

Authorized for Risk

(Psalm 150; John 20:19-31; Acts 5:27-32)

((Second Sunday of Easter))

Imagine the Roman Empire, its endless ambition and its endless wars. Imagine its troops always again going out to the fringes to stop the dissent, and word coming home always again of another violent death in “harm’s way.” Imagine the rat race to pay taxes and 24/7 work to stay on top of the heap in the empire. Sound familiar? It was like that. And then, right in the middle of it, while his followers met where the doors were “locked for fear,” he came. He stood there in the midst of the violent restless empire, and he said, “Peace be with you.” They recognized him when they saw the scars on his body as he had been executed by the empire. This was the same Jesus of whom they despaired! And when they recognized him, he said a second time, “Peace be with you.” The story exhibits the contradiction between the empire of death and the Living One whom the empire could not keep dead. We meet on this Easter Sunday to ponder that contradiction between *empire death* and *Easter life*, to consider our own faith amid the empire, and to be dazzled by the one who said then and who says now, “Peace.”

I.

And then, “He breathed on them.” In the Bible the notion of “breath” is the same word as “spirit.” He gave them spirit. He performed artificial respiration on his bedraggled followers. He said, “Receive the Holy Spirit” which is the spirit of Jesus. He gave them the surging gift of surprising life, so unlike the lifeless charade of the empire that only knows about violence and control, but nothing about giving life.

Imagine a world of life come amid the destructiveness of empire. It is this life-carrier who said to his followers, “I give you the power to forgive sin.” I recruit you for the forgiveness

business. I charge you with healing, transformative reconciliation. It was then, and always is, a hard work for the church, because in the empire there is no free lunch, no open hand, no breaking of the vicious cycles of fear and violence and failure.

He said “peace.” He gave spirit. He called to a ministry of forgiveness. And they knew it was the one they had trusted, for they saw the scars in his body left by the violence of the empire. They knew this was the real thing. They got it...except for Thomas. A week later he was still not convinced. But Jesus came again to them and said to them one more time: “Peace be with you.” And Thomas touched the scars left by the empire. And then he is convinced enough to say, “My Lord and my God.” Maybe that response is a big theological affirmation as the church has taken it to be. Maybe it is only an exclamation: “Oh my God!” Oh my God, it’s him! Oh my God, he’s alive! Oh my God, we are in the forgiveness business. He gave them breath; but he also took their breath away by his mandate.

II.

And then, it is reported, the followers of Jesus were touched with the power for life, summoned all around the empire, singing and dancing, healing and forgiving...all acts that contradicted the claims of the empire. In the story of the Book of Acts, we are told that the earliest church cured all sorts of people and cleansed folk of evil spirits, and it upset the empire that feared its loss of control. They arrested the apostles to curb this passionate movement of new life, but the jail did not hold them. It was reported to the authorities: “Look, the ones whom you put in prison are standing in the temple teaching the people” (v. 20). The apostles were resilient and irresistible. And the high priest who had colluded with the empire confronted them in court:

We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us (v. 28).

The authorities did not even bother to argue about the claim of Easter resurrection. They just tried to shut them up about it.

So here is a first truth we get on this Second Sunday of Easter. The empire is scared to death of Easter. It does not want to know about God's power for life that is loosed in the world, because it does not want the world to change. It is like that with status quo power. It maintains itself by silencing voices to the contrary. It resists the power of transformation. It vetoes the thought of new possibility. It covers over the surging of the spirit with the tired ideologies of fear and intimidation. It recognizes that Easter is a threat to the old weary ways in the world and it does its best on Friday by executing him.

III.

But the story in Acts offers a second learning. The surging power of the Easter church is not throttled by the stifling of the empire. You can see that on every page of the Book of Acts. The book of Acts is the account of that breathed-on church. Time after time, the Roman authorities...Felix, Festus, Agrippa...bring the Easter Christians into court and try to stop them or silence them or intimidate them, or imprison them. And time after time, the Easter church gives an account of itself and refuses the disciplines of the empire.

In our text in Acts 5, Peter speaks up for the church in perhaps the most breath-taking phrase we dare to imagine. He says to the imperial authorities, "We must obey God rather than human authority." Or in the original patriarchal formulation, "We must obey God rather than man." The "man," the "human authority," not to be obeyed by the church is the Roman Empire. But beyond

Rome, it is any form of the power of death that wants to shut down God's gift of life. And the God to be obeyed is the God who raised Jesus from the dead, the God who gives the spirit of life to the world, the God who calls the church into the forgiveness business. It is this God who must be obeyed rather than the old weary forms of death.

I submit to you, sisters and brothers, that the issue joined in the courtroom scene that day in the book of Acts is no abstract or remote question. It was, and is, clearly a life-or-death decision that we are always making about the truth of Easter. We are always deciding whether we will succumb to despair as if the world were closed, or whether the world is permeated with healing powers. We are always deciding whether we shall be in denial in order to keep things as they are, or face the truth of our life and offer it to God. We are always deciding whether me-first consumerism is the way to well-being or whether outrageous generosity is a better route to real life.

The church in the narrative of Acts goes on to say:

We are witnesses to these things.

We are witnesses to the truth of Easter, to the power of life that God gives in the world. So imagine the Easter church in this place deciding afresh about contradicting the empire. The church, since the Book of Acts, bears witness to new Easter life, bears witness by generosity, by compassion, by hospitality, by justice and mercy. In a thousand ways, the church is restless for God's call to life.

IV.

The faith of the church culminates in praise. It ends, as does the Book of Psalms in Psalm 150, in full voiced exuberance, dancing for the news of new life given in the scarred body of Jesus:

Praise the Lord!

Praise God in his sanctuary;

praise him in his mighty firmament!

Praise him for his mighty deeds;

praise him according to his surpassing greatness!

Praise him with trumpet sound;

praise him with lute and harp!

Praise him with tambourine and dance;

praise him with strings and pipe!

Praise him with clanging cymbals;

praise him with loud clashing cymbals!

Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!

Praise the Lord!

Doxology is the outcome of Easter, referring our life over to God's goodness. I think the antithesis of doxology is a memo, the communication of clear, one-dimensional, unambiguous, controlling truth that fixes reality and keep everything in its place. A memo is an instrument of control whether it is the "rules for engagement," or a complex tax code or a settled catechism. But doxology is open, propelled by the spirit.

Well, it is a long way from Thomas who doubts to Peter who defies empire. But both of them, both Thomas in his doubt and Peter in his courage, speak for us. Thomas is skeptical and unsure. Peter is ready and over-eager. Some of us are skeptical about the rush to civil disobedience. Some of us with abandon say, "Go for it." Or perhaps most of us know the mix of reluctance and eagerness in our own life.

So what should we do? Well, in the next paragraph in the Book of Acts, they argue in the Jewish council. Some want to kill the Easter folk and be done with it. But Gamaliel, shrewd rabbi that he is, says, “Let’s give it more time and see what happens.” Let’s give the Easter movement some time and let’s see if it will run beyond stifling empire in good ways.

So here is my pitch. Imagine that you and I, today, are a part of the Easter movement of civil disobedience that contradicts the empire. We are like Gamaliel: Let’s see what happens. Let’s see if life is longer than death. Some will never move, but will keep trusting in the empire. But we know this much: we have been breathed on. We have been addressed. To us he said, “Peace be with you.” He said it three times, and then he charged us with forgiveness. We are on the receiving end from him of his offer of life...praise God!

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April 11, 2010

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