

“Obeying God Rather Than Men”

A sermon based on Acts 5:27-32
Delivered at the First Presbyterian Church, Urbana
On Sunday, April 28th, 2019
By David Oliver-Holder

Easter is a season. Far from being a single day event, far from being content to proclaim “Christ is risen!” merely last Sunday when so many were here to enjoy it, we continue our proclamation today. Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed!

And because it remains such good news, and because our joy cannot be bound by even two Sundays, the celebration and proclamation continues for 5 more Sundays. Eastertide is longer than Advent. It is longer than Lent. We celebrate the Resurrection for 7 weeks because injustice has been undone by justice, the power of empire and the religious establishment has been overcome by the power of God, life has proven stronger than death.

The religious leaders and the representatives of empire did what has been so often done to deal with someone who persisted in causing trouble, who wouldn't just say his piece and then be done with it, who would not knuckle under, who would not be bought off. “Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will scatter.” End of the troublemaker, end of the movement, end of the story.

But not this time. God intervened. Common, ordinary time, which the Greeks called *chronos*, clock time was interrupted by “the appointed time,” which the Greeks called *kairos*, holy time, extraordinary time. In *kairos* time, the fabric of reality is disrupted, “continuities, probabilities, and predictabilities (so beloved in the modern world) are shattered; there really is something new.”ⁱ

And when God intervenes, those who witness it spend the rest of their lives trying to come to terms with the experience. Yes, last week we heard how the disciples did not anticipate God's intervention, how they doubted and disbelieved at first. This week we see how very quickly they recovered their joyful conviction that Jesus is Lord. And if Jesus is Lord, then Caesar most definitely is not, nor are any religious authorities.

In the week after God's intervention, the disciples dispelled any confusion about the two parts of Jesus' teaching he offered one day. “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.” “Render to Caesar...” is relative,

limited, conditional. “Render to God...” is absolute. “We must obey God rather than any human authority,” they said.

And those poor authorities thought that they could contain, that they could restrain the proclamation of the disciples. “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching...” And maybe the disciples would have preferred to comply. Of course, they would not have enjoyed being arrested. They would have preferred to avoid the beatings and harassment. They might have preferred to just keep the Easter celebration going among themselves, privately.

But they knew that was not what Jesus wanted. Jesus did not come only for them, for their personal salvation, which they could enjoy and celebrate privately. Jesus did not come merely to be a personal savior. Jesus came because “God so loved the world,” the *cosmos*. He came for all of Israel, for all nations, for all of creation.

So even if they had wanted to comply with the poor authorities, they knew they could not. In fact, I believe they could not help themselves. Something genuinely new had happened, at the appointed time, in God’s good time. God’s *kairos* had broken in and disrupted the world’s *chronos*. And they had been witnesses. Do you think you could have kept quiet about that? No. “We must obey God rather than any human authority.”

II

On October 31st, 1517, an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther nailed 95 theses, statements or points of dispute, on the door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg. His primary concern was the sale of indulgences, by which, he argued, the poor were deceived into paying money to free their loved ones from purgatory.

The great preacher of the day, Johann Tetzel, used to say, “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.” In the 86th thesis, Luther wrote, “Why does the pope, whose wealth today is greater than the wealth of the richest Crassus, build the basilica of St. Peter with the money of poor believers rather than with his own money?” Salvation was not a thing for sale. We are saved by faith alone.

And so he assailed a distortion of that faith, which played on the poor’s spiritual insecurity, so that the pope could build the biggest church in the world. When Dr. Luther could not be refuted, when he would not stop teaching and writing, on June 15th, 1520,

Pope Leo X, issued a papal bull threatening to excommunicate Luther if he did not recant the theses among other writings in 60 days.

After sending the pope a copy of his *On the Freedom of a Christian*, Luther burned the papal bull, and was excommunicated in Jan. of 1521. Local authorities were left to enforce the pope's ban on the theses. And so the Diet of Worms was assembled later in the year 1521, with the emperor, Charles V, presiding.

Luther was summoned to appear on April 18th. Asked on the second day, if the writings on the table before him were his writings, Luther acknowledged that they were. Johann Eck then asked, "Do you renounce what you have written?" Luther answered, "Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe or right to go against conscience. May God help me." He might well have said, "We must obey God rather any human authority."

III

In the mid-1780s in England, slavery remained a profitable institution. As author Adam Hochschild tells it, no major English thinker of the time defended slavery, "but few spent any real effort attacking it."ⁱⁱ More than a few good members of the realm felt unease about it, but the thought of actually abandoning slavery seemed a laughable dream.

Until June 1785. A 25-year-old, red-headed divinity school student at Cambridge, who was there only because of a scholarship for sons of deceased clergy, decided to enter the school's most prestigious Latin essay contest. The topic to be addressed in the essay was the answer to a question: Is it lawful to make slaves of others against their will?

Thomas Clarkson had two months to research and write, and over that time he read everything he could find. As he marshalled his evidence, he became horrified by what he read. He wrote that he was ever uneasy during the day, and had trouble sleeping during the nights. He kept a candle by his bed, so that when he was awakened, he could write down any insights and ideas as they came.

His essay won first prize, which served as the capstone of his education at Cambridge. Leaving Cambridge in June of 1785, as he rode his horse back home, he was preoccupied by his essay and its argument against slavery. Near a place called Wades Mill, he said, "I sat down disconsolate on the turf by the roadside and held my horse. Here a thought came into my mind, that if the contents of the Essay were true, it was time some person should set these calamities to their end."

"For us today, it is a landmark on the long, tortuous path to the modern conception of universal human rights,"ⁱⁱⁱ Hochschild writes. Together with Quakers and other abolitionists, Clarkson would go on to marshal the long struggle to end slavery. Too often, Wilberforce gets the credit, but he was a late comer to the cause, that took 50 years to win.

Clarkson was the catalyst. And with respect to the laws of the realm, he might just as well have said, "We must obey God, rather than any human authority."

IV

Something genuinely new happened on that first Easter, that disciples have been doing their best to come to terms with ever since. The new life released from that empty tomb was so extravagant, so transforming, no book, no year, no century, no millennia, could contain it all.

As John tells us, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."

Peter embodied this extravagant new life. Martin Luther was empowered by this wonderful new life. And Thomas Clarkson found himself agitated by this same new life. That same new life that interrupted the common order in the backwater of Palestine, that spoke through Luther in Germany, and that sat with Rev. Clarkson in England, stirs with us here in Urbana and West Urbana.

We are witnesses to these things. Who knows what we yet may do? Amen.

ⁱ William H. Willimon, *The Pulpit Resource*, "Christ Appears to Us," (Logos Productions e-mail article, March 2013), p. 59.

ⁱⁱ Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), p. 86.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 89.