

Lord, Give Us Such a Faith as This

2nd Sun. of Easter – 04/12/26 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Acts 5:27-42 Pastor Keith Besel

vv. 28-29, [The high priest said to the apostles,] **“We strictly charged you not to teach in [the name of Jesus], yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us.’ But Peter and the apostles answered, ‘We must obey God rather than men.’”**

Introduction

✘ Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

✘ Our text from Acts, chapter five today, tells the story of some of the earliest Christians soon after Jesus had been raised, appeared physically to hundreds of witnesses and then ascended to the right hand of the Father.

➔ At first Jesus’ followers hid behind locked doors in that Upper Room, but it didn’t take them, and those with them, long to leave their hiding places. For just as Jesus had promised, 50 days after His resurrection, Jesus sent His Spirit and He gave them the ability to do many wonders and signs; increasing their confidence to speak boldly about what had taken place. As Peter said in his Pentecost sermon: “Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36).

✘ Yet, those kinds of bold words were not received well by all. It meant prison and beating for Peter and the other apostles; eventually it brought death. But knowing that Jesus had risen in victory for people’s souls, these early believers couldn’t let such earthly things silence them.

➔ In fact, the power of Christ’s Resurrection works wondrous things both within and through His beloved followers, just as we see from the apostles, and we pray to see among us still today.

I. The Bold/Faithful Witness of the Apostles

✘ Peter’s words, coupled with the disciples’ miraculous activity, not only resulted in many positive reactions from those who were outside the Temple – even adding to the number of Christian believers each day, it also caught the negative attention of the Jewish Council. Their response was to arrest the apostles and hold them until they could appear before the high priest and Jewish council the next day.

➔ I can only imagine the soul-searching of Jesus’ disciples that night in prison; perhaps along the lines of the hymn that we just sang to lead us into this message today.

✘ (Hold up Red TLH) I’m sure many of you remember these old red (or blue) hymnals – *The Lutheran Hymnal*. They served not only our church body, but numerous Lutheran churches from 1941 until the 1980s and beyond. And it’s in this treasury of hymns, that William Bathurst’s hymn from the 1800s leads God’s people to consider God’s gift of such a faith “that will not shrink” in the face of opposition, persecution and danger (*Oh, for a Faith that Will Not Shrink*, TLH #396).

➔ I was reminded of this beautiful hymn earlier this week when I ran across a sermon written by Pastor Raymond Hartwig, who served many years as a district and synodical officer in the LCMS. His sermon reflects both upon Jesus’ apostles in our text today and also the text of this hymn that we just sang. And I have chosen to follow his lead and do the same with you here today; sharing some of his thoughts, blended with my own.

➔ So, take out the insert from your bulletin with the hymn, *Oh, for a Faith That Will Not Shrink* on it and look again at the first stanza with me:

**Oh, for a faith that will not shrink
Tho' pressed by many a foe;
That will not tremble on the brink
Of poverty or woe.**

✘ Peter's response to the Jewish leaders the following day, in verses 29-32 of our text, made clear that he and the other disciples were not intimidated; that their faith in Jesus would "not shrink" just because they had been "pressed" to be silent and thrown in jail.

→ The leaders gathered them and charged them not to speak; not to teach at all in the name of Jesus. And when the disciples' followers heard of this, they prayed for boldness for those disciples; for a faith much like we see described in stanza two of the hymn: a faith...

**That will not murmur nor complain
Beneath the chast'ning rod,
But in the hour of grief or pain
Can lean upon its God.**

✘ That night as the apostles sat in the confines of a first century Jerusalem prison, "an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought [the apostles] out, and said, 'Go and stand in the Temple and speak to the people all the words of this life'" (Acts 5:19-20). So they obeyed the Lord and continued the next day to teach in the temple, which meant they were arrested again and brought before the Jewish Council.

→ This is the instance where we hear Peter and the apostles courageously respond in verses 29-32, "We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging Him on a tree. God exalted Him at His right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him." That is precisely the faith that stanza three of the hymn describes:

**A faith that shines more bright and clear
When tempests rage without;
That, when in danger, knows no fear,
In darkness feels no doubt.**

✘ Now, despite a speech by the well-respected Jewish teacher Gamaliel – and his advice to the Jewish leaders that they should just cool down – those Jews still kept the pressure on. Granted, they didn't kill the disciples, but they did give them a public beating and a strict command that they stop speaking in the name of Jesus moving forward. Well, that's like trying to put a muzzle on God Himself; it's just not going to happen. So, verse 42 says, "In the temple and from house to house, the disciples did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ." Yes, Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia!*

→ These are the same apostles that Paul wrote about in 1 Corinthians 4:9 when he said, "For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men." That's it; just as stanza four of the hymn says, these men had a faith:

**That bears unmoved the world's dread frown
Nor heeds its scornful smile;
That sin's wild ocean cannot drown
Nor Satan's arts beguile.**

II. Martyrs then and now witness to Christ

✘ Well, history reveals that every one of those early apostles, except for John, was martyred; killed directly because of their faith in Jesus. And during the 2000 years since, millions of Christians have joined them; suffering and dying for the Gospel of Jesus. And that persecution; those kinds of threats, including death continue still today.

→ Pastor Hartwig shares that some years ago; our church body sponsored what they called the “Barnabas Program.” It meant that all of our district presidents spent one entire month with our LCMS missionaries and their families in Nigeria, West Africa, where we have our largest concentration of missionary families. The district presidents delivered encouragement and counsel to the missionary families. And the missionaries shared real-life stories of Lutheran Christian children being kidnapped or run over by trucks at a picnic; of congregations’ lay leaders often just disappearing, never to be heard from again; of Christian villages living in constant fear but also displaying amazing courage as many of them were raided by Islamic terrorists. Most striking though were the burial services, which ended with the deceased’s congregation, led by its pastors, choirs, and ever-present drums; marching from village to village; singing favorite Christian hymns; fearlessly calling attention to and witnessing to their Christian faith.

✘ The mass media rarely reports anything about this common martyrdom of Christians today. Some years ago, however, a video did surface that received widespread public attention. It featured a large group of shirtless dark-skinned men lined up in front of a large body of water. They stood absolutely still, spaced a few feet apart, their hands tied behind their backs, their at-peace-but-determined faces looking forward and upward, and their skin glistening with sweat under the hot African sun. Behind each man stood another man, head covered, fully clothed with a scorn-filled expression, and each one holding a large machete. It was clear what was about to happen to these soon-to-be martyrs standing before them. The fifth stanza of the hymn speaks of their Christian faith:

A faith that keeps the narrow way

Till life’s last spark is fled

And with a pure and heavenly ray

Lights up the dying bed. Or, in this case, the “seashore.”

III. Our non-shrinking faith brings rejoicing

✘ Here in our comparatively soft and safe American life, you and I rarely, if ever, think of suffering or even dying for our faith. Yet, my dear Christians, we are regularly being tempted and challenged by the devil and his minions, who would gladly take “our life, goods, fame, child, and wife” as Luther put it; and most of all, they strive every day to separate us from our Christian faith.

→ We see it; we know that evil is going on around us every day. But for us, it is rare that we or our loved ones find ourselves in serious physical danger; very different from those early disciples or the Christians in Nigeria or those men lined up on the seashore. And the temptation we face then, is that we give in far too often and just remain quiet; we mind our own business; we shy away from expressing our Christian convictions to others; often even within our own families. Why? to “keep the peace”; so as not to “give offense,” we tell ourselves.

→ And what is the result of such a fear-filled-faith? We miss out on opportunities to share the Gospel. Verses 41-42 of our text reveal that we are missing out on something else that should be important to all of us.

✘ After their beatings, the apostles’ behavior might be a surprise to many of us at first. They left the council and what did they do? Did they moan and groan because of the physical pain they suffered? Were they angry? Did they vow that the forty lashes less one was the last straw?

Were they panicking and rushing to get their families out of Jerusalem? These are the kinds of things many of us might have done in their position.

→ But instead verse 41 says, “they left the presence of the council, rejoicing...”. You’ve got to be kidding me; “rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name” of Jesus. Included with that rejoicing was certainly the sense of accomplishment that God gives to all those who give a faithful witness to Jesus; God’s Son and Savior. Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia!*

✘ 50-years-ago or so, there was a lot of excitement in our Synod about a new evangelism program that involved congregations sending teams of Christians out to knock on people’s doors and ask them two blunt questions about whether or not they believed they were going to heaven and why. We later realized there may be more effective ways to witness to others. I personally was a part of that movement in my youth. The group was called *Ongoing Ambassadors for Christ*, and I grew greatly in my faith as a result, because, in spite of its flaws, many of those who went out and witnessed did rejoice, not necessarily because so many people’s hearts were changed, but because they were counted worthy not only to share God’s Law and Gospel but also on some occasions even to receive rebuke or suffer dishonor for sharing the name of Jesus.

→ I remember thinking, along with my fellow Christians, that it just plain felt good to be speaking up and sharing the Gospel; often being able to remind people of their baptism and knowing that they/we were sharing the power of the Holy Spirit to change people’s hearts and lives, because Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia!*

✘ Now, I know, many of us don’t think that we have what it takes to step up and boldly share the Gospel. And it is true, not everyone can speak like an angel or preach like Paul. But everyone, my friends; everyone can tell of the love of Jesus; can share that He died for all and desires every soul to come, like little children into His waiting and saving arms.

→ And when you do share Jesus, trust me, you will be surprised by how good it feels. That was how the disciples felt that day in our text. They rejoiced even in their suffering. And from that point forward they couldn’t be shut up. Verse 42: “And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that Jesus is the Christ...”.

✘ It’s interesting, how our Epistle Reading today in 1 Peter, chapter one, adds three important points to what we see among Jesus’ apostles in Jerusalem. First, in 1 Peter 1:6-7, we hear again of “rejoicing” when trials test the genuineness of our faith, because secondly that “testing by fire” results in our “praise and glory and honor” of “the revelation of Jesus.” And third, in 1 Peter 1:8-9, we are gifted with a “joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory” because He has gifted us – you and me – in spite of the fact that we have not physically seen Him raised in the flesh, with the joy of “loving Him” and “believing in Him” without question or doubt or fear.

→ That, then leads us all to pray the words of the final stanza of our sermon hymn. Let’s pray it together:

**Lord, give us such a faith as this;
And then, whate’er may come,
We’ll taste e’en now the hallowed bliss
Of an eternal home.**

→ Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen.*