

Easter People: Surprisingly Bold
A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
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Acts 5:27-32

For the weeks between now and Pentecost Sunday on June 9th, we'll be preaching on passages from the Book of Acts that show the disciples in action, demonstrating characteristics of what it means to be what I would call Easter people: people whose lives reflect the love and power of the resurrected Christ.

To set today's passage from Acts into context, Peter and John and the rest of the disciples have healed a man in Jesus' name, they've been warned not to speak in Jesus name again, but they've gone ahead and done so anyway. For that they were thrown in jail, but the jail somehow opened (echoing the experience of the tomb on Easter morning) and they were made free.

Now they have been apprehended and hauled before the council again. Listen for what they are told and for what a bold answer they provide.

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 Saviour, so 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.'

In churches across Christendom this morning, on what is known as Low Sunday, associate pastors and visiting preachers and sometimes even the pastor who preached the Sunday before will climb into pulpits to take on the assigned Gospel text for today. The one I didn't read.

You're likely familiar with it. It begins on Easter Sunday evening with the disciples huddled in an upper room behind a locked door—trembling in fear of the religious authorities who had arranged to have Jesus crucified by the Romans. Jesus somehow passes through a locked door to get to them, breathes on them, and tells them receive the Holy Spirit.

The passage continues with the next Sunday night, with those same disciples, in that same upper room, huddled behind those same doors, presumably dealing with the same fear. This time, Thomas is there. Thomas, who hadn't been there with them the week before, and didn't take the other disciples word for it, demands to have the same experience of seeing that they had before he believes. He takes this to the point of actually seeing the marks of the nails and putting his hand in Jesus side. Jesus shows up and gives Thomas what he needs, tells him, "Have you believed because you have seen me?" And then says blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed.

So today there will be sermons about doubting Thomas and looking for evidence of the risen Christ, sermons that defend him for being insistent enough to ask for what he needed, and sermons that address the important role doubt can play in faith.

Frederick Buechner calls doubts "the ants in the pants of faith which keep it awake and moving."

I'll grant that. I have no quarrel with the existence of doubts. Indeed, last Sunday, we talked about how Resurrection faith gets lived not "beyond the shadow of a doubt" but within it.

But I have to tell you it always feels a little bit like going to Thomas and doubt and the disciples in the upper room takes some wind out of the sails on the Sunday after Easter. We have sublime and stirring Easter services, with the brass and timpani and organ and choir in full voice and then a week later, we're carefully hedging our bets. Well, yes, Easter was grand and glorious and all, but... You know, for thinking people like us, it's kind of hard to believe.

What interests me more than the existence of doubt today Is the persistence of faith and how those timid, unbelieving disciples—who were cowering in an upper room not just before Jesus came and breathed on them but also a week later—somehow became transformed into the bold believers we meet in today's text from Acts. They became the sorts of fearless people, who, even though they've been strictly forbidden not to teach in Jesus name, get out there and do it anyway. I mean they are hardly recognizable as the same people who denied and deserted Jesus in his hour of need, regularly missed the point of his teachings about self-giving love, and repeatedly failed to trust in God's provision.

What a contrast between those guys and the ones we meet today. Who having been warned, under penalty of imprisonment and death not to speak or act in Jesus' name, go ahead and do so.

What changed between the time we saw them in the upper room behind locked doors and the time we saw them boldly standing before the council?

The easy answer is to say that Pentecost happened and the Spirit was poured out on them and they actually received it and said their **yes** to God, rather than just letting it wash over them.

But another way to put that is that it took a while for the message of Easter to sink in. If the message of Easter is that Jesus' resurrection demonstrates that God's love is stronger than death, and sin, and evil, stronger than what separates us from God and each other, stronger than fear and anger and hatred, well, it makes sense that it might take time.

In more than one area of my life, it took a while for me to be bold enough to stand for the courage of my convictions. Take, for example, my conviction about the expansiveness of God's love and welcome. Seeds of that were planted in the home where I grew up, and nurtured through listening to sermons in the congregation where I was confirmed and the congregations I attended in college and reading and studying texts more deeply in seminary and in my first two congregations.

However, it was only after being in the Garden of Gethsemane in Jerusalem in 2006, and praying *Not my will, but yours be done*, that I heard a voice within me yet somehow beyond me saying, "Aaron, teach Love. Whatever you do teach love. No matter the resistance or opposition, teach love," that I started to more fully trust and live into God's love and radically inclusive welcome.

So when Brian and Christian asked me to conduct their wedding ceremony several years ago, I said yes, with, quite honestly just a little bit of fear, given that I knew there were people in our denomination at least who would not approve, and that indeed, our stance as a denomination at the General Assembly level had not yet changed. But, write this down, this is a good one, *courage is fear that has said its prayers*, and the reward for that was taking part in their joy and literally seeing a rainbow in the sky on a cloudless, rainless day. Then later, our PCUSA Book of Order changed, catching up with what I already knew was right.

So it was with no hesitation whatsoever that I and nine other clergy including Susan and Katie celebrated Billy and Steven's wedding here yesterday. It was one of the most profoundly moving wedding ceremonies I've ever been a part of, and I have officiated at nearly 200 weddings. Their wedding was such a true testimony to the Easter power of God at work in the world.

Sometimes it takes a while for Easter to sink in. But when it does, when you get it, that God is in the business of bringing life out of death and hope out of despair and full inclusion out of exclusion, you find yourself acting boldly in Jesus' name. And when someone asks you not to speak about it, your response might just be the apostles' response, "I must obey God rather than any human authority or longstanding tradition or the way somebody somewhere told me the Bible has to be read because I read it through the eyes of the resurrected Christ."

The world needs our Easter boldness, friends. In a world of religious violence, where Christians are bombed one week in Sri Lanka and Jews were shot and killed in a synagogue in California yesterday and Muslims were massacred in New Zealand and there is still too much hate that goes on the name of religion, the world needs us to stand up and say, "The power of love and welcome for all is stronger than what seeks to divide us."

The friend of mine and Judith's who is a pastor in Colombo, Sri Lanka, posted something the other day about how the small Muslim minority in that country there has come out vocally against the actions of a small band of radicalized youth and declared a fast and stated that there will space made for Christians to pray in their mosques until their churches are rebuilt.

Yesterday I read a piece from Paul Raushenbush, who is sort of related to this congregation because he is the brother of Lorraine Bucy. He works for Auburn Seminary up in New York City.

He wrote these words:

Praying in front of the Chelsea Jewish Community Center in NYC for all those injured and dead in San Diego as result of the anti-Semitic hate filled attack. Feeling so sad and angry that my Jewish friends and family have to feel terrorized even when they pray, just for being who they are. We have to stop this hate that is killing us. We have to stop this deadly blend of nationalism, racism and bigotry that targets minority people around the world. Stop! Take a moment to reflect on what is happening and what each of us must do to stand in solidarity together. Sending love to each of you and to all those who weep this evening. God, help me understand how my life might be used to promote love and to challenge hate wherever I might encounter it.

That is work that we do. It's not about our opinions. Our opinions don't change the world. What changes the world is how we live and treat those around us, including people with whom we do not see eye to eye.

The world needs our Easter boldness. So I'm glad we'll be hearing briefly about the trip 9 of our Immanuelites took down to Cuba during Holy Week and the bonds of fellowship and understanding that were formed between the people of First Presbyterian in Havana and our own delegation, which included members of two other churches as well.

Sometimes it takes a while for Easter to sink in.

So two quick short stories from the reception last night. How is this for fresh material?

First. I was out on the dance floor as I am wont to be and I walked over to get a Diet Coke. Christian Edel saw me and he said, "I just love your energy. I just love that positive energy, how you just get out there and dance. You don't care what people think. You just dance." I think what Christian was trying to say is that I am bold.

Second story. We were seated at a table, a number of us. Judith was there. Judith told a story about how on her 45th birthday, she really wanted to go to the National Book Festival. It was a Sunday and there was stuff going at church in the morning and it took a while for her to get done at the church. Finally ready to go she piled our two daughters in the car with her. They were younger, pre-teens or early teens. They really didn't want to go. She was heading downtown in the mini-van and they were just lamenting about having to go to the National Book Festival. She told us that she thinks that's when her life changed a little bit. They whined and moaned about having to go the Book Festival and so she turned the van around and headed home. She says she just lost it. "I'm 45 years old and I don't get to decide what to do on my birthday!" Later she realized, upon reflection, that she had a choice. The next time she'd choose differently.

Boldness is a choice. It is an empowered choice, and inspired choice, but it is a choice. The world, the broken hurting divided world, needs our boldness.