

Got To Tell It – Easter 2C

During Eastertide, these seven weeks that follow the great day itself, our readings take a different tack from the rest of the year. Each week, the First Lesson is taken from The Acts of the Apostles instead of the Hebrew Bible. This allows us more time to devote to Acts, which is a complicated book. While the Resurrection story is still immediate in our consciousness, we take the opportunity to hear and learn more about what it meant to the Apostles and their community. In so doing, we ponder and converse and pray about what the reality of a risen Christ means for us who try to pay attention to Jesus today.

Today's portion of Acts shows the disciples in the custody of the temple authorities, brought up on charges of preaching and healing in the name of Jesus. The judge says, "We gave you strict orders not to teach, yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching." The apostles answer, "With all due respect, your honor, we must obey God rather than any human authority (like you). Who else but God could have raised up Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree? We are witnesses to these things; we have the Holy Spirit of God in us, and so does everybody who obeys him.

Well the DA and the Assistant DA were enraged and wanted to kill Peter and the rest of the apostles. But luckily another lawyer was at the table, Gamaliel. Gamaliel was a very successful attorney in those days. Written up in the JBA Journal several times, he was the grandson of the great Rabbi Hillel. Gamaliel was admitted to the Big Bima and died in Jerusalem in 50 CE. He is recognized as a Doctor of Jewish Law. In fact, in the 22nd chapter of Acts, Paul reveals that Gamaliel had been his favorite law professor. Think Perry Mason, or John Houseman in *The Paper Chase*.

Anyhow, Gamaliel ordered the prisoners to be taken outside so he could approach the bench. In those days, things didn't have to be fair, trialwise. No, this was closer to Atticus Finch territory. He said to the council, "Gentlemen, let's just stop and think for a sec. Remember when Theudas, rose up, claiming to be somebody? He was killed, and all 400 who followed him were run out of town. Then Judas the Galilean rose up and got people to follow him; he also perished, and all who followed him were kablooie.

I suggest we leave these men alone. If their undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, we won't be able to overthrow them anyway — we may even find ourselves fighting against God! Don't forget Psalm 81, The Lord's enemies will cringe, and their subjection will last for ever." The

court was convinced. Nevertheless, spiteful bullies that they were, they still had the Apostles flogged before ordering them not to speak again in the name of Jesus and letting them go. The Apostles, God bless 'em, rejoiced as they left. They were giddy that they had been considered worthy to suffer dishonor in the name of God in Christ Jesus.

Other stories in the surrounding passages of Acts have similar themes. The Apostles say to their tormentors, "What is wrong with healing?" "We cannot ignore God and obey you." Or, "How can we keep silent about what we have seen?" And then there is a sudden end to their captivity. Once, the walls of their prison miraculously open and they simply walk out. This time, they're not quite so lucky, but the meaning persists: this good news, the wondrously impossible reality of the resurrected Christ, is impossible to keep quiet, impossible to keep to themselves, and impossible to keep from attracting others.

Tradition has it that the great Gamaliel himself eventually converted to Christianity and was buried alongside Nicodemus. In the 5th century, by a miracle his body was discovered and taken to Pisa Cathedral. It's there now, or what's left of it. He is venerated as a Saint and commemorated on August 2 or 3 depending on what calendar you follow. And in

case we haven't gotten the hint already, *Gamaliel* in Hebrew means "*Reward of God*," thus: "Every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and on his account, all the tribes of the earth will wail."

It is impossible to keep still about, impossible to restrain; it needs must out, this new great hope and truth that we carry aloft through Easter and beyond: Death has lost its sting. Yes, it is highly unlikely that anyone in this room will be brought back to life, at least as ourselves, after being hit hard by a bus. However, we are forever dealing with dyings of all kinds, so we must also take on and embrace the stream of renewals, reconciliations and rebirths that life offers if we hope and look for them. Of our healings, cures, blessings and miracles, however small: we cannot help but speak. The ways that God is evident in our lives are as many as there are of us. The psalmist says to make music with all our peculiar instruments: trumpets, lutes, harps, tambourines, dances, strings, pipes, and cymbals, both the clanging and the loud clashing varieties. We are all to praise God, whatever and whomever we might be, "Let everything that breathes praise the Lord, all ye creatures of the Earth." Wherever we are, whizzing around in our big terrarium, the mighty firmament, also known as the time/space continuum. We must be witnesses to these things, and thereby praise the Lord.

The vital question, of course is: “How do we do that?” The vital answer, of course is to pay attention to goodness, in ourselves and others: to seek out and perpetuate any goodness we encounter in ourselves and others. This activity and attitude towards life is the essence of love, so that even in pain, deprivation, terror and death, the praise of God as embodied in love can persist in art and story, in performance and construction and in memory. Beyond the tangible and visible is the mystical presence of God we call Spirit. Because we are witnesses to these things; we have the Holy Spirit of God in us, and so does everybody who obeys him.

That Spirit dwells in all who desire to seek the good. It emerges in as many combinations of ways as there are people, in the thoughts, words, deeds, beliefs and memories of those who love peace. These are blessed for unlike Thomas, they need no sworn knowledge to believe in the goodness of God. They do not sadden to be idle and at rest, for even as they sleep, they grow ever more awake to the coming of the warmth of spring, that will dispel the darkness humanity has fed on night after night. They are blessed who have not seen, yet know of the eternal love they have in Jesus’ name.

But this Thomas fellow has gotten a bad rap over the years. It wasn't his fault he was absent the day that Jesus covered the

“Here I am; Ego sum; Pax vobiscum, Peace be with You” material with the others. How many times have I heard an unbelievable report and said just that – “unbelievable!” or “get outta town!” So if somebody was dead and now is not, can you blame him for wanting firsthand evidence? Doubting can be very good for your health – just ask any New York pedestrian.

Each of us comes to faith and a reliance on God's power by a different road, and each of us arrives at a different waystation day by day. We each have a unique mixture of emotional, psychological and spiritual filters that determine what God has to show us in order that we might be convinced and comforted and captured by faith. But we're on this road together, and although the destination and the sights and sensations along the way will mean something different to each of us, we travel hand-in-hand on the road to happy destiny.