

*The Lessons Appointed for Use on the*

**Fourth Sunday of Easter**

**Year B**

**RCL**



Acts 4:5-12

Psalm 23

John 10:11-18

The Collect

O God, whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people: Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads; who, with you and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

## Acts 4:5-12

The day after they had arrested Peter and John for teaching about Jesus and the resurrection, the rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, “By what power or by what name did you do this?” Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders, 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, 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. This Jesus is

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

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

**Psalm 23 Page 612, BCP**

*Dominus regit me*

- 1 The LORD is my shepherd;  
I shall not be in want.
- 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures  
and leads me beside still waters.
- 3 He revives my soul  
and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake.
- 4 Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I shall fear no evil;  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
- 5 You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me;  
you have anointed my head with oil,  
and my cup is running over.
- 6 Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

**John 10:11-18**

Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away – and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

## SERMON

I posed a question last week, a question I think is important. It was this:

**Can an story which has lost its power to astonish still work transformation?**

If you're here because it's Sunday and that's what you do on Sunday, I'm delighted to see you but I don't expect miracles. You're not astonished. I hit on this theme last Sunday when I called the story of the resurrection “outrageous”. I got my comeuppance from a lady on Facebook who got pretty huffy:

**Jesus was raised from the dead. If you do not believe this you are not of the Christian Faith and you do not believe the Bible. Sorry about you.**

If that were indeed the case, I would deduce that all one needs to do is to assert one's belief in the account of the resurrection and you're home free. No bothersome transformation. No rebirth. No repentance. No nothing – just assert the truth of that claim, and you're good to go. With the greatest regret, I have to say to this lady, “Nonsense”. If that were the case, the “Jesus Movement” would have lasted about a year and a half, if that. It would have fallen apart of its own weight in no time. The fact that it didn't shows us, incontrovertibly, that something happened 2,000 years ago that transformed people. In the law trade, if you have a particularly persuasive argument, it is said to have legs. The something that happened 2,000 years ago had legs. Two millennia later, we are still talking about it. An unquestionably dead man of no particular provenance, no famous family, no connections with secular power, a man who was executed by the state for something like treason, was seen by an awfully lot of people (Paul puts the number at 500 in one sighting) to no longer be dead. Thereafter, people acting in His name managed miracles by invoking that name. THAT is a very big deal, indeed.

If we take a minute to actually walk with today's account from Acts, what can we find?

The day after they had arrested Peter and John for teaching about Jesus and the resurrection, the rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John<sup>1</sup>, and Alexander<sup>2</sup>, and all who were of the high-priestly family. When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, “By what power or by what name did you do this?”

John and Peter are, for want of a better term, nobodies from nowhere. They are working class people from an area far removed from the Temple and to these people, the Temple was the center of the earth. Luke, himself, describes them as “uneducated and ordinary men”. By contrast, Annas was the High Priest emeritus, having retired some years earlier. Caiaphas was his son-in-law, the current Kohan ha-Gadol, or High Priest. Don’t think pastor of the local church. Think no less than successor to Aaron, the brother of Moses! The retired successor to Aaron, the current holder of that office, and the entire high priestly family have gathered together to have a discussion about theology with two uneducated and ordinary men from a place too forsaken to have its own zip code. What does your understanding of human nature tell you about that? It's as if the Supreme Court, the Pope and the Roman Curia had assembled to talk to two truck drivers from Magoffin County! What could cause that much priestly horsepower to gather to interview these two nobodies?

Maybe because they weren't nobodies. Maybe because the miracle had been witnessed by too many people to deny it. Common sense will tell you that the religious and secular leaders of the entire Jewish people did not gather to interrogate two random dudes from nowhere because they had said something in the streets. I suspect you could have spent a lot of time in the streets of Jerusalem 2,000 years ago teaching the gospel of the Lollipop Fairy without gaining the attention of this group of worthies. Something

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1 Possibly Johanan ben Zaccai

2 This name has been identified by many scholars with Alexander, the brother of Philo, the Alabarch, or magistrate of Alexandria.

has happened, and that something had legs to walk these two into the center of religious and secular power. More than that, the something had put the people of power on the defensive. Acts, remember, is Luke's account of what happened AFTER the resurrection. Without the crucifixion, there could have been no resurrection, but that is the problem now facing this august body of worthies, because, you see, they were behind the crucifixion. Now, subsequent events they could never have predicted have shown that they were wrong. People in power HATE being wrong.

Peter said to them:

Rulers of the people and elders, 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, 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. This Jesus is  
`the stone that was rejected by you, the builders;  
it has become the cornerstone.'

This is a tricky response Peter has given. First, doing a good deed for someone who is ill is a very good thing, indeed, a *mitzvah*, yet the group confronting him is taking him to task for it. They are already on the wrong side of the argument. Secondly, it is clear that the Sanhedrin, for that is who this body represents, are handling these unlikely celebrities with some circumspection. Something had happened, and too many people witnessed it, to just sweep it under the rug.

The “something” was the healing at the Beautiful Gate of the man crippled from birth. Peter and John had been going up to the temple at the hour of prayer when they had spied a man lame from birth being carried in, as was his custom. He lay there each day and asked for alms, so he was well known. Peter had extended his hand and said, “I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of

Nazareth, stand up and walk.” He not only stood, he jumped and leaped. After the healing, Luke tells us:

All the people saw him walking and praising God, and they recognized him as the one who used to sit and ask for alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

That same man is now with Peter and John as they are being questioned and for the Sanhedrin, that is real trouble.

Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus. When they saw the man who had been cured standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition.

Luke tells us that 5,000 believed on account of this miracle, and we now have the mystery solved. The religious and secular authorities of the time had clearly made a bad decision when confronted by this Jesus who was making outrageous claims about himself but gathering followers. Jesus had seemed to them the very definition of powerlessness and they reasoned that if they got rid of him the Jesus movement would evaporate. Now they understand that He who seemed powerless was, in reality, beyond their understanding. People had seen the raised Jesus. People were healing sick people by invoking his name! This story has legs, and it’s going to walk over them if they don’t do something.

I think the only courses open to the Sanhedrin were these: confess that they were wrong and get on board, or silence those who are teaching in Jesus’ name. Guess which path they chose.

So they ordered them to leave the council while they discussed the matter with one another. They said, “What will we do with them? For it is obvious to all who live in Jerusalem that a notable sign has been done through



them; we cannot deny it. But to keep it from spreading further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name.”

Institutional power is always alarmed by loud voices. I was a policeman during the riots at UK over the Vietnam war. If I learned anything, it was this: people in power do not like being caught on the wrong side of a strong argument. They won't admit they are wrong, of course, but they will turn their efforts to silencing those voices accusing them. It's just human nature. There had been a great transformation in “all the people” who had witnessed this healing. Even the Sanhedrin was “amazed”. The things that happened, and were witnessed by so many, astonished all who came into contact with it. And all who came into contact with it were transformed. That's the power of astonishment. It has legs!

We live such a long way from these events, in time, place and culture, that it is almost impossible to retain our sense of astonishment, and that means that these stories always teeter on the edge of “once upon a time” for us. “Once upon a time” will not work a transformation in you. Like the Sanhedrin, you'll find a way to silence the accounts, maybe by thinking of them as matters of opinion.

If I could offer any advice to you, it would be this: rediscover your astonishment at the story. Consult your common sense and acknowledge that however outrageous the story of the resurrection sounds to contemporary ears, you know it had to have happened, or Rome would not have acted as it did. Rediscover your astonishment and let it work a miracle within you!

AMEN

## BENEDICTION

In the letter we call 1 John is this beautiful passage:

**We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?**

How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help. You can oppose raising the minimum wage or you can complain that there are too many people on welfare, but you cannot do both. Something happened 2,000 years ago that astonished all Jerusalem. May we allow it to astonish us as well.

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*Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.*

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