

January 21, 2018
National Presbyterian Church
The Acts of the Apostles Founding Fathers: III.
“Been There, Done That”
Acts 2:22-42; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11
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In our sermons on Sunday mornings over the next few months we'll be looking together at the story of the founding fathers and mothers of the Christian church – not just the Presbyterian Church but the worldwide church of our Lord Jesus Christ – and we're doing so through a book in the Bible called The Acts of the Apostles.

This is the second part of a 2-part book beginning with the Gospel According to St. Luke. Luke's Gospel tells the story of Jesus' birth and his life (in particular, his adult ministry), and then his death and resurrection. The Acts of the Apostles is the sequel.

It picks up the story of Jesus after his resurrection, and goes on to tell about what happens to and through Jesus' followers in the next 20 to 30 years, after Jesus leaves this earth in the body, and as the church is established. How fortunate we are to have this book in the pages of Holy Scripture!

So far – over the past two weeks – we've looked at the founding moments of the church from two different angles.

The first focused on the importance of remembering roots:

Looking back from time to time to our roots, to our basic principles, is something that is not only helpful, but essential to do if we are to be the people Jesus wants us to be.

This is something we all know to be true with our nation. As a nation, we all know how important it is to remember our history, to go back to the story of our founding fathers and mothers, and to remember the principles which were critical to them. If we're to know who we are today as a nation, you have to look back at the foundations.

And the same is absolutely true in the church – if we're to be the people Jesus calls us to be. So two weeks ago we thought about the importance of getting back to those fundamental ideas, principles and stories from time to time which is what Acts helps us to do.

And then, last week, we looked at what happened on a particular day in the story of the early church 50 days after the first Easter: the Day of Pentecost – When God sent His Spirit to Jesus' followers and to people from nations and races all over the world, who happened to be in Jerusalem at the time.

It was as if God wanted to make a statement on that day, through a kind of multi-media show of flame and sound, as if to say

“Can you ALL Hear me now? This is what I want to do:

- First, I want to empower my weak followers to carry out my mission! and
- Second, I want to empower and pour myself into all kinds of people!”

And this statement, this act, was all the more remarkable because at that time, the world was often seen as divided in two: there were those who were clean, and those who were unclean.

(In the 21st century we actually do the same thing – based on race or wealth or education: there are

those who are “in” and those who are “out.” But at that time, they were explicit in using the terms: clean and unclean).

Those who were deemed “unclean” were often met with a sense of revulsion or superiority by those who thought of themselves as clean.

But at Pentecost – following in the steps of Jesus who upset people by attending parties with “unclean” people of one kind or another, here God was shouting out, loud and clear to Jesus’ followers and anyone else who had eyes and ears:

“This is my passion – and it must become yours – to enter the world, not to exclude or step back, or keep out! BUT to reach out – to all! AND to pour out myself into the world as it is. Are you with me?”

So that was last week. Which brings us to this week.

This week I’d like us to think about the foundational message and content of the first-ever

Christian sermons: their preaching – what scholars call the “kerygma” (“kerygma” is the Greek word for “proclamation”) – their essential proclamation.

So I want us to ask,

“What was at the heart of that message in the very first days of the church? What was it that they said which was so powerful that it radically changed the lives of so many people?”

To answer these questions, we need to begin by thinking about the negative. In other words, to point out what the disciples did not say or preach (at least initially).

The answer that emerges is a little surprising. That is, to begin with, what’s clear is that the disciples did NOT spend a great deal of time speaking about the life of Jesus and the teaching of Jesus as a whole. Instead, they spent an inordinate amount of time focusing on what happened on only one weekend in Jesus’ life – from the Friday we call “Good” to the Sunday we call “Easter”! One weekend: sort of bizarre, isn’t it?

But there was a reason, and the reason was this: that they were convinced that what happened on that one weekend provided the proof that the rest of the story was worth looking at and listening to –forever! That the stories about Jesus, and the teaching of Jesus were not just the “the wonderful stories” and “the great teaching of a remarkable religious leader,” but stories and teaching that were absolutely unique: coming from the heart and mind of God and from the lips of the divine Son of God.

And They Believed the best way to show this in their preaching – to make their point – was to emphasize again and again that weekend: Jesus’ **death** (his Crucifixion) on the first Good Friday, and Jesus **on-going life** (his Resurrection) on the first Easter Sunday.

The easiest way for me to show you this repeated emphasis is to look at Acts itself, and the preaching of the Apostles, especially the preaching and teaching of the two most important early Christian leaders – St. Peter and St. Paul.

So, for example, right at the beginning of The Acts of the Apostles, we’re told that after his death, Jesus “presented himself alive to his followers by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days” (in Acts 1:3), and then Simon Peter began to preach on the day of Pentecost, saying this:

“This man (Jesus), handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, YOU crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law (DR: on Good Friday). But God (DR: on Easter Sunday) raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. (2:23-24)

This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. (2:32)

Let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom YOU crucified.” (2:36)

SO – Death and Resurrection (both Crucifixion and “Jesus alive again” – Good Friday through Easter Sunday) are central to this first Christian sermon on Pentecost.

Or move down to another sermon, the preaching of the Apostle Paul in the 13th chapter of Acts (13:15) and you’ll hear him speaking of

“God raising Jesus from the dead”

And then later in his life (Acts 25:19), when Paul was on trial for breaking the Jewish Law, Acts describes the essential contrast between Paul and those who were accusing him, by saying that the fundamental difference was actually about

“A certain Jesus, who had died (DR: Good Friday), but whom Paul asserted to be alive” (DR: Easter Sunday).

SO – Repeatedly, these two parts of the story, from just one weekend in Jesus’ life, are at the forefront of the first preaching. AND WHY? Well, because what happened on that one weekend was the key that opened the door to the rest of who Jesus was and what Jesus did: to the significance of his teaching; to the significance of his character and power. That weekend was what made the whole story of Jesus critical and powerful, and therefore vital to share and remember for the whole world: for every person who’s ever lived!

So – let’s take a moment to think about both of these in turn CRUCIFIXION and RESURRECTION beginning with resurrection.

1. Thinking about the resurrection: let me make it clear that when the first followers of Jesus spoke about “resurrection” they were not speaking about the re-appearance of the Jesus who had died just as spirit, or just as soul, but as soul and spirit and BODY together.

So much “new age” thinking – these days (we hear and see it in movies and talk shows: not long ago I heard Star Trek’s William Shatner speak this way in a PBS TV interview (recorded May 26, 2017). The idea is that when we die, we just blend back as spirits into the cosmos as if our individuality disappears: gone forever.

This way of thinking may be called “New Age” – but it’s not really new at all In fact it’s as old as the Stoic philosophy of Ancient Greece – which was neither Christian nor Jewish (the best scholar on this – Dr. N.T. Wright, in Surprised by Hope). In the Bible, God is always the creator and maker of “stuff”! God makes “matter.” God makes “stuff.” To put it another way, God may be “spirit” but stuff matters to God. “Matter” matters and therefore, in Hebrew and Biblical thought – our bodies matter!

So we’re not just ghosts: “disembodied spirits and souls.” As human beings God made us deliberately as “body, soul and spirit”: and we always will be! We may fight with our bodies; we may love or hate them; we may be scared by their failure; and scream to God, “Why have you made me so?” But this is who we are.

And the Jewish hope of resurrection was therefore that God would one day renew not just our spirits but our bodies too. And Jesus first followers were Jewish, not Greek; their way of thinking was Jewish not Greek. And what changed their lives – in fact, the only kind of event that could or would change their

lives, was not just “a feeling” that Jesus was alive again spiritually, but an experience that was in some sense material and tangible and visible.

Remember Peter’s words (in Acts 2:36)?

“This Jesus God raised up and of that **we all are witnesses**. Therefore, let the entire house of Israel (i.e., all of God’s people everywhere) know with certainty (because of the resurrection) that God has made him both Lord and Messiah.”

“There’s concrete evidence,” they said. He was seen by many; he was not a mere figment of individual imaginations. It was the communal evidence that confirmed to them that Jesus was who he said he was who he claimed to be:

- God’s chosen servant
- the Jewish Messiah King
- their Lord and Master
- God in human flesh.

The resurrection is God’s ultimate statement saying, “This is my beloved Son. Listen to him.” And in time, they would collect all those other stories about Jesus’ life and teaching – the whole story! Writing it down for posterity. Eternally worth listening to and following – because of God’s clear declaration in the resurrection that Jesus was unique and authoritative, as he claimed to be.

BUT RESURRECTION (Easter Sunday) WAS ONLY HALF of what the first Christians focused on in their initial preaching (their “kerygma”). At the same time, they spoke just as much about Jesus’ CRUCIFIXION (Good Friday, the first day of that remarkable weekend) and his death.

From a human point of view, of course, Suffering and Death – and in the ancient world, even Crucifixion, was really not a big deal. Servants of God suffered throughout all of history!

This is the constant message of the Scripture.

Turn to the 11th chapter of *The Letter to the Hebrews* and you’ll find a listing of all those who suffered in God’s name. You see it throughout the story of ancient Israel.

And even the ugliness and cruelty of “crucifixion,” by itself, was not that uncommon.

Go back to the Jewish historian, Josephus, in the first century, and you’ll find him speaking on at least a couple of occasions of mass crucifixions. 80 years or so before Jesus’ birth, 800 Pharisees were crucified by the ruler in Israel at that time (*Antiquities*, 13:379-380). And 80 years before that (*Antiquities* 12:256), the King of Syria, Antiochus Epiphanes, crucified every faithful Jew who would not give up their heritage and culture in order to become like the modern world, like the Greeks (the word historians use is “Hellenized”).

So crucifixion was not unknown in the ancient world and suffering of God’s servants was almost a given – taken for granted. But no one, *no one*, believed that God’s Messiah would suffer. No one would believe that the Messiah would be anything other than absolutely victorious and absolutely triumphant, destroying all his enemies swiftly and quickly, and heralding in an era of peace on earth forever.

And yet, if the resurrection on the first Easter Sunday was God’s declaration that Jesus was his messiah, then in the resurrection God was also declaring unmistakably that this “non-suffering” view of the Messiah was dead wrong! Indeed, looking backwards from Easter Day, it was clear that Jesus the Messiah let people trample all over him. He allowed people to dominate him, and arrest him, and try him unfairly, and beat him up, and kill him.

Which begged the question “WHY?”

If Jesus was so great – why did God let him suffer so much?

And, more, why did he suffer at all?

When the founding fathers and mothers of the church thought about questions like these, initially they gave two brief answers. Why did Jesus suffer, and why did he die?

- The first reason was to show us what we are like: the depth and perniciousness of sin within human lives
- And the second was to show us what God is like: to show us the depths to which God will descend in order to deal with our sin and to restore us to fellowship with God.

With regard to the depth of human sin:

When you read the first ever sermons, the passages in Acts in which Simon Peter is preaching on Jesus' death and crucifixion, it's hard not to notice how he points the finger at his hearers, especially when he speaks about Jesus' death. Listen to how pointed his words are.

- “This man (Jesus), handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, YOU crucified and killed.” (2:23)
- “Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom YOU crucified.” (2:36)
- “YOU killed the Author of life.” (3:15)
- “The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus whom YOU killed by hanging him on a tree.” (5:30)

It's terribly pointed. It's very much *in their face*: for Peter, everyone listening to him was there on the day when Jesus was crucified: they were there, and they did it! Even though it was now just over 50 days later. And some of those in front of Peter, to whom he was preaching, were certainly NOT in Jerusalem on Good Friday.

He knows this! Yet he treats them all the same, as if they were ALL there that day *as if we were all involved in crucifying Jesus: as if we were all to blame*. AND THAT'S THE POINT! We were there too! Complicit in his death.

In fact, that's how Christians have always understood this pointed preaching of Simon Peter: He's pointing not just to those who were there at that time, but to all of us. If we'd been there, we'd have done that!

Theodor Dostoevsky is probably one of the best at probing into the complexity of human good and evil and the shallowness of our civilized veneer when he writes about human nature like this (in his Notes from the Underground)

Tell me this. Why does it happen that at the very, yes at the very moment when I'm most capable of feeling every refinement of all that is sublime and beautiful? It would, as though by design, happen to me not only to feel but to do such ugly things, actions that occurred to me at the very moment – when I was most conscious that they ought not to be committed.

The more conscious I was of goodness and of all that was sublime and beautiful, the more deeply I sank into my mire, and the more ready I was to sink in it altogether. At first, in the beginning I did not believe it was the same with other people, and all my life, I hid this fact about myself as a secret.

But it is the same with “other people”! It's the same with all people!

We were all there – and we did it too!

SO, the crucifixion of the Son of God reveals the depth of human sin that we so often miss because we

cover-it-over with the civility of life.

BUT MORE THAN THAT, THANK GOD (in the second place) the crucifixion – Good Friday – also reveals *the goodness and love of God and the lengths and the depths to which God will go* to restore us, and forgive us, and to bring us back to himself.

Let me put it this way – as we think about the crucifixion. Imagine a scene between two people who have a vicious squabble.

One says, “I will never forgive you until you say you are sorry. I will never forgive you until you take the first step.”

But the other is quite different. The other (even though the truth is that I’m innocent and greater by far than you) says “I want to restore this relationship so much that I will do anything, whether you say you are sorry or not, I will do anything to forgive you, anything to remove the barrier between us, anything to restore our relationship forever. And if it takes my dying to do that – well, even before you do or say a single thing, I will do that.”

THIS is what God does for us in Jesus’ death that weekend! On that Friday, before we were born, knowing who we would become and what we would do, God stepped out of heaven into history and onto the cross in Jesus, and did everything that needed to be done so that our sin – past, present and future – would be dealt with justly and removed, and our relationship with God restored.

And how do we know that this is what’s happening on the Friday, that this was a picture of the sacrificial love of God? Well, because of what happened on the Sunday: because of the resurrection! – God’s declaration that Jesus is Messiah and Lord – God’s only Son: the One whose life and teaching are not just for us, but for the whole world, forever!

So when Simon Peter – Jesus’ best friend – ends the first ever Christian sermon by turning to the crowd and telling them to “Repent and be baptized,” he’s simply saying this

- Turn your life in Christ’s direction – in the direction of that weekend!
- A weekend filled with the power and love of God,
- You’ll find mercy in abundance there
- You’ll find a life and teaching there to emulate and follow, that will give you purpose and direction for ever

IT’S A GOOD DEAL: in fact, THE BEST EVER! Don’t leave it on the table

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