

April 4, 2021
Sunday Morning Service
Easter
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
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PROCLAIMING THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST Acts 4:1-14

Because the materialists have stolen Christmas, it seems that Easter is the only truly Christian holiday celebrated, even to some small extent, in our culture. But then, maybe that is not an altogether accurate statement either. Even the name “Easter” is associated with a pretty “unChristian” kind of past. The name Easter is used by English and German languages to refer to this special Sunday each year. It most likely comes from an old English name *Eostre* which was the name of a pre-Christian pagan goddess worshiped in England. Celebration of this goddess was connected with the changes associated with the beginning of spring.

That might help us to understand where traditions like Easter bunnies and brightly colored eggs came from. Eggs of course picture new life, a bursting forth of life like grass and blossoms burst from the ground, plants, and trees in spring. No one seems to know for sure where the bunny came from. But German tradition appears to connect it with the prolific reproduction of the cute little creatures.

Some people believe that these traditions are somehow connected with the open tomb and Jesus coming back to life in the spring. But the celebration of new life in the spring predates Jesus and His resurrection.

Greek and Latin cultures call the celebration of this day *Pascha*, which is a lot closer to the truth for us. That word refers to the paschal lamb that was sacrificed at Passover. God’s law required His people to observe Passover on the 14th day of Nisan. That was the evening when God delivered Israel from bondage in Egypt. It is always in the spring. It was the beginning of the calendar for the ancient Jewish people.

But Nisan 14 is not always on a Sunday. Why do we celebrate Easter on Sunday? That is actually a very difficult question to answer. For many years the official church debated whether to celebrate the Lord’s resurrection and, if so, on which day it should be celebrated. Changing to the Gregorian Calendar in 1582 did not help clear up the issue.

Which leads to the next question. Why do we celebrate Easter on different Sundays every year? If you have been paying attention in life, you know that Easter can fall on any Sunday between March 22 and April 25. The problem is with the moon. Yes, really. Many years ago, the Church authorities determined that Easter should coincide with the first Sunday after the Paschal full moon. The Paschal moon is connected to the Jewish Passover. Because the Jewish calendar is tied to solar and lunar cycles, the dates of Passover and Easter fluctuate each year.

All of the trivia about the history of Easter misses the whole point of our celebration. On this day each year, we are celebrating the resurrection of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. How many people know that? How many people care? Probably not very many who think that Easter means spring break in Florida. How many professing Christians really care or are truly impacted by the reality that Jesus of Nazareth, the actual man who was actually murdered on the cross, walked out of the tomb on a Sunday morning? Our text reveals that the resurrection of Christ was life-changing, life-motivating for His servants like Peter and John. His resurrection must still impact His followers in radical ways.

A Serious Problem (vv.1-4).

There must have been a serious problem in Jerusalem because the religious people were greatly annoyed. It isn’t that the annoyed people were just religious but the people who noticed the problem were very important. *And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, greatly annoyed (vv.1,2a)*. Peter and John were teaching a great crowd of people the wonderful truth about Jesus’s resurrection. The religious leaders were not happy about it.

They showed up because the temple grounds were under the direct supervision of the priests. The term “priests” is generally a reference to Caiaphas who was actually the serving high priest, and his father-in-law Annas who was the former high priest but stayed arm-pit-deep in the office. The captain of the temple was in charge of a standing temple guard. The Sadducees were the political branch of the Jewish ruling body, the Sanhedrin. They were most sensitive about popular uprisings that would bring Rome’s ire.

These important people were greatly annoyed. The word means that they were disturbed more than just a little bit. They were agitated to the point of anger. What caused such a reaction in these people?

The problem centered on the proclamation of the risen Jesus. The authorities were perturbed at Peter and John *because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead (v.2b)*. The two messengers capitalized on the miracle of the lame man healed to point to Jesus. They taught about and announced that God had raised this Jesus from the dead (3:26). Jesus was dead because they denied Him (3:14) and killed Him (3:15). And because Jesus was raised from the dead, so will be all who trust Him alone for salvation. Paul drew the natural conclusion when he wrote, *But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep (1 Corinthians 15:20)*.

Not content with the work God was doing through the apostles, the religious people tried to control God. They did what they could to silence God’s messengers. *And they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening (v.3)*. To arrest these men who dared to teach in public was to remove their influence, their teaching about Christ from the people. It was, in their thinking, the way to manifest human authority over them and their teaching. But ultimately, this was an attempt to stop God’s work.

People who are opposed to the resurrected Christ are fearful of that truth. These religious leaders are the same ones who forced Pilate to crucify Jesus, thinking they had shut Him up. They are the same leaders who tried to keep Jesus in the tomb by putting the governor’s seal on it and stationing a guard to keep Him inside. And things generally do not change much. Modern religious leaders willingly admit that Jesus was a good man. But they want to keep the whole truth about Jesus locked in a tomb. They fear the proclamation that

Jesus was God the Son in the flesh and that He rose from the dead. Well, all of the work and efforts of resisters both ancient and modern is vain.

No one controls God. And God kept working. *But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand (v.4)*. A large crowd of sinners heard about the risen Jesus that day. The message that Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead is really good news for people who need salvation from sin. But that is only part of the message. The whole message is that Jesus is God the Son. In eternity, the Trinity decreed that God the Son would become human, live without sin, then shed His blood as the payment for sinners’ sins.

All of that could be true up to a point. But if Jesus was dead, if God the Son’s human body was still in the tomb, sin and Satan had won. Christ’s resurrection was the affirmation that He won the victory of sin which power is validated in death. Paul stated the wonderful news with these words: *When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory.” “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:54-57)*.

A whole bunch of sinners believed what Peter taught. They did not believe the incredible truth about Jesus of Nazareth because Peter was such an accomplished, convincing preacher. They didn’t believe because Peter could tell touching stories. Salvation from sin is a matter of God the Holy Spirit changing the heart. *But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved (Romans 10:8-10)*.

God the Holy Spirit convicted the people of sin, gave the gift of faith, and drew sinners to Christ. The result was that God grew the Church more. According to the text, God added more men, which must logically include additional women and probably children. He

added to the 3,000 He had originally brought into the Church, the number grew to 5,000. It is significant that there are no more numbers about church attendance mentioned in Acts after this.

A Declaration About Jesus Resurrected (vv.5-11).

After keeping the preachers in jail over night, the religious leaders interrogated Christ's messengers. The self-righteous people wanted answers. *On the next day their rulers and elders and scribes gathered together in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family (vv.5,6).* This time, unlike the smaller band that went to arrest the apostles, the entire Sanhedrin met. They were the ruling religious body. They were the same people who sentenced Jesus to death. Also, at this trial we see that all of the high priest's relatives got into the act.

The inquisition did not come about because the religious leaders wanted to know more about Christ. *And when they had set them in the midst, they inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" (v.7).* "This," refers to the what the apostles did in healing the lame man. Healing like that was not normal and never has been. It attracted a lot of attention and a lot of opportunity to talk about the risen Christ. But the self-righteous religious people were not interested in Christ alone. Their question was about power, resource, means, authority.

Christ's messengers were more interested in Jesus and focused their answer on the risen Christ. Peter made it clear that what they had just witnessed was a case of the risen Jesus revealing His grace and power. The grace of Jesus is a "good deed." *Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed" (vv.8-9).*

Peter the messenger spoke out of Holy-Spirit filling. Jesus promised that part of the Holy Spirit's ministry would be to give the messengers the words to say. *"And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the*

Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say" (Luke 12:11-12).

Peter acknowledged that he and John were being examined for doing good. He also acknowledged that the name of Jesus is the source of grace that healed the man. *"Let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead – by him this man is standing before you well" (v.10).* The source of the miracle, the authority for the healing was Jesus Christ of Nazareth whom the leaders and all the people crucified. Jesus Christ of Nazareth whom God raised from the dead. By His name the effects of sin are done away with. Yes, Jesus was the power of healing in the miracle that attracted so much attention.

But what does that mean? What obligation does that lay on everyone who saw or heard about it? This is a true story. Jesus, who rose up and walked out of the tomb 50-plus days earlier, provided the healing for the lame man. So what obligation does that lay on us who hear about 2,000 years later? As with all the miracles Christ did, either they validate that He is the Christ and only Savior from sin, or it is all a fraud.

The root problem for the religious leaders (as with all sinners) is that the "Rejected Stone" is their only hope. Peter pointed out how foolish builders reject the Cornerstone. *This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone (v.11).* The religious leaders could not accept Jesus as the Messiah because He suffered and died. If He was the Christ, He would have raised an army, He would overthrow Rome, and no mere human could have killed Him. But what they did not realize was that their own Scriptures predicted that they would react this way.

Peter quoted Psalm 118:22: *The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone (Psalm 118:22).* The statement just kind of appears in Psalm 118 with no preceding argument. But it describes perfectly the problem for so many sinners. Jesus Christ dying to pay the penalty for sin and rising again just doesn't make sense to human wisdom. Admitting that I am a sinner and believing that the blood of Christ alone covers that offense is too hard for people to accept apart from the Holy Spirit's ministry. And so, sinners build their religious house on self-righteous ideas. And that house is defective, built on

sand, and will fall in the day of judgment because they reject the cornerstone Jesus Christ.

Only people who have been changed by faith in Christ by God's grace can say: *This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes (Psalm 118:22-23)*. Sinners must be saved by the risen Jesus. "*And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved*" (v.12). Salvation is impossible by any other means, including one's own righteousness. God, who is offended by our sin, and who determines the means for reconciliation, offers no other means for salvation.

The name of Jesus Christ is the whole point of the questions and argument in this text. Peter offered the miracle of healing based on the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. The religious officials wanted to know in whose name Peter healed the lame man. The "name" encompasses every characteristic, every trait, every work of Jesus Christ the Savior – especially His resurrection. And by that name we must be saved.

There are two important thoughts in this statement. First is the matter of necessity. It is necessary to be born again. The word is not an imperative, it is not a command. But neither is it a suggestion. It is necessary for sinners to be saved. The second important issue is the word translated "saved." It is repeated twice in the verse and is a fitting description of the need. Earlier in the verse we read that *salvation* is not found in any other. This is the same Greek word translated *saved* at the end of the verse. The word means to be delivered. The idea is delivery from slavery to sin and from the consequences of sin both temporal and eternal. Because we are born in sin, it is absolutely necessary for us to be delivered from it. But there is only one means for delivery – faith in the name of Jesus.

The Reason for the Problem and Proclamation (vv.13-14).

The adversaries witnessed or observed bold courage and confidence. *Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John (v.13a)*. The confidence observed marked the messengers as different or unique. They were standing before a large crowd teaching important truths from the religious leaders' own scriptures. Why were these men so confident? How could they be so bold? Maybe we

should ask more pointedly, "Why are we not confident like them?" What happened to them that did not happen to us?

The witnesses' boldness was all the more impressive because they were pretty common, ordinary guys. The highly educated religious leaders *perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished (v.13b)*. The religious leaders were among the most educated of their peers, especially in their understanding of Scripture. That does not imply that they were always right. They were just educated fools sometimes.

But here were a couple of uneducated, common men who spoke with more confidence and authority about the matter than their official teachers could. It is not that people were impressed that the messengers knew a lot about Roman government, Jewish traditions, or how to attract a crowd and not offend them. Those are the kinds of things modern ministries focus on. But the uneducated fishermen spoke clearly, accurately interpreting and applying Old Testament Scriptures. And yet most of all, Peter used Scripture to present Jesus of Nazareth as the promised Messiah – risen from the dead! As a result, the educated men were astonished at the uneducated teachers and preachers. The leaders were amazed in the same way the citizens of the world will be amazed at the beast who will be healed from a mortal wound in Revelation 13:3.

What was the key? They *perceived the witnesses had been with Jesus (v.13c)*. The leaders understood and acknowledged that they had been with Jesus. It is doubtful that Peter and John were so famous in a city of several hundred thousand that the religious leaders would recognize them. Rather, with a little investigation, they came to learn that these were followers of Jesus. Could a person's association with Jesus so influence them that they make a positive impact on others? Oh that it were true for all of us who claim to be Jesus's followers!

The end result was that the adversaries were silenced. *But seeing the man who was healed standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition (v.14)*. What could they say when the evidence of Christ's work was obvious? The lame man was standing. It was impossible to argue with the miracle. The miracle arrested the leaders' attention and the fisherman preached Christ. The purpose of the miracle was to gain the attention of listeners to hear about the risen Christ.

Though the religious leaders hated Christ, rejected Christ, and tried to deny the character of Christ, they had nothing to say. Your world is characterized by the same conclusions and attitudes. And yet, we are afraid to speak for Christ because they might argue or reject us. They will very likely argue and reject. But they will also walk away with a conscience that has been dealt a blow for truth – something they will have to deal with in the quiet hours when they are alone.

It is difficult to deny evidence. Here was the evidence of a victim of sin changed by Christ's power. It could not be denied. We are the evidence of a victim of sin changed by Christ's power. The story unpacks the importance of the testimony of a changed life. When the Holy Spirit gives us new life having thrown off the chains of sin, it ought to be obvious.

The evidence of mere humans changed by their relationship with Christ. Christ deniers can argue pretty convincingly that the whole salvation by grace thing does not make sense. They can argue that scientific evidence disallows for a person to be dead for two days and revive to life in a dark tomb. It doesn't make sense for God to do amazing works like this. That is the point. God does not intend for the gospel to make sense to sinful humans. We declare it through the power of the Holy Spirit and ask Him to do the work of regeneration.