he's not dead at all. They experience his presence and they say to one another, "The Lord is risen!" And they begin to experience a new transformed understanding of life, reality - that God, the God of Israel, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the God Whom their forefathers and mothers worshipped is a God, obviously, Who is not into death but into life, and will not tolerate the darkness but will affect the light, and the end, obviously is not death, but life, and power and joy. The presence of the living Christ transforms that dispirited band of defeated disciples into flaming evangelists filled with good news.

Luke, who tells us the story of Jesus in the Gospel by his name, tells us that he has researched the sources. Writing now several decades later, when there is already the early institutional Christian Church, Luke writes volume II, the Book of Acts. After telling about the day of Pentecost and the outpouring of the power of the Spirit of God, the spirit of the Living Christ, he relates the incident that we read a moment ago - Peter and John approaching the temple, still practicing their Jewish prayers, three o'clock in the afternoon, a beggar at the door seeking alms, his only means of livelihood. He is a cripple from birth. Peter and John say to him, "Silver and gold have we none, but such as we have, we give to you." (I usually say that, too. Silver and gold have I none. such as I have I give unto you. Here's a sermon.) But, Peter and John say, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!" They grab him by the arm just in case he didn't believe them, and he feels the strength come into his limbs. He walks, he begins to leap and to dance and to praise God, and, well, you would have been surprised this morning if you would have found a bag person out there with a hand out suddenly come down this middle aisle, dancing and praising God. I trust the ushers would be present to usher him out because we do things decently and in order here, we don't want too much frivolity or praise or dancing or leaping for joy. Right?

But, all the people, obviously, are amazed, astounded. So, they come crowding around and Peter and John say, "Look, this is no big deal. What do you think? Do you think we did this? Do you think it's through our power or our piety that this man stands before you, healed? Not at all. It is the name of Jesus. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob has anointed his servant, Jesus. That is, Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus is God's anointed one, that connection between heaven and earth. He is the conduit of divine power. It is through Jesus, the name of Jesus that awakened faith in this man, that caused strength to seep into this man. This man stands before you well, healed, full of health in the name of Jesus, not us."

Peter never missed an opportunity to preach, so he gave his witness to the resurrection, and that, of course, was the sore point, so once again the authorities have to move in. They thought they had done away with this pest. They thought they had gotten rid of this threat to good order, mediocrity and boredom, but obviously, they still had to deal with the problem. So, they arrested Peter and John. What else do you do? When you're in authority you just throw them into the holding tank overnight, let them cool off and think about it. But in the morning, they arraign them, they bring them before the whole high priestly family. Now, you've got a lot of vested interest here, and they say once again, "By what name, what power, what's the secret?" How did you do it, in other words?

Peter, not always known for a sense of humor, but I think this time with a little needle, (even Christians needle once in a while; they confess it the next morning), said, "Oh, so we are arrested for doing a good deed?"

Someone gave me a lapel pin the other day that says, "I got caught doing something right."

Well, Peter and John got caught doing something right, and the irony, of course, wouldn't be lost on those in authority and so, once again, at the drop of a hat they preach Jesus living, risen, powerful, healing, and they conclude with that old declaration that was the very heart and center of that Jesus Movement which was a movement of Jews who believed Jesus the Messiah. They said, "The name of Jesus. It was in the name of Jesus, for there is no other name under heaven given among humankind whereby you can be healed. In the name of Jesus, because Jesus is God's conduit to history. Because Jesus is God's anointed one. Jesus was that one conceived by the spirit of God, filled with the Spirit of God, living in the power of the Spirit, crucified and raised in the Spirit."

This is post-Pentecost stuff, and Peter and John give testimony to the fact that the eternal God, the God that Israel knew, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob - that God of power, that God Who creates and Who makes alive, that God, through Jesus, made that man well. And there's no other way to be made well, because there's no other God, and that God is the God of life and of wholeness and of living.

The word for salvation is a word that also has out of its root, *salve*. It means healing or wholeness, and it is interesting in this context that we have this man spoken of as standing there full of health, in full health, and then in the 12th verse of the 4th chapter, the word salvation is used, because often in the New Testament salvation was used as a word that pointed to that total restoration of the human person - physical, emotional and spiritual. And so, Peter's testimony is that the eternal God Who is connected to us in the bridge person, Jesus, is the God of life and of healing, Who creates wholeness and there's no other way to get it. Not through Moses, not through David or Isaiah or Jeremiah or Peter or John. It is through Jesus' name, Jesus who is the historical embodiment of the eternal

God, that's the way of healing and wholeness and health and salvation, life. That's the answer.

Now, what's the question?

Well, obviously, the question is whether or not a Buddhist can be saved, isn't it? Wouldn't that be the logical question that would fit that answer?

I read all the commentaries I could on the passage and it didn't say anything about Buddhism or Hinduism or Muslim faith or whether or not other world religions had any true knowledge of God or mediated any grace of God. There wasn't any reference to this "burning issue," this burning question. Commentaries, good scholarly commentaries, some liberal and far-out, some conservative and ignorant, the whole spectrum, is what I mean to say, wherever you want to look. No one addressed the burning issue - is there salvation in any other than Jesus Christ? This text spouted everywhere, as though once you've said Acts 4:12, you've solved the thing, there's nothing more to talk about, and the Bible commentaries don't even address it! I wonder what's wrong with them?

Or, might it be that the Church in its soul-sickness is so mesmerized by a non-problem that it missed the whole point of the passage?

The answer is that Jesus Christ is the embodiment of God, the conduit of grace and healing, the one through whom life comes and life is transformed.

What's the question? The question is - How can I find wholeness? How can I be healed? How can I be transformed? How is this world going to be transformed? How is creation going to be mended? That's the issue.

In that early movement of Jesus people, if you had said to Peter, "Can a Buddhist be saved?" Peter would have said, "Who?" "What?" I mean, Peter makes this bold declaration in this conflict situation. Do you think everything being said between the Israeli negotiators and the Palestinian negotiators is right on the mark, measured carefully in these days? Netanyahu and Arafat make statements, they look at each other and they talk to the press, don't they? They're in a conflict situation. The future of Jerusalem is at stake. The future of Israel is at stake. The future of the Palestinian state is at stake. The whole complexion, the future of their lives is at stake. Why do you think we have to go back there time after time after time to broker the peace once again? Why do we have to go back again and again and throw them together? Why do we have to force them into a room and lock the door and make them talk? Because their whole life, their whole future is at stake! Do you think they're rationally sitting back and carefully calculating the whole dimension of reality? They are so focused on that issue which is like a pyramid set on its head, their whole life is determined by what happens in these days, and they are making statements and claims and counter-claims, and so was Peter and so was John and so was Caiaphas and so was Annas. They were in a life

and death conflict situation. They were talking to each other, making their boldest declarations.

Two thousand years later, in the cool of the situation, we take that statement that was made with hot blood, rip it out of its context and make it an answer to a question that wasn't even being raised.

Our old friend, Krister Stendahl, says the right answer to the wrong question is always wrong. And I even hesitate to deal with these biblical texts because, you know, I can prove anything to you from this book. There's enough stuff here on the one hand and on the other. So, it is not enough. It is a sign of a weak, defensive, dying institution that it goes crawling through these pages looking for a text to say, "Ah! You see? You see what it says?"

Dear friends, we've got to use our heads, to think. Because if you want to use Acts 4:12 as an answer to the wrong question, then I'll use Acts 10:38 as the right answer to that question. Peter's now in the house of Cornelius. Cornelius is a Gentile. Peter comes into that house expecting lightning to strike him dead because he's not supposed to be in the house of a Gentile. He's not supposed to have a ham sandwich with this man. And suddenly, he says, "Oh, I see. God shows no partiality, but rather, everyone in whatever nation who fears the Lord is acceptable to Him."

Well, in Acts 4:12, Peter, you said this. Acts 10:38, Peter, you said that. What are you, nuts? What are you, Luke, trying to confuse us?

Luke would say, "Look, folks, use your head. Think. Think. For God's sake, think!" Jesus of Nazareth, God's reconciling presence in the midst of the world. Jesus of Nazareth, full of grace. Jesus of Nazareth who touched lepers and caused the blind to see and the lame to walk, Jesus of Nazareth who put his arms around the world - we've made him the one who draws circles that leave people out when he's the very one who drew the circle that brought people in.

Question? What is the question? How will the world be transformed? How will the kingdom be mended? How will creation come to wholeness? How can I find peace with God? How can I find grace in my life? How can I have the forgiveness of my sins and the removal of anxiety and fear? How can I come to find meaning and purpose in my life?

The answer is Jesus. Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus, who was the embodiment of the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the God of Israel, the only, only God - Jesus, here, historically in our midst, becomes the beacon, the sign, the pointer. Jesus who calls us not to worship him, but to follow him in worshipping God, and following in ways of justice and compassion and with all others. The answer is Jesus.

I have no other answer for you. That isn't even an issue. For here and there, now and again, more often I'm meeting others who speak about that same God, that same sense of peace and grace and worship, devotion, and I say, "In what name?" They have some other name, because there was some other particular revelation of that One Universal experience of Grace. And then I say, "Well, you didn't come my way," and then they quote Jesus to me, who says, "Those who are not against us are for us who are also doing good things." Then I realize that it's so important, when I've experienced the answer that is Jesus, that I learn the question.