

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

Sermon 4.3.16

Scripture: Acts 5:27-32  
John 20: 19-31

On Wednesday I was driving south on Route 7 & 20 in Lenox. I was pulling out from a dead stop at the light where 7a splits off from the by-pass to head south into the village. I was in the right-hand lane and accelerating apace.

In front of me, two state police cars had pulled out from where they'd idled in watch. Their blue lights began flashing and off they sped, well in front of me.

Some distance behind me in the left-hand passing lane, three cars were approaching, also apace. They'd not been stopped with me at the red light, instead passed through the green light so they were already at the speed limit while I was still accelerating. They would safely pass me or, by the time they reached me, I might be at their same speed.

One of them was a rust red color, a small sedan.

Behind me, a black Jeep charged. I noticed it in my rear-view mirror and, having been rear-ended a couple years ago, I tried not to over-react. It became clear the driver meant to get in front of those three cars coming up on my left. Though we were all hovering just over the speed limit, which is 55, this wasn't fast enough, apparently. But before the Jeep could cut in front of those three cars, the front of the three was too close to clear. The Jeep lurched back into my lane. All I could see was its grill.

We all crested the hill and rounded the curve at Hubbard Street, which is when I saw those two state police cars pulled over to the side conducting a traffic stop on a white coupe. Their driver's side tires weren't even all the way over the white line, though the breakdown lane is plenty wide.

Fast approaching, I slowed down as much as I felt I could safely do, to 51 miles an hour, mindful though of that black Jeep. Still right behind me, it backed off a bit, I assume at the sight of the blue lights. I hugged the left side of my lane to give the cops as much space as I felt I could safely offer. But I was mindful of those passing cars that, were I to clip them on the side, could ricochet me out of control.

About three weeks ago, a state police officer was killed conducting a traffic stop on the Massachusetts turnpike, sideswiped by a too-close passing car.

As I was nearing the front of the two cop cars, the driver's door opened into my lane and the officer stepped out. With an urge to swerve out, I managed to stay steady on the steering wheel though the officer, the *man*, suddenly seemed to me so vulnerable—flesh and bone amidst all these speeding tons of steel. If something went wrong here, I knew I'd live, but if I killed a police officer, or anyone for that matter, I wouldn't live happily, not for a long time.

However much of this I thought in that moment, I can't say. I doubt it was all conscious, mostly simmering beneath the surface—for the events were all still unfolding. The second of the two police cars had now pulled away from that first traffic stop, apparently to conduct another though this time alone.

As soon as the car was in motion, blue lights still flashing, the other cars began to make way for the officer now in the passing lane. The rust-red sedan was long-gone, the two other cars with it on their way as well, though that black Jeep was still behind me, having tried a second time for a pass. But, even as those three cars were out of the way, the Jeep was thwarted again, this time by the police car that had everyone behaving themselves.

It made its way in front of the Jeep and behind me.

It was me the officer was after.

There was some relief in being at a stop in the breakdown lane, though by the time the officer was at my window I'd begun to shake for all the adrenaline let loose.

You know what he said: "License and registration."

"Why are you pulling me over?" I asked.

"License and registration."

"Why are you pulling me over?"

"I'll tell you after I get your license and registration."

"Is it because it I drove so close to you because of the Jeep charging behind me, which if you were to get in your car and drive you'd easily catch up with, and the three cars beside me, one of which was red and all of which made it so I had no room to move over?"

"So you *do* know," he said.

I gave him my license and registration with trembling hands and while he was off issuing me my warning—that's when I really began to cry. It had been scary and outrageous, even absurd. I was about to be warned of something that I shouldn't have done even though it

was the best of all the choices available to me. I was about to be warned when what would have been actually helpful was a list of realistic options I might have exercised or, absent any and so better yet, a thank-you note.

When you're stuck in misfortune that is a cascade of near-misses, bad decisions, and the stubborn limitations set upon us all by time and space, it's so tempting to look for someone to blame. The officer thought it was my fault, at least until I opened my mouth. I thought it was the fault of the driver of the Jeep, and also the officers' fault for not pulling over fully and safely into the breakdown lane. The driver of the Jeep might have thought it was the fault of the drivers of those three cars, piled deep in the passing lane though not actually passing anyone, at least not yet.

You really, really want someone to blame.

Luke puts us into that squeeze. Something terrible has happened in the crucifixion of Jesus, but he's careful not to blame anyone for it. At least, I think he is.

I mention Luke here because Luke is the author of our reading today—the Acts of the Apostles being his second book, his sequel to the gospel narrative that got the whole thing started.

For Luke, the story doesn't end with the passion of Jesus. It's just that the main character changes from the Christ to the Church. In the gospel according to Luke, Jesus is the focus, as teacher to the disciples (which is to say students), and as healer of the sick and bringer of good news to the poor and proclaimer of the year of the Lord's favor. In the Acts of the Apostles, the church is the focus, this budding body that would continue Christ's mission, therefore serving as Christ's body in the world, those who were once disciples, which is to say students, now made apostles, which is to say those who are sent out.

Where we pick up the story this morning, Peter and some other unnamed apostles had been jailed for preaching and teaching in Jesus' name. The story notes that the high priest and some Sadducees had become jealous of their teaching and moreover their appeal among the people, and so they'd had them locked up in a public prison.

But during the night, an angel came and let them out. And it's perhaps worth noting that an "angel" is a but a messenger of God and therefore can be imagined as either a natural or supernatural being. This book, the Acts of the Apostles, is one that defies scholars in their attempt to classify it. Whether history, biography, or novel, it's hard to say, and because its

content goes from ordinary to extraordinary over a matter of moments, is mundane and then miraculous and then downright dumbfounding before landing back into typical of what a group of people will do when faced with a crucial decision. This book runs the gamut, so that angel who freed the apostles might have been a man, might have been a winged thing, might have been really anything, and that's for you to decide.

What the story does make clear is that, when the high priest sent for his prisoners that he might question them, they were found not in the jail but back in Solomon's portico in the Temple teaching once again in Jesus' name.

"We gave you strict orders," the high priest said to them when they'd been found and brought before him and the council, "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 who is "us," I wonder, and are they so determined?

Last week, I quoted the insights of a New Testament professor, Greg Carey, whose blog on Luke's interpretation of Jesus' death had me seeing what I'd never seen before. "Luke interprets Jesus' death as a continuation of his ministry," which might not seem at first all that exciting an idea.

But he goes on to say that, "quite early in the story, Jesus identifies himself as bringing the reign of God through his acts of healing and liberation, his teaching ministry, and the community that forms around him. He shares that these activities will eventually lead to the cross, and in his last hours, [even while hanging and dying] Jesus continues this ministry by seeking blessing for other people rather than calling attention to himself," all of which is to say that, "For Luke, Jesus' death carries no saving power on its own. It provides no atonement for sins, whatever we may mean by atonement. Instead, Jesus dies as a consequence of his commitment to bless all people, especially the poor and sinners"—something that upset social convention to the degree that those most invested in social convention and entrusted with keeping social order deemed it necessary that he be stopped.

In short, according to Luke, Jesus' crucifixion wasn't part of some divine plan, some offering of atonement for the forgiveness of sin, a theological assertion that wasn't *really* developed until centuries later, in the early middle ages. No, the crucifixion of Jesus was a consequence of his urgent and undissuaded ministry of blessing and gracing all people, something he continued to do even from the cross. ("Father, forgive them," Luke alone

remembers Jesus, while dying, to have said.)

And this is good news. It's good news that God didn't require blood sacrifice, by which we might conclude that God doesn't require blood sacrifice. We're not so bad, so sinful, as to need such a terrible and painful offering made on our behalf; and God isn't so harsh in his holiness as to be pleased and appeased only by such a terrible and painful blood-letting.

Good news!

But if God isn't to blame for this, then who is?

Years ago, this question came before me in a most unexpected place — my 7<sup>th</sup> grade English class at BCD. Someone asked it, "Who killed Jesus?" I know not why. And someone answered it before I could — that dreaded answer. She'd received her elementary education at the Berkshire Christian School, and so she had the answer at the ready. "The Jews," she said, which had her Jewish classmate, a boy with whom she was friends, cover his head and say softly, "I didn't do it. It wasn't me."

I doubt very much that Luke could have foreseen what answer history and the church might together have come up with, did indeed come up with — and to evil effect. I doubt this very much because, to Luke, the conflicts between the apostles and the religious authorities were more like family disagreements than like inter-religious strife. The apostles were Jews. The religious authorities were Jews. What difference was just now developing between these two groups was a big one. It was a difference over the question of whether Jesus, the crucified one, was also the anointed one of God for whom the people had waited, and it's a big one. It's a big difference. But it wasn't a difference that had brought anyone to blows, not yet — though the high priest seems aware of the possibility of such a thing.

"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, I think quite simply and un-incitingly, "We must obey God rather than any human authority. This Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree, God exalted to his right hand as Leader and Savior."

How fine a line it is between holding responsible and placing blame; how fine a line it is between holding responsible and inciting violence or exacting revenge.

I wish I'd been quick enough to correct my young zealot — that it wasn't the Jews who'd killed Jesus, it was the religious authorities, it was people like me. Paired with the

deadly power of the imperial authorities, those ordained to keep social order under God couldn't perceive social disruption as also possibly of God, so they snuffed it out.

But not for long. It was back. *He* was back, both in resurrected spiritual form but also in the form of countless others who'd been called and sent out in his name to do his work of blessing and gracing and bringing good news.

He was back, so there was no need for revenge. The chief priest's concern, that it was the aim of the apostles to bring blood on the religious authorities, was misguided. That wasn't their aim...

...until it was. For we know our history—how the apostles became the church, and how the church then paired with imperial power and became militant, or with state power and became punishing, or with national power and became racist. We know, we *know*. We must ever stop forgetting. Instead, we must always take responsibility for what wrong's been done in Jesus' name by people who might well be us were we in similar circumstances.

But there's also this, we must ever abide in that press between acknowledging the wrong though not seeking revenge. We must tolerate in faith the full recognition of injustice wherever we find it, resisting evil wherever we encounter it, while not fighting it on its own terms, while not avenging injustice as if this will bring justice.

It won't.

There's a whole lot in the Bible about being blameless. Abraham, the patriarch, is praised for being blameless, as are the prophet Samuel and King David. It's a common prayer in the Psalms, that the speaker might be blameless, and therefore innocent of great transgression. Paul, in his letters to the churches he gathered, describes himself as blameless and exhorts the congregants to be blameless as well. And I've long heard all this to be about living without fault, living in such a way that you or I or anyone might never be rightly blamed from wrong-doing. Lately, though, I've heard this to be about participating at all in laying blame, in placing blame. To be blameless is, to put it glibly, not ever to play the blame-game.

Is it possible to aim for understanding and recognition, to hold responsible someone else for what he or she has done or to take responsibility for what I've done, without getting into blaming, which is to court violence and incite revenge? Is this possible? I think so. I *hope* so.

I didn't like being the one blamed for that near-miss earlier this week — not when there were so many factors at work. But I could, and can, take responsibility for what part I played, especially when I imagine all the others taking responsibility as well.

So, who killed Jesus? According to Luke, that's an uninteresting question. According to Luke, the more interesting one is this: "Who will live for Jesus, and *as* Jesus?" If you like a challenge, then this one might be for you.

Thanks be to God.