

By What Name?

Menno Mennonite Church
April 21, 2024

Purpose: To expand the consequences of the Resurrection to how we then respond to it.

Message: As those receiving the Good News of resurrection we are invited into the opportunity share in the consequential good news that calls us forward.

Scripture: Acts 4:5-12 (I will read), 1 John 3:16-24 (Please read)

Synopsis: Actions have consequences. That is true in physics as it is in life. The resurrection is quite possibly the most consequential action of them all. Empowered of the Spirit the Apostles then begin to live into and out of the Good news of the resurrection. Yet this is not good news to those for whom are managing and marking the Godly power of the way things are. This brings them into conflict with the powers that are naturally as a consequence of how we know and understand the world. As those who come after, also recipients of the resurrection, how might we be invited into the consequence of resurrection that would cause us to stand out in our own right?

Acts 4:5-12

⁵ The next day their rulers, elders,
and scribes assembled in Jerusalem,
⁶ with Annas the high priest,
Caiaphas, John, and Alexander,
and all who were of the high-priestly family.

⁷ When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired,
“By what power or by what name did you do this?”

⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them,
“Rulers of the people and elders,
⁹ if we are questioned today
because of a good deed done
to someone who was sick
and are asked how this man has been healed,

¹⁰ let it be known to all of you,
and to all the people of Israel,
that this man is standing before you in good health
by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth,
whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead.

¹¹ This Jesus is
‘the stone that was rejected by you, the builders;
it has become the cornerstone.’

¹² There is salvation in no one else,
for there is no other name under heaven
given among mortals by which we must be saved.”

Among the various things that I know of the life of the saints, few though they may be, it that it is a bit curious as to how they end up being called that. Because when you look at the those lives we venerate—both formally through the recognitions of the Catholic church and our far more informal embrace of those whose stories we hold as exemplary—by in large those stories are not, really, all that saint like. At least if we think of saints in any case: those who could do no wrong whatsoever, so busy are they polishing their halos. The reality of course is far different. The first apostles as we read here were those most given to come to the attention of the authorities for what they got up to. The martyrs of the church embraced what they were fated to do because they could no longer embrace that which would make them safe by continuing to go along in the stream of the way things were, and turned instead to Christ. In modern times, more time than not those who we regard with admiration are those who have stepped outside the ordinary. Mother Teresa is held as she is precisely because she stepped outside the norm to be with people, often literally untouchable people, and spoke so well in learning from that experience. There are any number of stories from the Anabaptist story stream that would remind us of this as well. Or in other terms, when we pray for the movement of the Holy Spirit to come, it might also be wise to anticipate that there are some notable side effects as well.

We need to start here in this reading because we need to find the right frame of mind. We know that as we move Easter, we hear time and again of the spreading of the Good News that we know and connect to the moment of Easter resurrection. But we are quick to forget that even thought we brand it and know it as such—the good news, the best possible news—it is not always good for everyone out there. For Good News to be fully gospel in all its world changing and the consequential thing that it is, we need to remember that it will have a way of changing things. Theologian N T Wright connects us to this: “if you were already in power ... and not particularly (good news) if you were in charge of the central institution that administered God’s law, God’s justice and the life of God’s people, and if you strongly suspected that this new movement was trying to upstage you, to diminish or overturn that power and prestige and take it for itself.” And whenever people get scared things get awfully tense. People held together in an institution even more so.

But people powered by the resurrection tend to be trouble makers because the so much of the script has changed. Because when we are considering Gospel trouble we have to ask ourselves the most famous of all questions: “So really, what is the worst that can happen?”

While this question is usually a good time to stop and have a think when you are out doing things in the grand adventures of life because usually the accurate answer to this question is “way more than you have likely imagined” when we are working with the word of God and the working of the Spirit, it is often an opportunity to move in faith.

Because within the resurrection reality the script has changed. When we are given the work of the Kingdom, we are also given the logic of the kingdom that takes the world seriously, sure, but with a profoundly different script. Because we have to ask #1 what can the world do to us that Jesus has not already overcome? Death is the worst of it, right? And Jesus stands ready to overturn our death sentence on appeal. The second reason people who believe in the resurrection should be up for some Gospel-trouble-making is that we believe Jesus is coming back to put things right in the end. We know who wins this thing. And he’s our team captain. Jesus told us to be on the look-out for signs of redemption and, when we see the kingdom on its way, to jump on board and hang on for the ride. While this frequently not the life of faith we live, it is the life of faith that is available and can be part of the reality of the resurrection. We have far more frequently wedded the notion of quietude, peaceability and stability as the reliable markers of healthy faith than anything that would run us afoul of the way things are.

But we cannot ignore that this is not the witness we receive of the Apostles and is one we do well in questioning within our own lives. The inevitable result of resurrection people acting in the name of Jesus and the power of the Spirit is that economic, political and social structures *will* feel threatened and react. As resurrection people, Peter and John, knew that the things resurrection people say will put them at odds with those in power. And they said them anyway. As resurrection people, they knew that the things resurrection people do put them at odds with those in power. And they did them anyway. They did them in the name of Jesus who they serve..

Anyone can claim that they are speaking “in Jesus name” and a lot of people do. I know that when I hear it I am taken for good and for ill the to the televangelists healing on TV. It is of course possible for just about anyone to baptize their personal cause with the name of Jesus in order to take on the power that this association holds. Sometimes this claim is true to the Kingdom. Other it is less true. But it is always there and damaging.

This is what’s really at stake in the third commandment about using the Lord’s name in vain. Dragging Jesus into your swears is tacky and not terribly uplifting. But the real damage is

done when folks baptize the flag of any country in Jesus' name. When religious leaders align themselves — and their Jesus — with a preferred outcome and endorse one set of assumptions or the other is that they implicitly diminish the name that they apply to that situation and forego the needed moral and prophetic power to speak the words of the resurrected kingdom, the words of Good news, when those are the words that need to be spoken, as so often they do and must be spoken. The difference between the broad claims of piety that we hear so often and the inflections of the Spirit moving people to the work of bringing people together toward and within that same Spirit healing and building, not dividing out and driving apart. Not matter the moment, it is this test that we must always apply to our own speech and that of others—in what way does it give a glimpse of the kingdom of God, especially when that word has an element of upset within it.

To be clear here, applying the name of Jesus is a challenge in its own right. We may wonder who are we to invoke the name of Jesus, to act on his behalf. That's what we are doing, really, when this happens. We are applying the label and the power of the ongoing ministry of the most high to the ongoing intentions of his kingdom. We are operating in the power left us for the outcomes that Jesus intends for the world. When we put it in those terms, it changes the way we finish our daily table grace and the way that we go about the works of good will in the world. There is a boldness here, a boldness that comes of the Spirit and a boldness in adopting the working of their ministries, our ministries, into the work and will of the master Jesus Christ. There is an authority here that allowed them to risk doing what they were doing and speaking the will of their Lord.

Lest you think that this is one more case of "Well, that was Acts and this; this is not Acts" rendering this a nice story a little more, I would challenge that assumption. In fact, I am relying on the very principle of what we do in the name of Christ even right here and now. We are familiar with this invocation to apply to the work of MCC, blessing and naming the work of relief as a work of the Spirit, meeting people where they are with, hopefully what they need. We do this why? In the Name of Christ.

But I would like to expand this notion for us if you will allow me. It is not our language so it does not get said in this way all the time. But the work of the worship, of gathering around word and song and symbol is a work that is done too in the name of Christ, to invoke Christ's reign and to rely on the resurrected Spirit. I have been known to stand here before you in my

stocking feet. I have lost the habit after the demands of the machinations of the pandemic made the process logically inconvenient. But my feeling remains the same. Try though I might, working as hard as we can and do on the words and worship that we share together, we must always acknowledge that there exists beneath it all a prayer of the worship doing its work to sooth, challenge, inspire, energize and so much more only by the work of the Spirit. The work is important, yes. But we know that words have to be understood in order to make sense, and with any communication things do not always go right. It happens at home. It happens at church. It happens where ever you have more than 1 person in the picture.

The fact that we do this at all every Sunday is a huge blessing to begin with simply because here the Spirit is, helping us well beyond ourselves. The Spirit is at work, always. We are invited into the boldness to claim that, know that, and own that. Might doing so take us to odd situations and challenges we may not feel prepared for? Quite likely, yes. But here too the Spirit will meet us. With that being true, we never fully know where then the Spirit will lead us on and grant us the boldness that we need. May we reach for that boldness, and speak what we are given to speak: the good news, and be ready for the results. Amen.