

## Pastor's Message – 4/21/24

Acts 3:1-11

Acts 4:5-12

The Sunday school teacher had a question for the children in her class, "If I sold my house and my car, had a big garage sale, and gave all my money to the church, would that get me into heaven?" "If I cleaned the church every day, cut the grass, and kept everything neat and tidy, would that get me into heaven?" "Well, then, if I was kind to animals and gave candy to all the children and loved my husband, would that get me into heaven?" "Then how can I get into heaven?"

A five-year-old boy, smarter than all the rest answered, "YOU GOTTA BE DEAD!"

What about us? If we would cook meals and deliver them to our hungry neighbors, build houses for the homeless, write books to uplift and inspire people, deliver medical care in the developing world, teach children in underserved communities, and compose music that glorifies God. What if we fill the Food Pantry box with the donation of the month every week and donate 10% of our income to the Church? Would all that get us into heaven?

"Nothing is certain," said Benjamin Franklin in the 1700s, "but death and taxes." With April 15 now behind us, we are keenly aware of the reality of taxes. But what about death? Death is a requirement, not a suggestion. The death rate is the same that it has always been: one per person. How do we find eternal life?

We have two readings from the Acts of the Apostles of the Bible today. I told the story last week, but I elected to read it today so we can get the whole flavor. So, our readings describe both the healing (3:1-10) and the aftermath of healing (4:13-22) of a man who cannot walk. This portion of the story concerns Peter and John's arrest and their questioning by the Jerusalem temple authorities. The scene is set by Luke in the midst of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. We'll hear the first on May 19<sup>th</sup> when we celebrate Pentecost, we heard the second last week, but today we hear the third sermon that Peter gives. This sermon is after everything had happened.

On the previous day, Peter and John had healed a crippled beggar as they entered the temple for afternoon prayer. After the people saw the lame man walking around, "they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him." Seeking to learn more about this marvelous deed, the people who had previously seen the man by the temple gate approached Peter and John, the alleged perpetrators of this act of mercy (3:1-11).

With the lame man still clinging to them and the crowd closing in, Peter asked, "You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk?" The narrator then recapitulates Peter's answer to his rhetorical query. The lame man wasn't healed by the apostles' power, but "by faith in his [i.e., Jesus'] name" and by the power of God who raised Jesus from the dead.

You might expect this would be a problem for the religious leaders. After attracting a great deal of attention through healings they have performed, Peter and John are brought before the council -- including Caiaphas, Annas, and others who condemned Jesus. Luke records in 4:2 that the Sanhedrin, which includes Sadducees who did not hold such a doctrine, were “much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead.” Whether or not the cause of arrest was a doctrinal issue, the trial of Peter and John reveals that the council members have another agenda. They first inquire, “By what power or by what name did you do this?” (v. 7).

Peter does not help his case, but throws gasoline on the fire when, inspired by the Holy Spirit, replies, “Rulers and elders of our people, are we being questioned today because we’ve done a good deed for a crippled man? Do you want to know how he was healed? <sup>10</sup> Let me clearly state to all of you and to all the people of Israel that he was healed by the powerful name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, the man you crucified but whom God raised from the dead. <sup>11</sup> For Jesus is the one referred to in the Scriptures, where it says, ‘The stone that you builders rejected has now become the cornerstone.’ <sup>12</sup> There is salvation in no one else! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved.”

In our pluralistic world, how do we handle that faith statement? You may struggle with how to remain true to your faith while affirming that of our ecumenical and interfaith partners around the globe. Is Christianity inherently exclusive? Are all world religions? Do we as United Methodists have the whole truth? Is faith in Jesus the only road, the only way to salvation?

Some people will say “live and let live.” You may have heard some say, “All roads lead to God.” People have been saying stuff like this for years, often thinking themselves to be open-minded and free-thinking.

Many of you probably have map programs or GPS on your phones or in your cars. I went on a hospital visit last Saturday, opened my GPS and was given three different routes to and from my destination with redirections during the trip. There were several ways to get there and back according to my GPS. They were all acceptable; they were all different.

For centuries, faithful Christians have struggled with Peter's claim that salvation comes only through Jesus. They've asked, "What about those who've never heard the gospel? What about those who are faithful participants in other religions?" And in attempts to answer those questions, various Christians have come up with no less than six different positions, all of which are speculative:

- *Restrictivism*: There is no hope of salvation apart from hearing the gospel and having faith in Christ before death.

- *Radical pluralism*: Christ is one of many ways to God.

- *Universalism*: Salvation is through Christ, but ultimately all will be saved.

- *Universal evangelization before death*: God ensures that everyone who seeks God will in fact hear the gospel.

- *Eschatological evangelization*: All who did not respond in this life will receive an opportunity to respond after death.

- *Inclusivism*: People who have never heard the gospel may obtain salvation if they respond to the light they have.

In terms of this list, Billy Graham, for example, would be an *inclusivist*.

Speaking on Robert Schuller's "Hour of Power" program some years ago, Graham said:

The body of Christ comes from all Christian groups around the world, or outside the Christian groups. I think everybody who loves Christ, or knows Christ, whether they are conscious of it or not, they are members of the body of Christ.... That's what God is doing today: He is calling people out of the world for his name, whether they come from the Muslim world or the Buddhist world or the Christian world or the non-believing world, they are members of the body of Christ because they have been called by God. They may not even know the name of Jesus, but they know in their heart that they need something that they don't have and they turn to the only light that they have, and I think that they are saved and that they are going to be with us in heaven.

Is salvation finally about motivation and actions? Consider Matthew 25:37-40, for example, "Then these righteous ones will reply, 'Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink? Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing? When did we ever see you sick or in prison and visit you?' "And the King will say, 'I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!'

How, then, do we sort this out? Here are some things we can say with confidence. You may want to add more thoughts of your own before offering these to the congregation:

- Do you believe Christ came for all?
- Do you believe Christianity is a valid path to God?
- Do you believe there is some good in the other world religions?
- Do you believe no one apart from direct knowledge of Christ may be saved?
- Do you believe accepting Christ actually changes our lives and enriches life on this earth?

Maybe, in the end, it's not about which road is the right road. Christianity is not the only road on which people find hope and courage and even satisfaction.

Salvation is not just about what happens after death; salvation may be broader than just what happens to a person after death. Salvation also affects the quality of life a person lives right here and now.

Consider people who have not found meaning and purpose in their lives. Or consider those who are locked in unhappiness, sunk in despair or simply find no joy in life. Their lives perhaps feel like places of barrenness and drought. The immediate question is not where they're consigned after death, but how to bring the refreshing rainfall of truth to the dryness that sucks the life out of their very existence. Perhaps such people wonder how they can be delivered from such dry places, how they can find the wellspring of life.

It is said that sometimes the only Bible that people read is the lives of believers. Believers act in such a way because we believe. In God's reality, we find eternal life. The grave is not the end for anyone who trusts Jesus, because he is the one "whom God raised from the dead" (v. 10). God overcomes the cross for Jesus, and he overcomes our deaths as well, receiving us into everlasting life. This is an augmented life that is connected to what we know in this world, but goes far beyond it. As Saint Augustine said in one of his prayers, "We shall rest and we shall see. We shall see and we shall know. We shall know and we shall love. We shall love and we shall praise. Behold our end which is no end."

Resting, seeing, knowing, loving, and praising are all part of the real world. We experience them and understand them. But in everlasting life, they are augmented by the saving power of God, and they connect us to God and to each other for all eternity.

Believers in Jesus have the opportunity to give heartfelt testimony about our experiences of Jesus Christ -- not attempting to shove Christ down somebody's throat, but sharing good news with those who live in dryness apart from him. It's not up to us what others decide about that good news. It's up to us to live faithfully by the great light we have received in Jesus Christ, the Light of the World.

I read a story about a former navy diver about diving deep, really deep. He said that he had been in situations so deep and dark that it was almost impossible to keep from becoming disoriented and confused. What a terrifying feeling -- being underwater, unable to see your hands in front of your face, not knowing which way is up, panic engulfing you. "What to do?" ....

"'Feel the bubbles,' he said.... 'When it's pitch black and you have no idea which way to go, you reach up with your hand and feel the bubbles. The bubbles always drift to the surface. When you can't trust your feelings or judgment, you can always trust the bubbles to get you back to the top.'"

People need a way to determine what is real and true and to find a way to the top. In the sixty-six books of the Bible, the stories, letters, guidelines, and examples from God that tell us what is true and real. The words and actions of believers are the bubbles that can lead to God and offer salvation. Is there any better way that the world can be healed than by the powerful name of Jesus Christ spoken and lived out by His followers?