

"The Real Power"  
Acts 4:32-35

April 15,2012

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter

The week after Easter is often a let down at many churches. After a full house, inspirational music, and a great celebration, the week after Easter is marked by lower attendance, less special music, and an absence of real celebration. The question often arises: how can we prevent that from happening? The early Christian Church, of which we read in the book of Acts, never experienced that let down. What can we learn from the early church so that we can avoid such let downs in the future?

Some people would say that the church needs re-think worship so that there is no let down. We need to work on people's emotions to maintain the spirit of celebration. Music that is more thrilling would help. Preaching that is more inspirational would also help. Changing the form of the service so that it is less formal and more "user friendly" would be another thing to do. More exciting worship would ensure no let down.

Some would say that the church needs to offer a variety of programs that meet people's needs in order to attract and hold on to people. It seems that this is what our First Reading for today is advocating. The people back then had everything in common. There were no poor people in the church because people pooled their resources and distributed them to people as they had need. If only the church today could develop more programs to feed, clothe, house the poor, serve the youth, minister to men, woo the women and so on, the church would be vibrant and alive.

Some would say that we need to be more diligent in our doctrine and more enthusiastic in sharing the Gospel. We have to let people know that they have forgiveness for all of their sins because Jesus died on the cross to earn that forgiveness. Preach Christ and the forgiveness of sins and surely there will be no let down.

Is this where the real power is – powerful worship, powerful programs, and powerful doctrine? Is this how the early church went from 120 people (Acts 1:15) to 5,000 men – plus women and children (Acts 4:4) just a few chapters later?

Appealing purely to emotions is a tricky thing. Emotions are so unstable. We may feel excited and happy one day and sad and depressed the next day. While there is always emotion involved in worship (no matter what form it takes), planning worship just to get people pumped up (as many in modern Christianity are doing) is a risky business. You are forced to continually look for the next emotional high while being paralyzed by the fear of being boring. Besides, the early church had no dynamic choir or music program. Their preachers were fishermen and blue collar workers, rather than inspirational and polished public speakers. Yet the church exploded with power.

Caring for the physical, social, and emotional needs of people in general, as well as youth, men, and women in particular, is a good thing. Don't get me wrong. The church should be involved in doing those things. But can such programs alone provide power and sustain the church? Or are such programs merely short term solutions for temporary problems? A focus on physical, social, and emotional needs of people may distract us from seeing the greatest need which is spiritual. Our needs for the here and now will eventually cease. Death eventually overcomes us all. Food, clothing, lock-ins, LWML, and men's groups cannot prevent that nor provide a solution to that.

The same is true for pure doctrine and proclamation of the Gospel. Pure doctrine is important, but it can save no one. If, by proclaiming the Gospel, we mean simply telling people that God loves them and that Jesus died on the cross for the forgiveness of their sins, that will likely have little effect. Most people assume that God does and should love them. Many people won't see the need for the forgiveness of sins because they will assume that they are good enough not to need it. Even if they recognize the need for forgiveness, how will that provide any sort of power for the Christian's life or the Church's life? So we have forgiveness for sins. So what? We are reconciled to God now. What difference does that make? We will be at peace with God when we die. How does that help?

Power to avoid a let down does not come from the emotions, from inspiration, from programs, or even from doctrine. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied." (1 Cor. 15:19) In other words, if we think that our faith in Christ is

good for getting us an emotional high, having our physical needs met, or providing us with a great life here and now, people should feel sorry for us because that's not what it's all about.

What it's all about is death. Death is the common problem for all humanity. It has a common cause – sin – which afflicts everyone. The early church had power. It thrived and grew. Why? It is not because the Church helped people deal with death or accept death. The Church claimed to have an answer for death. Our text for today says, “And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.”

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is a major theme in the book of Acts. The word, *resurrection*, is used ten times while the word, crucify (which we emphasize a lot) is only used twice. However, this was not a popular message but a dangerous message. It was the proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus Christ that got Peter and John thrown into prison by the Jewish religious leaders. It was the proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus Christ that got Paul ridiculed and rejected by the Greek philosophers in Athens. It was the proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus Christ that got Paul in trouble with the Jewish council.

Why? A new moral teacher – that would be fine. A social worker who fed and healed people – that would be fine. A leader of a new religious sect – that would be fine. A martyr who died for a cause – that would be fine. But a person who died a horrible death and then came back to life again – that would not be fine. That would radically change everything.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ means that He is who He claimed to be – the Son of God and the promised Messiah, a frightening thought for His enemies, but a comforting one for His followers. The resurrection of Jesus Christ means that His life lived perfectly in the place of sinners and His death died in the place of sinners was effective in removing the barrier between God and man through the forgiveness of their sins. The resurrection of Jesus Christ means that life does not end at the grave nor does it extend to hell. Because He lives again eternally in His heavenly kingdom, all who have faith in Him will pass through death to live eternally in His heavenly kingdom as well. The resurrection of Jesus Christ means that the glorified Savior lives and rules the universe on behalf of

His Church, another frightening thought for His enemies, but a most comforting one for His followers.

The apostles did preach Christ crucified for the forgiveness of sins, but it was never left at just that. They always preached the resurrection of the Lord Jesus from the dead. It's easy not to do that. As a preacher, I work hard to proclaim Christ crucified for the forgiveness your sins. It's easy to leave it at that or tack on the resurrection of Jesus almost as an after thought.

But it is the resurrection which makes all the difference. As Paul writes in the famous passages from 1 Corinthians:

if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. (1 Cor. 15:14-18)

If the resurrection was the main message and the real power that drove the early church, made the early church to thrive, and caused the early church to grow, then let it be our message and our power as well.

The Lord Jesus has risen from the dead! That means our worship will always be filled with joy, regardless of what form it takes. For the joy comes from *what* is proclaimed and not *how* it is proclaimed: whether it be ancient hymns or moderns songs; inspirational speakers or humble preachers.

The Lord Jesus has risen from the dead! From this joyous news springs forth all our love and acts of kindness. We no longer fixate on the things of this life and tightly hold on to them only for our own use because we know this life is not the "be all" and "end all" of our existence. We are free to let go of this life because of the assurance of the life to come. We eagerly serve our neighbors in their needs because we are already overjoyed at our Lord's resurrection and not in order to become joyful or feel good about ourselves.

The Lord Jesus has risen from the dead! This glorious truth drives all of our doctrine. We preach Christ and Him crucified for the forgiveness of sins, but that cross means nothing without the empty tomb; the death of Christ means nothing without the resurrection of Christ.

Everything else is dependent upon the resurrection, as well. Baptism is able to deliver forgiveness and salvation to us only because of the resurrection. St. Peter writes, “[Baptism] saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” (1 Peter 3:21)

We have hope in facing this life with all the evil that the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh throw at us, as well as hope for the life that is to come because of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. St. Peter again writes that we have “a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade....In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.” (1 Peter 1:3-6)

We have strength to face the dark and ugly reality of death when it comes for us because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. St. Paul, sitting in a jail cell at the end of his life, thought back to everything he had ever valued in life and said,

I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.” (Philippians 3:8-11)

One time, in the first church I served in Wisconsin, the Church Council was noticing how good the attendance and offerings had been on one Easter and someone said, “I wish it could be that way every Sunday.” I suggested passing a motion to declare every Sunday to be Easter and see what happens. They laughed, but essentially that is what the Church has done. We gather here on Sunday, not Saturday as the Jews had done, and have renamed this day as “the Lord’s day” precisely because it is the day on which the Lord Jesus rose from the dead and the Church wanted that to be remembered every week. Therefore, every Sunday we gather here is an Easter celebration. Every Sunday is a time to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ and receive the

power of His resurrection for our lives with God, with one another, and the people of our community.

For, despite all the things which we think are powerful, the resurrection is the real power. Amen.