

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Easter 2 – April 4th and 7th, 2013

Acts 5:12, 17-32

¹² The apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade.

¹⁷ Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. ¹⁸ They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. ¹⁹ But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. ²⁰ "Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people all about this new life."

²¹ At daybreak they entered the temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people. When the high priest and his associates arrived, they called together the Sanhedrin—the full assembly of the elders of Israel—and sent to the jail for the apostles. ²² But on arriving at the jail, the officers did not find them there. So they went back and reported, ²³ "We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside." ²⁴ On hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were at a loss, wondering what this might lead to.

²⁵ Then someone came and said, "Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people." ²⁶ At that, the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles. They did not use force, because they feared that the people would stone them. ²⁷ The apostles were brought in and made to appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. ²⁸ "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name," he said. "Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood."

²⁹ Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than human beings! ³⁰ The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. ³¹ God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. ³² We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."

In the name of our risen Savior,

What causes you the most fear? For little children, the greatest fear might be the fear of darkness or the fear of the boogie man. As we get older, our fears might change such as the fear of getting bad grades in school or the fear of certain things in the world (phobias) such as fear of heights or fear of being in tight spaces or fear of being in large groups. As adults we have might have fears about bad things happening to our children or fears of getting some terrible incurable disease.

As we look back at Jesus' followers in the days leading up to his death we see that fear was also all around them. Fresh off another review of the actions of Jesus' followers during Holy Week, we are once again reminded of their not-so-great moments. And what was behind so many of their last words and actions leading up to Jesus' death? Can't it be said that fear was most certainly a big factor? But today we are going to see what the Easter resurrection meant for God's disciples and what it also means for God's people for all ages as we use the theme:

Theme: Easter Leads Us To Stand Up For Jesus!

- 1. Without fear**
- 2. Full of God's strength**

Do you recall how things ended up in Gethsemane as Jesus was taken prisoner? The disciples had previously boasted of their undying and unyielding devotion to Jesus. A sword was even swung in his

defense. But how did it all end up? Mark tells us in one succinct statement, as if to emphasize his point with simple words, **“Then everyone deserted [Jesus] and fled” (Mk. 14:50)**. What is it that causes one to “desert” or “flee?” It is fear.

From the actions of the group, we move to the actions of two individuals, Judas and Peter. At first Judas demonstrated anything but fear. He was bold enough to approach Jesus’ enemies and sell him out for silver. Greed, after all, can lead a person to do just about anything. But greed gave way to fear after Judas had witnessed the results of his betrayal. He no doubt wondered what the other disciples would say or do if he had the gall to show his face to them again. More than that, how would Jesus respond? Or worse, what if Jesus had no chance to respond because he wouldn’t live long enough as a result of Judas’ betrayal? How could Judas ever look Jesus in the eyes again? Judas feared that he could never be forgiven for such a disgraceful behavior. So rather than face such fears, he hung himself.

Peter didn’t fare much better than Judas. His story of denial is so much a part of the Passion history that we hardly need to recount it again. But take note that it was also fear that led Peter to his blatant denial of his Savior. At the end of the day Peter was afraid that being associated with Jesus might result in some jail time or worse. He was afraid of what might happen to him if word got out that he was among the people identified with Jesus. While Judas turned on Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, Peter did it for free. And both acted in fear. And that fear didn’t quickly subside, did it? We heard in this morning’s Gospel that still three days after Jesus died and again a week later the disciples locked themselves away **“for fear of the Jews” (Jn. 20:19)**. See how the shadow of Jesus’ death paralyzed his followers with fear!

In sharp contrast to the fear of Jesus’ followers, one can’t help but notice the confidence of Jesus’ enemies. The hardened hearts of the religious leaders opposed to Jesus and his followers gave them the confidence to scheme and put into motion their plan to get rid of Jesus. Though they started out preferring to arrest Jesus under the cover of darkness to keep things relatively low-key, as each step of their plan fell into place, their confidence grew. Men who prided themselves in keeping the rules suddenly had no problem breaking them when they conducted their interrogations of Jesus throughout the night, something that, according to their own laws, was only supposed to happen during the day. Then when morning broke, they were unafraid to take their case to Pilate himself and press on with their plan to have Jesus put to death. No fear kept them from choosing to release a guilty criminal instead of Jesus. No fear led them to second-guess their demands to crucify an innocent man.

If not so woefully misdirected, we might be envious of the confidence displayed by the enemies of Jesus. But are things really any different today? Jesus’ followers today are often paralyzed by fear as were his followers 2000 years ago. But, while we shake our heads in disappointment over the specks of fear displayed by the words and actions of Jesus’ disciples, we ought not quickly overlook the 4X4 of fear protruding from our own eyes.

If we peel away the veneer of many of our individual thoughts, words, and actions, don’t we see fear beneath much of it? Why is it so unnatural to say something good about another person? Rather than building him up, we often times find ourselves tearing him down? Isn’t it because there is this sinful insecurity inside of me that fears somebody else might be looked at more favorably than I am? Why do I struggle with giving generously to the Lord when I have no problem giving generously to Wal-Mart, Best Buy, or Home Depot, or toward a car payment or mortgage? Isn’t it because I’m afraid that my sinful greed for more stuff will go unmet, or that I won’t have enough money for God to take care of me if I give more of what’s his back to him? Why does God get so little time in each of our days? Isn’t it because we’re afraid that serving him with our time will inevitably lead to less time for us to do the things we want to do?

These fears and many like them are really all very similar. In reality, all of these fears are reflective of a greater general fear that each of us has, the kind we’re not so inclined to talk about. Yet we all face it to one degree or another: the fear of sacrifice. We forget — or simply choose to ignore — that the life of a Christian is one of sacrifice. It is so much a part of my sinful nature to put me at the center of my universe so that everything revolves around me, that this business of Christianity that calls us to serve Christ first, others second, and self a distant third does not sit well with who we naturally are. And so when it comes to our

relationship with Jesus, perhaps it'd be more accurate to refer to ourselves many times as fans rather than followers. As fans we don't have to invest so much of ourselves and we can kind of just casually observe along with other Christians while avoiding the sacrifices of a committed follower.

The Christian who is afraid of sacrifice is content with occasional church attendance and no or very little involvement with any sort of Bible class. The Christian who is afraid of sacrifice will talk about how important the Great Commission is, while assuming other Christians are seeing that it's carried out. The Christian parents who are afraid of sacrifice might very well agree that children and youth are the future of the church, but won't bother to see that their own children receive a Christian education or bring their children to Sunday School or to make sure that they and their children are regular in Worship attendance. See how the fear of sacrifice can paralyze the Christian!

2. Full of God's Strength

But ... now listen to what it sounds like when the Christian is aware that the fear of sacrifice has been overcome: **“Peter and the other apostles replied, ‘We must obey God rather than men! The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead — whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him’” (v.29-32).**

What on earth would possess these formerly cowering disciples to speak with such bold words to the very ones who held the power to put them through the ringer just as they did Jesus?! From where did this towering confidence come? How is there no trace of fear in their speech? It is not a secret at all. They point directly to the source of their boldness, revealing exactly how their fear was overcome: **“The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead.”** He had risen! Death's ironclad grip could not hold him. Satan's short-lived celebration on Good Friday was unfounded. The tomb was empty, as they had seen with their own eyes. Jesus was alive, as he told them he would be.

What was there possibly left to fear — death? It had been undone! Sin? The Father had accepted the Son's payment for sin in full! Satan? What could the prince of this world do against the One who is Prince and Savior of all — nothing!

And notice too how fear suddenly shifted. Before the Resurrection it was believers filled with fear, but after, it was Jesus' enemies who were now filled with fear. In seizing the apostles, they didn't use force, **“because they feared that the people would stone them” (v. 26).** And bringing them before the Sanhedrin, they commented, **“We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood” (v.28).** The very voices of those who cried, “crucify” were the ones now accusing Jesus' followers of pinning his death on them. They were scared stiff. And such fear should not surprise us from the unbeliever, for he who denies the cross and empty tomb denies his Savior and has much to fear indeed.

For Christians, though — for you and me — Jesus has freed us from fear. The peace that he brought to the disciples locked away in their room together is no different from the peace that you and I have. Are we afraid that someone might uncover some dark sin from our past? The message of Easter is that there is no dark sin from your past — as surely as Christ has risen, so has your sin been removed. Are we really afraid of the many sacrifices that go hand-in-hand with the Christian faith? Christ's sacrifice and victorious resurrection were sufficient, and so we sacrifice not because we must, but because we desire to give our all to him who gave himself for us.

When we are asked the reason for the hope that we have, or when others ask us how we know we're going to heaven, how do we typically respond? Don't we most often tell them, “because Jesus died for me.”? That answer is not incorrect, but it is incomplete. Let us also answer, “because Jesus rose for me.” And because he did, we need not fear, for Easter Overcomes Fear. Amen.