

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Eastertide

Sermon 4.30.17

Scripture: Acts of the Apostles 2:14a, 36-41  
Luke 24:13-35

Of all the amazing things that are recounted in the book the Acts of the Apostles, none draw my attention more than the thing remembered in this passage. And this is saying a lot. This book, the Acts of the Apostles, or simply Acts for short, is chock full of amazing, attention-grabbing things. Really, that's what defines the genre.

This book is singular in the Bible. There's no other representative of this genre among the sixty-six books of our canon. Sure, we've got several books of history, several books of poetry, several gospel narratives, many letters, a legal code, and a couple of legends. Acts, though: this one stands alone.

This isn't to say that it stands alone among all literature. On the contrary, there are lots of examples of this genre, which, confusingly, is also called Acts. Most of these can be found in the Apocrypha of the New Testament—fifteen books there featuring many of the better known apostles, and a few of the lesser known ones. Recognized in the ancient world, books of acts describe great deeds of people or of cities, so they're full of amazing stories about amazing events.

This quality is all the greater for the purpose of these stories—they're written for believers. Not for argument or reportage or apologetics, these books of acts are inspirational and *aspirational*. They're encouraging for those who would aim to such heroism themselves, even amidst apparently otherwise hopeless situations.

As for this book of Acts, it sings of the great deeds of the apostles and of the early church. Written by the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke, making this "book two" in a two-book series, its first chapter remembers Jesus Resurrected ascending to heaven and the Holy Spirit felt to have come down—and from there on the apostles are the focus, the movers and shakers, all by the power of the Holy Spirit.

For the rest of the twenty-six chapters, the disciples who once followed Jesus act now as apostles whom the Spirit has sent out. They heal people who are paralyzed. They raise people who have died, and in two cases they witness people dropping dead for their having withheld worldly goods from the church whose members otherwise were to hold all things in common. They open the scriptures to people who would have had no occasion for

understanding them, and they create converts to follow in the Way. They end up in prison, and in Peter's case are miraculously let loose from prison. They preach to the crowds that God doesn't play favorites—that God loves Jews and Gentiles all the same. They get shipwrecked. They get martyred, one stoned to death, another beheaded.

But of all these amazing things recounted in this book, none captivates my attention more than the thing remembered here: "Therefore," Peter said to the men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, "let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified."

To a large extent, this was true. To a large extent, the men of Judea and all in Israel *did* see to the crucifixion of Jesus. They were the ones to have done this—either by arresting him, though on no specific charge; or by questioning him, though as more of a battle of wits than as an investigation into wrongdoing; or by hollering as one of the crowd, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" or by not standing up to the crowd, as Pilate failed to do, though he said he'd do otherwise, "You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death. I will therefore have him flogged and release him." In a very real sense, they *did* crucify Jesus, whom, by the way, they knew to be innocent of any capital crime.

This bears saying, that, really, no one, it seems, actually thought Jesus was guilty of an offense, and certainly not one so bad that it warranted his death. No one seems to have thought this criminal execution would actually be just—a matter of retributive justice.

What people do seem to have thought is that this execution might at least re-stabilize things. Jesus, having called into question so much that had long been thought good and right and true; Jesus, by his words and his deeds and his very existence, having cast into doubt so much that was assumed and given in society, really in the world; Jesus having come into the world from beyond the world so to cast the world's values and methods and means into full relief in the light of God's truth: Jesus simply could not stay, not if there was any hope of things getting back to normal. It was simply too destabilizing. It was just too revealing, too apocalyptic. He had to go—guilty or not. Having drawn the attention of the religious authorities, which then upset the armistice they'd established with the imperial authorities, he had to go.

Remember, according to the story, following Jesus' raising of Lazarus, "...the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, 'What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.' But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, 'You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.'"

Yes, Jesus had to go. So, they did it—all in Judea and in Jerusalem, all in the Temple and in the high court.

But they can't have felt good about it.

How is it, then, that they were so open to hearing of their own complicity in injustice, in evil? How is it that Peter was able to say so plainly to them, "...this Jesus, whom you crucified...?"

When you're confronted with the worst thing you've ever done, aren't you even just a little defensive? When any of us is confronted about something shameful we've done, something wrong, are we able to let the terrible fact of it into our consciousness so graciously, or really at all? How did this crowd manage it? How did Peter manage to say it, that it was accurate without being too much for them to bear? How is it possible that the people were "cut to the heart" and moved to ask, "What should we do?"

I ask these questions seriously, not just as rhetorical flourish. What's more, I ask them, or something like them, on a daily basis, practically an hourly basis. After all, so much of our public discourse, it seems to me, is a back-and-forth of who is more to blame. For whatever circumstance we find ourselves in, for whatever problem we're as a society facing, for what history we're coming to terms with or what recent events have unfolded unfortunately, the conversation eventually comes to the question, the accusation really, of whose fault this whole mess is.

That's long been true, I think. Maybe it's always true when it comes to human beings trying to live together. Accusation and blame are ancient arts, primitive drives. Consider, the ancient Hebrew word for "accuse" is *satan*, as in Satan—which suggests that the practice of accusing someone else is both long-standing and satanic.

But these days I think the dynamic is in hyper drive.

Have you heard of “whataboutism”?

A story on the NPR website from last month brought it to my attention. The story focused on President Trump’s habit of, when criticized for something, pointing out that someone else has done something worse. If his health care plan is worthily criticized, then why did the Obama Administration have to spend millions of dollars to hype so-called “Obamacare”? If Mr. Trump’s Russian connections are so suspicious and problematic, then what about the Democrats’ contact with the Russian ambassador?

A common enough tactic to some degree, it’s a mode any school kid is familiar with. But the grown-ups are in on the game, too, at no time more than in Soviet Union. It was actually a centerpiece of propaganda, and most often the focus, when they meant to shift it away from their own inhumane activity, was (no surprise) the United States. The Kremlin even went so far as to have a special commission covering human rights violations in our country, which gave their whataboutism some real ammunition; this was during the time of Jim Crow laws and segregation. But, as a tactic in general, it became so pervasive that it was eventually a joke among Soviets, and birthed a subversive genre of humor called Armenian Radio jokes, so named after the official state radio in the Soviet Republic of Armenia.

One example: a man asks Armenian Radio, “Could an atomic bomb destroy the beautiful city of Yerevan?” and the radio official answers, “In principal, yes. But Moscow is by far a more beautiful city.” Another example: a man asks Armenian Radio, “Is everything alright with meat in Armenia?” and the radio official answers, “Yes, everything is alright with meat, but it’s very bad without it.” A third, and iconic, example: a man asks Armenian Radio, “How much does a Soviet engineer get paid?” and the radio official answers, “I don’t know, but did you know that in the U.S. they lynch Negroes?”

That final punch line became synonymous with the whole phenomenon of whataboutism.

The story analyses what is perhaps obvious: “[Whataboutism] is a simple way to shrug off criticism or even responsibility for any wrongdoings. [Plus,] ... anyone who dares to criticize another can be ‘unmasked’ as a hypocrite—and this creates a useful moral equivalency... : if nobody is perfect, then there’s license to do all sorts of imperfect things.”

What the story doesn’t get into is a more existential problem. Laid bare when whataboutism has come to dominate all public conversation is the fact that, once a

commitment to truth and responsibility is lost, so are we. Once whataboutism is the only way we engage one another, it is unbelievably difficult to stop. It's just too seductive — accusation breeding resentment and stoking a desire for revenge. It's just too powerfully seductive, the desire to shift blame and get even. Once whataboutism is our primary mode, we might not be able to stop it, and this will make the common good not only impossible to establish, but even impossible to imagine.

Satanic, indeed.

It's with an eye on the dangers we flirt with when we engage in such discourse, and with an ear for the accusatory tone that's cheap and easy, that I ask the question: how did the men of Judea and all in Jerusalem go from being told, in no uncertain terms, that they had crucified Jesus, he whom God made both Lord and Messiah to being moved and even asking, "What should we do?"

How did they hear, accept, respond so graciously? And how did Peter speak with conviction but not accusation, with clarity but not acrimony? How did these two parties communicate about something so potentially divisive without becoming further divided, becoming instead unified, reconciled?

Potentially divisive: that's an understatement! Really, it's proved deeply divisive throughout our history. Indeed, much of the church's history as regards the Jews hasn't been nearly so reconciling. Though the question has been asked and answered — that certain people are responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus, which they acknowledged and then attempted to respond rightly — much of the church has continued to ask the question, on down through the ages, making the crucifixion not an historic fact (though one that had theological and spiritual ramifications) but an eternal and enduring crime that Jews down through the ages must continue to be punished for. Though the matter was settled that day in Jerusalem, we keep bringing it up.

No surprise this. That's how many groups earn their sense of membership, their sense of belonging. This is the tack many tribes and nations and parishes and principalities take to establish who belongs — by reminding everyone who doesn't, by bringing up old injuries to gin people up for more action, by stoking resentment, which then might even motivate some unifying act of vengeance. Back to the article about whataboutism, a professor at Columbia specializing in public affairs, Dmitry Dubrovsky, noting that populist leaders seem especially

to make use of the tactic, is quoted as having said, "...a populist leader wants to keep his masses of supporters on his side. Getting too specific on a policy or a position risks creating rifts within that base of support. Pointing to a common enemy, on the other hand, is a great way to unify a group."

So, it's no surprise, though it is a shameful fact, that the church over the centuries has fallen for this seduction: keep alive the question as to who killed our Lord, for this will give cause to the lived faith. And, to some degree, it has.

If it's not that question though, it can be a more general one. Who's sinful? Who's unsaved? Who's blasphemous? Who's impure? We'll identify those people and then we'll congratulate ourselves that we're not them.

But it hasn't had to be that way, lo, these many centuries; and it doesn't have to be that way going forward.

Okay—yet how? How else are we to do this? How else might we freely and fully live, and into a future that might be bright with hope and abounding in love, when so much of even the recent past, recent weeks, recent days, have served up heaped helpings of offense, or wrong-doing or wrong-saying?

How do we get past all the acrimony, all the duplicity and cynicism?

I suspect any reconciliation between people and parties divided from one another largely depends upon recognition—the party in the wrong owning up to the fact, recognizing the error, taking responsibility for it and trying (at least) to make it right. And, of course, recognition, responsibility—these are no easy things. But, in my experience, they're made easier when this basic truth claim of the gospel is taken in, believed, and lived out: that Jesus suffered terrible wrong-doing, painful injustice, and agonizing cruelty that was considered expediency; and that, when he returned, he wanted nothing to do with getting even or striking back.

This must certainly be a central point in all the appearances of his, though having died, yet being alive. This must certainly be a central, if only implied, point: that his return had him simply continuing in what he had been doing before—teaching, feeding, walking along the way with friends. This must certainly be a central, if only suggested, point in the church's use of the term to name this incredible event. Resurrection: the word means to set something to right. That's all. What happened on that same day when Cleopas and his unnamed friend

were walking along the road to Emmaus, what happened earlier, first thing in the morning—what happened was a simple setting things to right. As if Jesus had been knocked down, God simply stood him back up. No retributive justice, no punishment, no revenge, God simply stood Jesus back up so he could continue in his work of ministry and compassion.

So it might be for us—that when we’re knocked down, we simply get back up and continue on our way. But so it might also be for us—that when we have knocked someone else down, we might not fear our own guilt and complicity, our own sinfulness and shame, but might instead be open to the terrible facts of our lives, which then opens the possibility up that we might make it right, we might make it all somehow right. We might live resurrection.

The other day, Tobias, in thinking about his ancestry and the history of our country, most notably its having been built by slaves, had this to say, “If my ancestors had slaves…” and I stopped him there. “They did,” I said. “They did?” he said. “Your ancestors from my side have been here since 1630. The earliest one we know of came himself as an indentured servant. But from then on, we can only assume they had slaves.” So all this that we now have—all this by virtue of generations of stability and inheritance—is founded on the systematic captivity, exploitation, and murder of human beings. Worse, the fact that we don’t know for sure that they were, and we certainly don’t know who they might have been, is itself an evil. “Oh,” he said.

I have to admit to you that I don’t know how to reverse society-wide trends of accusation and whataboutism. I don’t know how to put some ground—some *moral* ground—beneath the downward spiral we seem (some quite gleefully) to be riding, riding down even to our own end. “Remember,” John Adams, our third president, wrote: “Remember, democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself. There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide.” I don’t know how to reverse this dangerous trend we’re amidst.

But I can say that one of my daily faith practices has been to pull that punch, to still the defensive move, to take in what I might more happily push back against. Informed by the faith that there is forgiveness for all wrongdoing, and there is hope for reconciliation amidst all division, and that the resurrection—a divine though simple setting things to right—is true, one of my daily faith practices has been to enter that realm where all such things reign.

I can also tell you this, that since opening my eyes to all that needs forgiveness (in the world, in my personal interactions, in my family, in myself) and since noticing all the times when I have a chance to live that out (every day, every hour!) I've been increasingly convicted in the belief that this is salvation, this is eternal life.

You know, it's often a source of wondering: why those first witnesses of Jesus, now resurrected, didn't recognize him? Had he changed? If so, how? To what degree? Why is that they were so slow to see what then suddenly, eventually becomes clear?

Well, we often don't see what we don't expect. It often takes us a moment to make sense of some surprise.

What, then, did the disciples-turned-apostles expect, and how did Jesus resurrected defy that expectation?

For one thing, they expected Jesus to be dead.

Beyond that, though, they perhaps expected that, were he impossibly to have come back, it would certainly be with a new energy, a new charge. Get even, get revenge, show the world how wrong they were and how sorry they'd be: Jesus would have changed by this new charge, this new purpose.

But Jesus didn't come with a new energy and a new charge. He came with exactly the same energy and purpose he'd come with before. The resurrected Jesus was exactly the same as Jesus in the flesh. So maybe the unrecognizable thing of this new-form Jesus is that he *wasn't* different, wasn't changed. He was exactly the same.

To see this sameness might then have called those first witnesses to a deeper recognition, just as it might us. And it's a recognition that would take *at least* as long as a six-mile walk and supper afterward to come to, that our complicity with evil can be forgiven and drained of its power. Our participation in sin, our propagating deception, our prolonging trauma in part for denying it: these are things that will not have ultimate sway. So we can admit it. We can open our eyes to it all. We can be free of it all.

This recognizing, the risen Lord and our need of the risen Lord, are indeed things that we've proven over and over again to be slow at. But time is on our side when we practice what we proclaim. To borrow a phrase, the practice works if we practice it.

Thanks be to God.