

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Acts 5:27-32

When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, saying, “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.” But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.”

One Easter morning, a Sunday school teacher decided to see how much her class knew about the true meaning of Easter. One of the little girls quickly raised her hand. “Yes, Sarah?” the teacher called.

“Easter is when all of my aunts and uncles come to my house to eat turkey, watch football, and take naps,” she said.

“No, Sarah, that’s Thanksgiving.” Another student raised his hand. “Yes, Billy?” she asked.

“Last Easter, we decorated a tree, sang songs, and got lots of presents,” he answered.

“No, Billy, that was Christmas,” she replied. Now the teacher was getting a bit nervous. “Does anyone know what Easter is?”

“I know,” little Emily said, confidently standing to her feet. “Easter is a special day to remember that Jesus was hung on a cross, died, and put in a tomb for three days.”

“Very good, Emily!” the teacher said with a sigh of relief. “Now, class, we’re going to…”

“And on the third day, everyone gathers around the tomb,” Emily continued. “And they wait to see if Jesus comes out, and if he sees his shadow, that means six more weeks of winter. If not…”

The teacher interrupted Emily before she could finish her speech, “Class dismissed!”

Throughout Lent, Holy week and the huge celebration of Easter, we’ve been reminded of the purpose and meaning of Easter. In essence, we relived it. So, I think we know the story pretty well.

I believe we gained more than knowledge of the Easter story. Many of us experienced a personal connection with Jesus and Holy God through our many worship experiences. I’ve heard many, many positive comments about the services we held throughout Lent and the services of Holy Week and Easter.

The atmosphere of those services was filled with energy—almost like it was electrified. We felt inspired to give our Savior command of our souls. We were motivated to diligence in our faithfulness and spiritual discipline to grow avenues bringing us closer to our Savior. We were challenged to living daily selflessly and by serving others.

Now, if we really think about it, these lessons are not presented to us only once a year, here at Easter; we are challenged by them throughout the year, but Easter and the energy surrounding the celebration of our Risen Lord moves us in exceptional renewing ways. As you may already know, and certainly something pastors are aware of is that the Sunday after Easter,

new trend begins to emerge in many congregations. There seems to be a bit of a lull in the spirit of people of faith and a feeling like something of a let-down when fewer people attend worship.

As humans, our emotions can be somewhat of a barometer, guiding the plans of our lives. We enjoy the mountaintop experiences so much that it can feel somewhat disappointing when emotions do not run high. This leads me to this question: "If the Easter celebration is over, what do we do now?" How do we stay energized for Christ? Where do we go from here?

Jesus' disciples must have asked themselves the same question—first, right after Jesus' death, which was certainly a dark and fearful time with not much energy happening then except from the stirring of their memories from the three years they had with Jesus, and once again after Jesus arose from the grave, revealing himself to them and then ascending into heaven. What an emotional high it must have been for them to spend days with the risen Lord! If I were in their sandals, I would have wanted that time with our marvelous Savior to never end.

For a while after Christ's ascension into heaven, the energy resulting from those glorious days prevailed. The disciples began the work Jesus commanded them to do prior to his ascension: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." The Holy Spirit, as was promised by Jesus, came upon them and many people joined the movement of the believers. Everything seemed to be going smashing! The group of believers was growing by leaps and bounds.

But it did not remain that way. Jesus had also told the disciples, that the journey of faithfulness would not always be an easy road to travel; so it likely did not surprise them when the euphoria waned low, and troubles began to arise for the early church and the apostles. Today's scripture gives us a glimpse into one of those rocky moments that Peter and some other apostles encountered.

Prior to the scripture for today, we read that the high priest and his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were jealous of the popularity of the apostles. The Sadducees were a prominent political religious group composed mostly of priests who existed in Palestine from the second century B.C. until the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. They carried out the priestly functions at Jerusalem's temple and maintained the temple itself.

They arrested the apostles and threw them into jail. In Acts 5:19-20 we are told what happened next: "But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors, brought them out, and said, "Go, stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about this life." And that is exactly what the apostles did. The temple at that time of day was a very busy place, so many people were hearing the gospel message.

The high priest and their associates, having called together the Sanhedrin, who were members of the supreme council of the Jews, arrived at the temple, and not yet seeing the apostles, sent for the apostles who they assumed were still in the jail. Imagine their surprise when they did not find the apostles in the jail cell. Eventually, the apostles were found and were brought before the Sanhedrin for a trial. It was a desperate attempt to silence the apostles.

An interesting exchange took place in those moments. Peter and the other apostles replied to the accusations of the Jewish authorities saying very simply, "Our allegiance is to God and not to any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus!" Peter could have stopped there, but he didn't. He went on to dredge up the past. He had a bone to pick with them. He had not forgotten what they had done to Jesus; in fact, he rubbed their noses in the fact that they had crucified him—killed him. Someone had to take the blame, so he was blaming them.

Now we might have cause to argue with Peter on the facts of the case. Remember, the Sanhedrin were not alone in condemning Jesus. There's Judas who betrayed Jesus, Pilate who tried and sentenced Jesus to death, and the crowds who shouted, "Crucify him!" and called for the release of the criminal Barabbas over Jesus. Peter himself was not white-as-snow during this time either. He denied knowing Jesus—three times! Did he forget about all of that? I highly doubt it. Peter, however, clearly was carrying a grudge for what they had done to Jesus, and he wasn't ready to let it go.

It's not for us to judge Peter. He was a work in progress, just as we are. We too have our grudges with the world. Even as we bask in the afterglow of Easter, the problems of the world have not gone away. We are well aware of the wars, the disease, the death, the poverty, the broken homes, the greed, the injustices that all rage rampantly in our world, both near and far.

We all have our own personal pains and trials that we bear. We wonder why. We want to blame somebody, even when we played a role in the distressing dysfunction around us. We have a bone to pick with the world—people messing things up and causing misery and turmoil. We wonder, "What is wrong with people?" We may even get angry with God, asking why he won't make it all go away. And like Peter, who also celebrated the risen Lord, we find these things that I am going to call Sanhedrins in our lives and they did not go away with Easter; they continue to weigh us down, wounding us, or at the very least troubling us in some way all over again and making it hard to move on with the same joy we felt on Easter morning. Maybe, just maybe, we can find some comfort as we commiserate with Peter's emotional woundedness.

This story, however, goes on to offer us something more to work with as we face our Sanhedrins. Peter, even as he struggled, directs us towards the answer to healing our wounds and overcoming the battles that get us stuck in cycles of disillusionment and apathy. Remember, again, what he said: "We must obey God who raised Jesus from the dead rather than any human authority." He and the other apostles held on to **this** truth **more than their grudges or trials** as their motivation to move on and spread the Gospel message.

No, my friends, Easter is not over. We live as Easter people, resurrected in Christ from our own sinful nature. Like Peter, even as we struggle, we can choose to be obedient to Christ's teaching and the call of the great commission. We too know that it is God who had the power to raise Jesus from the dead; and it is, therefore, God and our faith in God that should be the driving force motivating and moving us forward—not the Sanhedrins, the emotions, the earthly trials, the grudges, the whatever's of our lives, but our faith in God.

Let us not allow the seeking of any high emotional experience be our goal. Let not our emotions determine the satisfaction we have with our lives and our faith. Our emotions are not the determining factor of our relationship with Jesus. None of this will really help to dispel the torments of the Sanhedrin in our lives. But our obedience to God who raised Christ from the dead is what makes us Easter people, and as Easter people we make a difference in our world.

What now? I'll tell you what we do now. We forge ahead although imperfect beings, forgiven and revived; and God will use us to make sure the light of Christ prevails all around us and into the world in this time now and in the future. The apostles of old did it, we can, and we must do it too. Christ is risen, brothers and sisters. Therefore, let us live as Easter people. Amen.