

Effect Of Apostolic Witness To The Resurrection

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[0 : 00] I am full of a sense of the fact that he said all that needs to be said. It's only time for us now to do something about it. And that sitting down to listen to another sermon is not really what we should be here for.

However, in keeping with long tradition, we'll go ahead with it anyway. But I really have been very much sort of moved by John's visit and by the things he's had to say.

And I'm always moved by you as a congregation. I wonder what you're doing here. I don't suspect you have any ill motive or anything like that.

It's just that lots of people are here for lots of deeply personal reasons. And sometimes perhaps for no particular reason at all. And how we are to hear the word of God, not just individually into the circumstances of our own individual lives, but into our corporate life together, how we're to hear it.

Do we represent a kind of, you know, when an accident happens on a street, there's a sort of collection of people that gather around very quickly that don't have anything to do with one another, and yet they're all attracted by the same thing.

[1 : 33] Well, this is different than that in that we need to be together. We need to find out something of what it means to be together and something of the nature of our responsibilities one to another.

So in the passage that has been read to you tonight, in the passage about which I want to speak, I want to really speak about what it is that does, what I think should be bringing us together, how we are to relate to one another and to understand one another in the light of what we're told about the Church of Jesus Christ in the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 4, beginning at verse 32.

In order to do that, I want you all to pray with me. Lord God, in this moment of quiet, help us to identify the agenda of our own hearts in being here tonight.

The motives are good or bad or even mysterious and unknown. Help us to know why you and your grace have drawn us here.

Help us to be open to what it is your purpose should be accomplished in our lives by our coming together and sharing this hour this evening. So we turn to your word.

[3 : 13] We ask that your Holy Spirit will direct us in our reading it, in our thinking about it, in our response to it. We ask this in Christ's name.

Amen. We're at the 32nd verse of the fourth chapter of the book of the Acts of the Apostles, and here you get another picture of the Church.

If you turn to the Acts of the Apostles, you will see at the end of chapter 2, there is a glimpse of the Church and how it responded in the very earliest days of its being.

the end of chapter 2, verse 43, fear came upon every soul. Many wonders and signs were done through the Apostles.

All who believed were together, and they had all things in common. They sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all who had any need.

[4 : 22] And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people.

And the Lord added to their number day by day, those who were being saved. So that's his first little glimpse of the Church community, marked by fear, by signs and wonders and apostolic ministry, marked by a strange moving together and unifying, and marked by daily attendance in the temple.

And then the more private breaking of bread together, one with another, partaking of food, praising God, and finding favor with the people.

So that's a lovely picture, and I'm not going to dwell on it, but I want you to know that it's there because it forms a bit of a background to what comes then in the passage that we are looking at tonight, which is chapter 4 and verse 32 following of the Acts of the Apostles.

You look at it and it says, now the company of those who believed. You've all got that at the top left-hand corner of page 116. I want to talk about this in terms of the community.

[5 : 51] I want to talk about the apostolic function, and then I want to talk to you about prescription and description, those three things. First, the community.

It's called here the company, and it refers to a multitude of people. If you go back, you'll find that there was a multitudinous response to the first sermon, the Pentecost sermon, when 3,000 people believed.

I think that's in chapter 2 and verse 41. There's the first sort of church census. There were added about 3,000 souls that day to the company of the disciples.

Then after the miracle at the gate where the lame man who had been begging for alms, Peter and John turned and fixed their gaze on him and took him by the hand and said, silver and gold have I none, but such as I have I give you.

In the name of Jesus Christ, stand up and walk. And he did. And Peter and John took advantage of that to preach a short sermon and a very impressive sermon it was too because if you look in verse 4, chapter 4, verse 4, you'll find that the number of the men came to about 5,000.

[7 : 18] So either it's growing very rapidly indeed or I don't know where these numbers, you add them together or you just extend 3,000 to 5,000 between chapter 2 and verse 4.

But anyway, that's why this passage that we're looking at starts with the words now the company, which means a multitude of people.

They're talking literally about thousands of people who within the city of Jerusalem, it says of them that they had those who had believed.

And that's how they're described. They're the company of those who had, who believed. And this doesn't mean that this is the company of those who were believing.

It means they were a company of people who had come to a point when under the preaching of the resurrection of Jesus, they believed.

[8 : 25] They came to a point of belief. This was a large multitude of people who had believed. You remember in the passage I just read you from the end of chapter 2, it talks about them in the continuing progressive sense that they were being saved.

But this same company now are referred to as those who had believed. So they had believed and were being saved, and that was the company that are gathered in chapter 32.

And they were an unusual company of people because in that multitude they were of one heart and soul. There was a tremendous unity among them.

the kind of unity that is spoken of in Psalm 133, which you sang in the original Hebrew tonight, though I'm sure an original Hebrew would hold his hands up in horror.

Nevertheless, it was, we did our best. And these people were marked by the fact that they had believed were being saved, were of one heart and soul.

[9 : 43] In other words, they found a wonderful identity with one another, so much that they regarded themselves as being of one heart and soul.

And that's a remarkable thing to happen to a group of people. We have all sorts of ways of bringing people together into company with one another.

together. And we have memberships and membership fees and rules and regulations, and we have a certain amount of prestige that might attach to belonging to the group or something like that.

But it's an extremely difficult thing to have people of one heart and soul. Something must have happened which was very much out of the ordinary that this great company of people who had believed really found that they were of one heart and soul.

That they had this very real unity with one another. Most groups that I know of in terms of our human capacity are simply groups that are looking for another occasion on which they can fly into contempt for one another or prove that the worst they believed about one another was well founded.

[11 : 07] And that this one heart and soul is a very unique event. And you might wonder how that came about. Well, I think you can find a little bit about how it came about.

That oneness expressed itself in a particular way. The particular way that it expressed itself was that no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own but they had everything in common.

Try swinging that sometimes. I mean, it's, you can't do it. People don't work that way that they have that kind of ability to share.

We have reason. Somebody, my friend John Chapman was driving through Shaughnessy just last night and he said, why do they have such high hedges?

Good question. You can figure that one out for yourself but I just leave it to you as an observation. Why this, this, you know, I don't know.

[12 : 20] You can think about it. Maybe it's true. Maybe it isn't. But it doesn't seem to suggest one heart and one soul and it doesn't seem to ring of that truth which is here that no one said that the things which he possessed was his own.

You know, when you find a place ringed with burglar alarms and guard dogs and things, you wonder if there isn't some slight tension about whether in fact they're not one's own.

anyway, that, this is a remarkable contrast to that that these people thought in this way. Whatever possessed them to think this way.

And in the midst of this, you see, what was happening and what is central to this passage is that with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and great grace was upon them all.

That was the function of this community. This community was gathered together and had a profound unity and they had a tremendous sense of calling in that they were the community which was living in response to the testimony of the apostles to the reality of the resurrection.

[13 : 46] The apostles were going around saying he is risen. If you don't believe me, I'd love to take you through. Give me just a few minutes just to quickly take you through.

You can do it yourself, but go through the first four chapters and look at all the references to the resurrection. They were going around saying that telling people about the resurrection, chapter 1 verse 3, he presented himself alive by many proofs, appearing to them during 40 days, speaking of the kingdom of God.

He said to them, you shall be my witnesses, the witnesses to my resurrection in Jerusalem. He says, why do you stand, when he ascended, the angel came and said, why do you stand looking up into heaven?

You have a job. Go and bear witness to the resurrection. resurrection. In chapter 1, verse 22, they said, we've got to elect a new apostle because we've lost Judas and we need one of these men and he must become, one must join with us and his qualification, he must join in the apostolic witness to the resurrection.

In chapter 2, verse 11, we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God. And what is the mighty work of God they were talking about essentially? The resurrection of Jesus Christ.

[15 : 17] This Jesus whom you crucified and killed, Peter said in his sermon, God raised him up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by death.

They were bearing witness to the resurrection. Thou wilt not abandon, well, they went into David's prophecy. David had prophesied that the Messiah would be raised, and he said, thou wilt not abandon my soul to Hades, nor let thy holy one see corruption.

And there's a lovely bit of Old Testament exegesis there in chapter 227, where it says that David bore witness to the resurrection in the Old Testament. Verse 31 says, David foresaw and spoke of the resurrection of Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption.

And they went on to say David wasn't speaking about himself, because there's his tomb. He was speaking about the Son of God, about Jesus Christ.

And in chapter 2, verse 33, following, this Jesus whom God raised up, and of that we are all witnesses.

[16 : 31] That's what our job is. Our job is to bear witness to the resurrection. when they came to a man who was crippled and at the gate, Peter and John went up to him and stared him in the eye and said, in the name of Jesus Christ, get up and walk.

But they did it in the name of their risen Lord. And when people gathered around them to say, to say, what's happened here, you know, as they might gather around that traffic accident I was told you, they gathered around this event outside the temple gate, saying, what's happened?

What's happened? What's happened? What's going on here anyway? And they all did that until there was a great crowd of them. God's and what the apostle said was, this man has been raised up not by us, but by Jesus, whom you crucified and whom God raised up.

It's in the name of the risen Lord Jesus Christ that this has happened. And this has happened to bear witness to the fact that Jesus, the one whom you crucified in the last few weeks, is a lie.

Well, then it goes on. I mean, I'm doing this for you simply because I want you to be impressed with how much the witness to the resurrection permeates the first four chapters of Acts.

[17 : 58] Chapter 326, God having raised up his servant, sent him to you first to bless you in turning every one of you from your wickedness. chapter 4, verse 2, annoyed because they had, they were annoyed at Peter and John.

This is the Sanhedrin now, the very company of people who had condemned Jesus to death. They were annoyed because Peter and John were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead.

Again, that's what the apostles were doing. These were the men who were afraid to even acknowledge that they knew Jesus a few weeks before outside the company of the Sanhedrin, let alone right as in the company of the Sanhedrin.

Chapter 4, verse 4, tells about many who heard the word believed, heard the word concerning the resurrection of Jesus Christ. When they were hailed before the Sanhedrin, the Sanhedrin said, by what power and by what name did you do this?

Which was just the right question. They wondered what power Peter and James had. They said, by Jesus, whom you crucified and whom God has raised. By the name of Jesus Christ, whom you crucified, whom God has raised from the dead.

[19 : 24] By him, this man is standing here among you. that miracle pointed to the miracle of Christ's resurrection. This is the stone, they said, which the builders rejected.

They said, there is no other person, there is no other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved from death, except the name of Jesus Christ. There isn't any other name.

Well, this went on. They talked about a notable sign has been performed through them, that is, the raising of the man who was lame. It's manifest to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and we cannot deny that.

That's what the Sanhedrin said. They pointed out they certainly couldn't deny it, because behind it lay the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. He spoke of that community, the community among whom signs and wonders are performed through the name of thy holy servant Jesus.

They weren't talking about the man who was crucified a few weeks before. They were talking about the man who had been raised from the dead with great power. This is where we come to our passage.

[20 : 41] With great power, the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. Well, that was the community, and that was their function.

Their function was with great power. We already know there's great power because here are people holding all things in common. Here are people who are one in mind and heart.

These people with great power, the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them.

They knew what their function was. Their function was to bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our function is not to bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Our function is to bear witness to the apostolic witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But we're not eyewitnesses as they were. They have left us the record of their testimony about the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

[21 : 49] and we look at their testimony and we come to believe through the testimony, through the apostolic testimony which is spoken of here. And that's what our primary job in our world is.

In a world which is frightened and disunited and people can't get along with people and all that kind of thing, we say, look, you're leaving out one reality, one dimension of all this which you can't afford to forget and that is the one whom you crucified, God has raised.

And that brings an entirely new dimension into every circumstance of your life. And the demonstration of that new dimension was in the community at Jerusalem which gathered around in response to the apostolic witness to the resurrection.

As we gather around the apostolic witness to the resurrection. So we keep reading the Bible because it is, in a sense, the setting of the apostolic witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

That's what brings us into a community. And by our testimony to the resurrection, there is great grace. Well, that's the community and that's the apostolic witness that the apostles apparently gave leadership to this community and they bore witness to the resurrection.

[23 : 26] They gave leadership, obviously, because the community needed leadership and they assumed it. And so things started to happen in this community.

Surprising things which don't mark many human communities mark this human community. There was no needy person among them. There simply wasn't. For as many as were possessors of lands or houses, sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet.

And distribution was made to each as any had need. Well, that's obviously what we have to do. And I'd like to commend you to a good real estate dealer so you can get that done this week and we'll see you all next week.

Now, I mean, there's a sense in which you might come to that conclusion. You might say that's what's required. I don't think it is. I think that what this demonstrates is that certain people acted not in obedience to the apostles because the apostles weren't giving out this order.

What they were doing was saying, Jesus Christ is risen, so everything is different. And as people appreciated, in fact, in the circumstances of their own lives, that everything was different and that Jesus was Lord and that Jesus had the authority to cause a man to walk, that Jesus could bring people into union with one another, this risen Lord, that Jesus was raised from the dead, because of that, they began to live their lives differently.

[25 : 21] They began to do things in different ways. And I don't think that they're setting an example for us to follow in selling what we have and bringing it and bringing the results of it so that it can be distributed to everybody.

I think what they're demonstrating is personal and individual obedience among the community to the leading of God, the Holy Spirit. They give you an example, a personal example of how this worked.

There was one person who was a former priest, a Jewish priest, from among the Levites. Verse 36, Joseph was surnamed by the apostles Barnabas, which means son of encouragement, and he was a Levite and a native of Cyprus.

So he belonged to the priestly family of the Levites. There he was. And his response was to sell a field which belonged to him and bring the money and lay it at the apostles' feet.

That's what God, the Holy Spirit, told him to do. That's how he responded. I want to just tell you a personal story because I want you to pray about it and tell me how you'd solve it.

[26 : 42] A young man in this congregation lost his job, but he was going to begin this week and it's not going to begin it anymore. He went to his Bible study group last week and the Bible study group discussed tithing.

He decided that he should start tithing. So, with no prospect of a job, his old job having, he finished it off last week, no prospect of a job coming, he decided he should die.

So, he wrote out a substantial check, brought it to church this morning. The only difficulty was his wife saw him do it. And they're having a hard time talking to each other because they differ on the subject of what you do about situations like that.

Now, what is your advice, please? Don't tell me. I, but, you see, what the church is to be.

I mean, obviously, what needs to happen is they need to come together and come to some agreement about it. But you can't say that he's wrong because if God, the Holy Spirit, told him to do it and you come along and say that he shouldn't do it, what's that make you?

[28 : 08] And so, they have to learn. And I, I don't think that they would be necessarily wrong to go ahead and do it. But I do think they'll be wrong if they don't do it together in the unity about it.

So I think we need to pray for them and ask that they might be really helped in that particular attempt to be obedient to God, the Holy Spirit. Because that's what I think Joseph, whom they called Barnabas, did.

He knew what he had to do and so he did it. He went and sold a field of land and brought it and that provided for some of the needs of the community, the community whose function it was to respond to the apostolic witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And that's why I talk about description and prescription. What this story does is not prescribe how we ought to behave, but to describe how they behaved in response to the Holy Spirit.

And how you're to behave will come out of the obedience of faith worked out in the circumstances of your life. You have to figure it out.

[29 : 32] How are you going to respond to the apostolic witness to the resurrection? Because it changes all the dimensions of your life and the meaning and purpose of your life.

your life can't be the same. In what way is it going to be different? Well, for Barnabas it was different because he went and sold a piece of land and took the money, and that had probably been his business managing that land before, took the money and laid it at the apostles' feet and they made a distribution of it to people who didn't have any wealth and that was a good thing to do.

But that was his obedience. Immediately he had done that, the church was in trouble, deep trouble, because along came another couple, and they saw what Barnabas had done.

They thought, well, if he's done it, we'll do it. We won't do it just exactly the same way because we can satisfy people by, we'll sell some land and we'll take the money and we'll put a little in the bank in case it doesn't work and put the rest at the apostles' feet.

So instead of being obedient to the Holy Spirit, they were disobedient to the Holy Spirit. And that's how chapter 5 begins.

[31 : 07] it gives us a very powerful picture that this community of people who had believed, people who were being saved, a great company of people, people who had been brought into one heart and one soul, people who were happy to share the things they possessed with one another and to care in a remarkable way for one another.

all those things were happening within this select community and people were being individually obedient to God the Holy Spirit in the things they chose to do in response to the witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And so they responded. And people responded. You're welcome to respond in uniquely different ways. In fact, you should be warned.

Be careful you don't copy somebody else's response. Make sure it's yours. The family that are having trouble with tithing, if they're just imitating somebody else, they're probably in trouble.

But on the other hand, if they're seeking to be individually responsible before God, then they probably are home free. You see the difference?

[32 : 37] And that's what a church is about. The apostles are not running around telling. John told me a good story about a friend of his who joined a church.

He's just joined a new church. She's been put on the roster for helping with this and the roster for helping with that and the roster for helping with something else and the roster for helping with something else.

So she started to call the church St. Rosters. Because that's the way they run it. You get on the roster.

Well, I think we're in danger of being St. Rosters sometimes. But obviously the way we're meant to be is the way that's described here. In which in response to the apostolic witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which makes the most enormous difference to our lives.

Our lives simply can't be the same if Christ is risen from the dead. Everything we touch has to be different because of the reality of that resurrection.

[33 : 44] We have to regard life in a very different way indeed. Well, how is it going to be different? Well, I think that you will, through the scriptures and through the fellowship of other Christians, finding yourself with a unity of mind and heart with other Christians, sharing the circumstances of others, you'll be led to what you need to do.

John was very helpful on this point to him. He said that we define all the gifts and people are wandering around looking for gifts all the time.

What is my gift? And ignoring the thing that's right in front of them that needs to be done. Well, your gift is probably in response to the Holy Spirit to look at the situation you're in right now and do something about it.

You know, that it's not waiting for packaged kind of priority post letter coming to tell you your gift is this and this is how you must exercise it.

You do the thing that needs to be done and God will let you know and your friends will let you know what your gift is in due course. You may not even be aware of it first. Well, that's what I think this passage is about.

[35 : 05] It's about this community of believers who are built around the apostolic witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ among whom great grace was at work and in response to all that people were doing quite unusual things in a personal way in which they responded to the resurrection.

And that I think is what the church is all about. What the church needs to be. Let's pray.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Remember how people, you know what it's like when you're newly in love and everything is sort of new perhaps you're newly a Christian and you can't help telling people about it.

Well, that doesn't last forever and we get on to the place where we have to take serious thought about relationships and things and we need to take serious thought about our continuing responsibility as the soldiers and servants of Jesus Christ.

God, we pray that you will help us to do that in the circumstances of our individual lives. Not to be caught in the terrible trap of Ananias and Sapphira and to just sort of do what everybody else is doing, though not for the same reason.

[37 : 06] Keep us from that and help us to, with boldness and without shame, to be, to exercise the obedience of faith in the circumstances of our own lives.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Thank you very much. I'm going to continue to pray.

Our God, you make us glad with the remembrance of the resurrection from the dead of your only Son, Jesus Christ.

Grant that we who remember his resurrection this evening and celebrate it may die daily unto sin and learn a new and radical obedience in the light of his resurrection.

And may we live with him evermore in the glory of his endless life. Lord, in your mercy. Almighty God, whose loving hand hath given us all that we possess, grant us grace that we may honor you with our substance, as the first Christians did that we've heard about tonight.

[39 : 00] And remembering the account which we must one day give, may we be faithful stewards of your bounty. Lord, in your mercy.

The world that doesn't know about the resurrection of Jesus Christ or has heard about it and has done nothing about it continues to be a world which bears the fruit of not attending to the gospel.

But God still loves the world, the world towards, the world to which he gave his only begotten Son. And so we pray for peace in the world tonight. Almighty God, from whom all thoughts of truth and peace proceed, kindle, we pray, in the hearts of all people, the true love of peace.

Lord, in your mercy. And guide with your pure and peaceable wisdom those who take counsel of the nations of the earth, that in tranquility your kingdom may go forward till the earth is filled with the knowledge of your love.

Lord, in your mercy. Lord, in your mercy. We pray tonight for those who are suffering.

[40 : 33] We all know some who are lonely or afraid or unemployed. Some in our community these days are suffering the loss of loved ones.

Family members have passed on. Some among us are in hospital. Some are confused about the future. We think of the young couple that Harry has spoken of tonight.

So in a moment of silence, let's bring these names that we know before our father. Our father. Almighty God, who art afflicted in the afflictions of thy people, regard with thy tender compassion those in anxiety and distress.

Bear their sorrows and their cares. Supply all their manifold needs. And help both them and us to put our whole trust and confidence in you.

Lord, in your mercy. Amen. Amen. O Lord, support us all the day long of this troublous life until the shadows lengthen and the evening comes.

[42 : 11] The busy world is hushed. The fever of life is over. And our work is done. Then, Lord, in your mercy, grant us safe lodging, a holy rest and peace at the last.

Lord, in your mercy. Would you take your service sheet and turn to the back page? The first collet, shall we pray it together?

O God, the source of all good desires, all right judgments, and all just works, give to your servants that peace which the world cannot give, that our hearts may be set to obey your commandments, that freed from fear of our enemies, we may pass our time in rest and quietness through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen. Lighten our darkness, Lord, we pray. And in your mercy, defend us from all perils and dangers of this night.

For the love of your only Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. And together, the general thanksgiving. Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we, your unworthy servants, give you humble thanks for all your goodness, loving kindness to us and all whom you have made.

[43 : 45] We bless you for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life. But above all, for your immeasurable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ, for the means of grace and for the hope of glory.

And we pray, give us such an awareness of your mercies that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up ourselves to your service and by walking before you in holiness and righteousness all our days.

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, to whom with you and the Holy Spirit be honour and glory throughout all ages. Amen.