

Easter, the Sequel

Easter 2C

Acts 5:27-32

Back in the late 40s when I was a University student, I had a rather weird, but entertaining English professor, a male who once appeared before the class wearing a red dress, with matching red shoes, hat & purse. He lectured us on the principles of good writing for 45 minutes while we dutifully took notes. At the end of the class, one courageous student asked, "What's with the dress, shoes and hat?" "Glad you asked," said the professor. "I am demonstrating that good writing depends upon a vivid imagination and a willingness to have your expectations disrupted by new information." Remember: this was back in the 40s and the dean was not amused.

Well, today's text from the book of Acts begins with an official lack of amusement. The once disheartened followers of Jesus have been running loose in Jerusalem doing "signs and wonders." The common people hold "them in high esteem." Great numbers are joining them. The poor are bringing their sick out into the street hoping that Peter's shadow might fall on them to make them well—these are the poor who have no other access to health care, as millions in the U.S. today.

The government officials are not amused. They have the apostles tossed into prison. But an angel delivers them saying, "Go to the temple; tell the people the whole message about this life." So the apostles went and when the high priest and his cronies found that the apostles were back in the streets teaching the people, they sent police to arrest them and drag them before the court. That's where today's scripture from the book of Acts Apostles begins.

"We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching . . ." And the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority. So we will continue telling about Easter, continue healing the poor, no matter what the police do." And when the officials "heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them."

Does it surprise you that only a week after Easter, Jesus' resurrection has caused such conflict? Well, if you don't know why there is big trouble after Easter, then you may not know much about how the official management of life and death, of health and wholeness, is challenged by Easter.

You see, we can't have unlearned, ordinary people healing, and proclaiming a power in the world greater than the power of government and its functionaries. Such things must be done in an orderly fashion, through accredited channels. Untrained faith healers with no certification? – why next thing you know, folks might think that a power is available through other means than our accredited system – that there is life not sanctioned by the government or distributed through the government. Then where would we be?

A friend of mine was a high administrator in a university in the late 70s. He told me one day that he had been visited by a delegation of earnest students who wore (would you believe?) coats, dress shirts and ties, short hair, looked respectable, acted politely. They were the South Africa Divestment Committee pressing the university to divest itself of South African investments in order to fight what was then the South African apartheid policy. They said, "We wrote a letter to the president, but he hasn't answered us." "Would you help us get a hearing with him? We would not take much of his time, but we think this is important."

My friend looked at them, thought how neat and polite they were and remembered his own angry-young-man-student-radical days. He told me, "I thought, when I was their age we would not have asked the president for anything; we would have occupied his office and made demands. Then he said, I'm disturbed. "Now I am the Administration. I've changed places with the students. I'm now a relatively powerful university administrator and see things differently. I can't have ignorant, unlearned students assuming responsibility for the world, outside of proper, official university channels!"

Today, in 2007, according to the most recent figures, 45 million people in America (most of them children) have no access to health care. The number of people who have slipped below the poverty line each year has been growing extraordinarily, adding to that number. But don't be upset. This is just the way the world is. One must accept, adapt, be patient, allow the authorities to work it out.

But not here in this story of post-Easter commotion. It says there is a power let loose in the world, a power that rises from the bottom up, a power for good, for life, that cannot be contained or accredited or channeled by official powers. You and I too easily settle down in the economic status quo, adapt ourselves to the politics of death. This story suggests that, when it comes to Easter, you & I suffer from an attenuated imagination. Our minds are trapped in deadly alliances with the way things are.

But now that God has raised Jesus from the dead, everything is up for grabs. Increasing numbers of the poor and the dispossessed – those who have suffered through the worst schools, the poorest health care, the worst housing – those folks have begun to stir. Down in the same part of town where they say Jesus was born, the risen Christ begins to gather his people. Now these so-called “ignorant and uneducated” women and men whom the world disempowers are sensing their own power. They are on the move and no police or prison can contain Easter's power.

So today's text from the Book of Acts wants to blow our minds, expand our horizons, teach us again to dream. It tells us a story. We may be poor and dispossessed. We may not be. But each of us, in spite of our economic circumstances, knows the way the powers of death, tend to trap us, want to call the shots, name our lives, say what can happen and what cannot happen in our lives. Death is seductive and Easter is a threat—it brings the threat of life.

And now for the big question: “Where would I find myself in this story?” Would I be with the powers at the courthouse, hoping finally to put an end to this Jesus commotion? Or would I find my voice among those out in the streets, among the poor, the dispossessed, praising God for God's work among the little and lowly?

Today's question is deeply biblical, very theological, utterly political: Where do you see yourself after Easter?

The Reverend Bob Browne