

Sermon: 4th Sunday of Easter

Text: Acts 4:1-12 (v. 2)

Theme: The resurrection of Jesus: Powerful!

Goal: To grow in confidence and in boldness to confess the resurrection of Christ.

Dear Friends,

Introduction: The message of the resurrection of Christ always challenges people. Either they accept it, like the many that heard the message of Peter and believed, so that the number of the first Christians in Jerusalem grew to about 5.000 men; or they reject it and become disturbed and scared, like the leaders of the Jews.

Peter and John were put in prison because “they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead”. - The News shows that persecution because of the message of the Living Christ happened not just in the apostolic era, but it is still a reality. I receive a monthly report from the Evangelical Fellowship of India – Persecution Watch - that shows how much the Christians suffer under some Hindu extremists. Although India has so many different kinds of religions, worshipping from rats to cows, Christians are not tolerated in some areas. On Easter Sunday, one of the biggest Christian Festival, many services were disturbed by mobs of Hindus carrying saffron flags and shouting slogans against the Christians and they started to beat up pastors and leaders. – The News showed also the Bishop of the Orthodox Church in Iraqi complaining about threats that he and his church are receiving from extremists of the Islamic State to destroy crosses and very ancient documents, like some archaeological sites were destroyed by the same group just because

of the images they carried. – These are two examples only I mention among many others.

We cannot imagine suffering persecution because of our faith in the living Christ, and we enjoy our religious freedom. But we have to remember our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world, and to strengthen ourselves in the true faith, confessing with boldness that Jesus is alive and that we believe in His resurrection and in the resurrection of the dead.

I – Powerful to witness

The former fishermen from Galilee, Peter and John, were not intimidated before the Sanhedrin. It was accomplished what Jesus had promised them: “But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you” (Matthew 10:19-20). “Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: ...It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed.”

Just to understand the situation: This text follows the text of last Sunday, when Peter and John had healed a lame man at the temple. Using the opportunity that many came together to see the healed man, Peter preached about Jesus and His resurrection. They were seized and had to face trial before the Sanhedrin. The leaders of the Sanhedrin, even the High Priest, were Sadducees, a party among the Jews who didn't believe in the resurrection and in eternal life. They had condemned Jesus to be crucified. And, on Easter morning when the guards in charge of Jesus' tomb came running and told them “everything that had happened... the chief priests gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them: You are to say, ‘His disciples came

during the night and stole Him away while we were asleep... And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews” (Mathew 28:11-15).

It was now a big challenge to Peter and John to defend the resurrection, because they had been eyewitnesses of the resurrected Christ. The Sanhedrin couldn't deny the miracle done, because the healed man was there. And when they asked “By what power or what name did you do this?” Peter proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus. “When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus!” – What a bold witness through words and behaviour! The living Christ was giving them strength through the Holy Spirit to proclaim the truth before the enemies of Christ who had condemned Him to death.

II – Powerful to Save

Peter went on with his speech, quoting the Old Testament and said: “Jesus is ‘the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone. Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.’” The image of Jesus being the cornerstone of the Church was a beloved one to Peter, as his nickname given by Jesus, Peter, means “rock, stone”.

Is the statement of Peter not too exclusive? “Salvation is found in no one else” but Jesus? We are living in an inclusive world, where every religion is good, everyone must be respected in his faith, everything is relative... and Peter's statement looks like pride. Of course everyone must be respected and has his/her rights. But we Christians cannot be quiet about our faith and our hope. The resurrection of Christ is unique among all religions, and this makes a huge difference. Christianity does not only mean to teach morality and

respect; obviously it includes these too; but above all our task is to preach Christ, the crucified for our sins who resurrected for our justification. Jesus Himself said: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). It is not a matter of church affiliation, but it is a matter of faith and hope. If we believe it, we share it. If we believe it, we live it in our daily lives loving God and loving our fellows.

Conclusion: The Sanhedrin couldn't do anything against the apostles, “because the people were praising God for what had happened” (v.21), and they were released for the time being. – In spite of the many persecutions the Christian Church suffered along the centuries, she never stopped proclaiming “the good news that Jesus is the Christ” (v.42) and that the living Christ is still among His people in His Word and in the Holy Sacraments. The history shows us that the more the church is persecuted, the bolder the Christians witness. Someone of you shared with me a nice article about the persecuted church in China. One of the leaders there said: *We don't complain about the persecution we suffer. We are afraid that, if tolerance and freedom comes, we will become like the churches in Europe: lukewarm, empty and non-active anymore.*

We have to learn from this bold witness and “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15), wrote Peter in his first letter.

May the living Christ, through His Holy Spirit, empower us to witness with boldness our faith in the resurrected Christ, our Saviour and our Hope. Amen.