

The Trouble With Easter, Part One

Acts 4:1-22

The Lord's Day, April 17, 2011

“Spin” - Most of us are familiar with that term - - not speaking, of course, about the twirling motion something might make - - or of the process of producing yarn - - but rather the twisting or slanting of information to produce a favorable, or predictable response.

It's called spin.

And it seems everyone does it.

Except, of course, the Bill O'Reilly show on Fox News ... which proudly declares each evening to its viewers that they have arrived at the 'NO-SPIN ZONE'. I've watched O'Reilly - - and I really think he means to say - 'You've now arrived at the NO-SPIN other than MY-SPIN Zone' ...

NONETHELESS - - you know what I mean by spin, right?

Almost everything can have a spin - but politics would be the undisputed champion of spin - - most would say. Tragedies are hard to spin - - It would be difficult, and considered by most inappropriate, to try and put a positive spin on an earthquake, or a hurricane or the horrible storms that raged through the south yesterday killing over 34. But some will - usually, again, the politicians seeking monies for relief will feel compelled to spin the damage, or the need.

Spin, actually, is simply an acceptable term for what should be an unacceptable practice - - the practice of DECEIT; the intentional effort to make something appear different than it actually is - different than the facts would support.

Christianity suffers from spin. The Theological Spin-doctors are constantly working their deception to alter the facts, or change the impression of the facts to make the message of Christianity more acceptable - or less acceptable - depending on the intent of the spinner.

I think the Bible would declare and give record of the first spin-doctor, the first deceiver, as being Satan --- the Serpent in the garden - -

Most of us are familiar with that story - - God had said - - “you can eat from any tree in this garden except the one tree ... the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil” ... But the Serpent shows up and approaching Eve puts a spin on those very clear instructions - -

And he uses one of the best techniques - - the question ...

Genesis 3:1

3 ...he said to the woman, "Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden'?"

Now the woman gives the detail of what God actually had said; very clear, very simple “don't eat from this tree” language.

And the doctor ratchets up his maneuvering ...

Genesis 3:4-5

4 The serpent said to the woman, "You surely will not die! 5 "For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

God didn't say that!

Now that is spin at a very-high speed ... but like a top - if it spins fast enough it almost looks like it isn't spinning at all ... right? And so the woman listens - - looks at this spin - - and falls to the deception that it really isn't spin at all.

- Deceptive - -
- Detestable - -

- Dangerous - -
- In fact, Deadly!

This is spin.

And for all the centuries of mankind, spin has been being used - - and not just by the Serpent, the Devil - - and his demons (we should throw them in there) - - No, not just by the evil spirits - - but by those who come under the effect of the evil spirits - -

Spin is in - - and Christianity hasn't gotten a pass.

Christians spin. As I said - - the theological spin-doctors are constantly at work – taking the facts - - what is plainly said - - and altering them for a different, more desirable effect.

Now...

Here's the deal - - for you and me ...We've been effected by spin - -

And most of us have become, at some measure, effective at spin.

And this morning and next Sunday - - Resurrection Sunday – Easter Sunday – I hope we will see the dangers, the deadly dangers, of this practice as we visit the verses in chapter 4 of Acts that are before us ...

Because - - here's the trouble with Easter ... **YOU CAN'T SPIN IT.**

At least you can't spin it and still have Easter.

But we'll get to that - -

OPEN YOU BIBLES TO ACTS 4 NOW ...

There is an unfortunate chapter break between chapter 3, which you and Chase covered last week, and chapter 4 ... which really is the continuation of the events that began in chapter 3 ...So we will back up just a bit - -

Look first at chapter 3, verse 1 - -

Peter and John come up to the Temple – through the Beautiful Gate – and there they are met by a man – a crippled man - - lame from birth - - a man who had set at that Gate for years - - the text implies - - Verse 2 - - **every day he sat here - - begging alms.**

Now just a quick note - - Jesus would have used this Gate on His many visits to the Temple - - passing by, no doubt, this very same man - - and choosing NOT to heal him.

Sovereignly aware - - being the very Son of God – even God Himself - - that this lame man had an appointment for healing already - -

So Peter and John come through the Gate - - the man catches their attention - - They don't have any money - - **he should have know better than to ask a couple of preachers for money** ...But they do have good news - - the power of the Name of Jesus - - the Name above all Names - - and that power is on this day the POWER TO HEAL ... and the lame man gets up and walks - - really walk is too small a word - -

Verse 8 has him LEAPING AND PRAISING GOD ... this guy was more dancing than walking it seems ...

Now - - so I'm not guilty of spin - -

I said that the power of the Name of Jesus was on this day the POWER TO HEAL - - and it was - - but that is only a part of the story and if I left it there would really not represent the story well. No, the power of the NAME OF Jesus isn't limited to a personal healing of a lame-from-birth man.

It is much bigger than that - - always - - It is the power to save through the message declared - - that is the power of the Name of Jesus!

And that power is really the issue – and that power is really what is on display. And that power comes to the center of the story in verse 11 - -

The crowd gathers - - including the religious leaders - - or I could say - - INCLUDING THE ENEMIES ...

And Peter declares the truth - -

- Unfiltered - -
- Undiluted - -

- Un-Spun TRUTH!

Peter, starting with the Old Testament history of the Jews - - beginning with Abraham - - and carrying forward to the events of only a few weeks before - - Peter tells the Easter story - - Right?

Sure...He gives them the facts of the prophesied Messiah who came, was rejected, murdered, and seemingly FINISHED by the very ones He was sent to deliver ... this Jesus murdered by the Jews - - but pre-ordained for such by His own Father - - this Jesus, God then, look at verse 26 - -

This Jesus God raised up - -

That's a resurrection phrase - - Peter used it in his first sermon in Acts 2 - -

Acts 2:32 - - "This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses..."

This is the Easter story - - a celebration of the Resurrection marked by the church each year in the spring - - not the very date of the Resurrection - - but simply the time to mark, in a unique way - - at least for the world - - the events of the coming of Christ, the crucifixion of Christ - - and the resurrection unto life of this same Christ - - Jesus of Nazareth ...

Now that brings us to chapter 4 - -

And to the heart of the message for this morning - -

"The Trouble with Easter"

And here it is - -

The trouble with Easter is the trouble it brings when the story is told - - clearly, factually - - without any spin.

Look at verse 1 of chapter 4 and you'll see it:

Acts 4:1-3

4:1 As they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to them, 2 being greatly disturbed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. 3 And they laid hands on them and put them in jail until the next day, for it was already evening.

As they were speaking to the people - -

Allow me to read that this way - -

As they were giving the no-spin version of the Easter events – the events surrounding Jesus' virgin birth – perfect life – sacrificial death - - and, most important ... the POWERFUL RESURRECTION UNTO LIFE ...

As they were speaking to the people - - which means in the middle of the Peter's sermon ...

The RELIGIOUS OPPOSITION SHOWED UP - -

That's the priests - - they are the religious leaders in the temple ... This is the RELIGIOUS OPPOSITION - -

And not just the priests - - but look at it - -

The captain of the temple guard - -

This is the POLITICAL OPPOSITION ... This is Rome's connection to the Jews - - married together in the temple ... married together at the top - - And when you took the religious opposition - - usually the Pharisees in the gospels - - and married them to the POLITICAL OPPOSITION - - Rome - - what you got was this third group mentioned here in Acts 4 - - The Sadducees - - they were political, religious - - but morphed together - - they really represent the SOCIAL ORDER of the day.

CALL IT SOCIAL OPPOSITION

They were the opposition party to the Pharisees. They were the religious liberals of the day - - and they were as much committed to Rome as they were to the Jewish religion ...

The Pharisees dominate the opposition in the gospels - - in Acts - - the Sadducees dominate the opposition ...

The Sadducees were wealthy - -

They were liberals, theologically - -

And most importantly we will see - - their version of theological liberalism denied the RESURRECTION. They didn't just deny Jesus' resurrection - - but any resurrection - - They didn't accept a life-after-death --- no heaven - - and, most would say mostly for this reason - - NO HELL.

No punishment for the wicked. Okay - -

So this opposition shows up - -

- The RELIGIOUS OPPOSITION
- The POLITICAL OPPOSITION
- And the SOCIAL OPPOSITION

And this group comes up to Peter and John - -

Verse 2 says - - BEING GREATLY DISTURBED.

Not, note, greatly disturbed by the healing of the man...

Not greatly disturbed by the crowd of people ...

No - - please note, we are told the source of their personal distress ...

BECAUSE THEY WERE TEACHING THE PEOPLE AND PROCLAIMING IN Jesus THE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD.

And they arrested them.

This is the trouble with Easter - -

When you declare the truth about Christ and the resurrection - - TROUBLE WILL FIND YOU.

It always will. Not because I said it would - - but because God said it would.

I don't want to assume you know this - - though I know most of you do - - but also, because we like to imagine it is otherwise - - let me remind you of how clear this is ...

John 15:18-25

18 " If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. 19 "If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. 20 "Remember the word that I said to you, ' A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you;

John 16:2-3

2 "They will make you outcasts from the synagogue, but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God. 3 "These things they will do because they have not known the Father or Me.

This message we are called to proclaim - - it will bring trouble. It will bring persecution.

This is the trouble with Easter - - the trouble it brings.

And not just the message preached, but the life lived - - all of it promises trouble - -

2 Timothy 3:12

12 Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

That is a definitive statement - - persecution will come.

Jesus experienced it - - as an example to us ...

1 Peter 2:21

21 For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps,

How's that for a purpose statement - - you have been called for the purpose of suffering persecution the same way your example - Christ himself - suffered persecution

Look at this - - Peter again - -

1 Peter 4:12-19

12 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; 13 but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation.

Peter says - - this isn't strange - - this is to be expected - - you will share in the sufferings of Christ ...

And this suffering, this trouble - - this is persecution because of our witness – because of our testimony ...

That trouble that comes from other directions - - and there can be plenty of that - -

- A loss of job
- Sickness
- Cancer
- A horrible accident
- A devastating disaster

Those are trouble - - and very much a part of God's plan - - BUT DON'T CONFUSE THOSE WITH PERSECUTIONS OF SUFFERING FOR THE CAUSE OF CHRIST.

That is the trouble that comes because we live in a sinful fallen world - -

Persecution, this, is the trouble that comes because we declare Christ to be the Redeemer from that sinful fallen world!

They aren't the same - -

There is way too much of this going on today – taking the normal troubles of life - - as exaggerated as they can be - - and confusing them with the mark of Christian persecution.

You might use your cancer for the glory of Christ and the gospel - - and you should - - but your cancer isn't your Christian persecution.

Okay - -

Now Peter and John are thrown in jail – trouble came, just like Jesus said it would. And the text is clear - - it was the message that got them into trouble.

And you might want to mark in your Bible - - the book of Acts is filled with FIRSTS - -

This is the first persecution of the church.

The beginning of what has now been happening for over 2000 years.

Now this arrest is followed by an inquiry - - a formal inquiry - -

Acts 4:5-7

5 On the next day, their rulers and elders and scribes were gathered together in Jerusalem; 6 and Annas the high priest was there, and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of high-priestly descent. 7 When they had placed them in the center, they began to inquire, "By what power, or in what name, have you done this?"

This is the assembly of the Sannhedrin - - the Jewish court.

All the leaders assemble together - - 70 of them, plus the high priest - - 71 total.

Annas is bad news, Caiaphas is bad news - - we know that from Jesus' trial.

John and Alexander are named - - not for their individual importance, I think, but for the important note that they belonged to the HIGH-PRIESTLY DESCENT.

This is the assembly of those WHO BELONG.

- By religious RIGHT
- By political RIGHT
- By birth-RIGHT

- By social RIGHT

And into the center stand Peter and John - - And if you have this mental image of some sort of rotunda with these 70 elevated around you have it right.

Very intimidating - - very foreboding - -

And they ask - - BY WHAT POWER, OR IN WHAT NAME, have you done this?

Done what? Healed the man - -

This is their spin - - hang this on the healing - -

But in reality the inquiry is into the POWER BEHIND THE HEALING - -

Or specifically - - THE NAME BEHIND THE POWER.

This is, listen, this is an inquiry into the ongoing work and ministry of Jesus Christ through these early apostles - - this is what this is about.

Acts 4:8-12

8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, (**mark that – we’ll come back to it next week - - “filled with the Holy Spirit)** said to them, " Rulers and elders of the people, 9 if we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man, (**Now Peter knows they are not on trial for the benefit done to a sick man ... but rather)** - - as to how this man has been made well, 10 let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene (**now he is on point – right? Since we are on trial for our relationship, and declaration of, the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene - - let’s just quickly catch up on this name – this man – this Messiah ... let me fill in the blanks - - this is what Peter says ...**), whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead — by this name this man stands here before you in good health. 11 " He (**that’s Jesus - - He**) is the **STONE WHICH WAS REJECTED** by you, **THE BUILDERS**, but **WHICH BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER** stone. 12 "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved." (**and with a brilliance that can only be divine inspiration - - Peter cuts through all the spin and makes the main point the main point - - we are on trial today because the Redeemer invaded humankind in order to bring salvation to those who would believe in His name ... and you took that Redeemer – that Deliverer – that Messiah - - and you crucified Him ... thinking, “there, that will be that!” - - but you didn’t know that God had sent Him for that very purpose - - your desire to kill God’s promised Messiah – His very Son – was actually a desire consistent with God’s intentions - - and in power He showed His sovereignty when He raised that Son – whom you killed – from the grave!”**

That is why we are here today - - on trial - - it is because of Jesus.

And Christian - - understand this - - Christian persecution will always be about Jesus.

It isn’t about you.

John 15:21 "But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know the One who sent Me.

Friend - - they are still trying to kill Jesus.

And Peter and John are only feeling the stings meant for Jesus - -

- The prison is meant for Jesus...
- The trial is meant for Jesus ...
- The suffering and insult - - it is all meant for Jesus.

Realizing this is critical - - and realizing this brings CONFIDENCE - - LOOK AT THE NEXT VERSE ...

Acts 4:13-14

13 Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed, and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus. 14 And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they had nothing to say in reply.

These religious leaders are suffering a very strong bout of déjà vu ... They had seen this before - -

Standing before them - - a confident man ... not learned or trained under their teachers - - not bearing the tassels of the office of priest - - no titles under his name - - just a man who spoke like no other man had spoken before ...

They had seen this once - - and it was Jesus ...

Now - - they know these men must have been with Him - - they are, in fact, like Him in so many ways.

Even having the power to affirm the truth they speak with the miracle of healing.

And just like before - - when it was Jesus in their midst - - there was nothing they could say - - NO CHARGE THAT WOULD STICK.

They have no case.

But that didn't stop them with Jesus - - and it won't stop them now ...

Acts 4:15-18

15 But when they had ordered them to leave the Council, they began to confer with one another, 16 saying, " What shall we do with these men? For the fact that a noteworthy miracle has taken place through them is apparent to all who live in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. **(this is fascinating, isn't it - - it's like a staff meeting at MSNBC - - "here's the facts - - they are clear – they are undeniable – now how are we going to spin this!")**

17 "But so that it will not spread any further among the people, let us warn them to speak no longer to any man in this name." 18 And when they had summoned them, they commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.

"Look, we can't deny what you did - - but we can ask you to not give the reason, or the power, behind what you did." And even then, the implication is - - "you can give credit for the power somewhere else - - JUST DON'T GIVE Jesus THE CREDIT." "Don't make it - - listen - - don't make it about those events ... you know - - that thing that happened in Jerusalem - - the betrayal, the arrest, the trial, the, you know - - the beatings and the crucifixion - - just don't make it about the missing body ... Just don't make it about Easter!"

But that's the trouble with Easter - - once it is seen - - once it is believed - - well, you just can't keep quiet about it:

Acts 4:19-20

19 But Peter and John answered and said to them, " Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; 20 for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard."

Now we are out of time - -

And we've skipped some verses we'll have to come back to - - and then finish out the chapter - - all of that next week - -

But before we go - - let me ask you...

Have you seen - - have you heard - - this Easter story? You know, the facts? Do you know them?

- A BABY BORN TO A VIRGIN – that’s a fact
- A LIFE LIVED WITHOUT BLAME, WITHOUT FAULT – that’s a fact
- THE AFFIRMATION OF THE FATHER AT HIS BAPTISM – “This is my Son in whom I am well pleased”
- THE TEACHING – THE MIRACLES

Have you heard this?

- ONE OF HIS CLOSEST COMPANIONS BETRAYED HIM
- THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS FALSELY ACCUSED HIM
- HE WAS BEATEN, MOCKED, SPIT ON - - AND FINALLY CRUCIFIED
- THE EARTH SHOOK – THE SKY GREW DARK – THE SON OF GOD DIED - That’s a fact.
- GUARDS WERE PLACED ON THE TOMB –
- A STONE WAS PLACED OVER THE ENTRANCE –
- BUT GUARDS AND A STONE COULDN’T HOLD HIM - -
 - ON THAT FIRST RESURRECTION SUNDAY OUR LORD AND SAVIOUR Jesus Christ ROSE FROM THE GRAVE!

Have you heard this?

Have you believed this?

He didn’t do it for attention.

He didn’t do it for acclaim.

He did it for you and for me.

He did it to satisfy the wrath of His Father against sinful man.

He did it to save all who would believe in His name.

Have you seen this?

Have you heard this?

Have you believed this?

I hope so.

Now - - Are you being persecuted for this?

If not, why not?

Let me tell you - - 3 reasons...

1. you really don’t know the story
2. you really never have believed the story
3. or you have heard it – you have believed it – but you’ve decided you can SPIN IT and avoid all the trouble with Easter.

If your reason is number one - - not any more, not after this morning.

If your reason is number two - - may God by His grace grant you faith to believe.

And if your reason is number three, if my reason is number three - - if the church’s reason is number three ... may God grant us mercy to repent of the sin of running from the trouble with Easter.

Let’s pray.