

Trinity Church (ELCA)

Stephens City, Virginia

Sunday's Sermon

April 3, 2016

The Rev. Mr. Cameron P. Keyser

Easter 2-C

It's been a wild week around here...not even sure where to begin. Maybe I'll just sorta' work my way back:

It was just a little before 10 when we arrived at the courthouse that morning...there were 11 of us, counting Peter-even Thomas showed-up – and, believe me: it took nothing short of a miracle to make that happen...More on that in a minute....

None of us wanted to be there - but, we had no choice: we'd been subpoenaed by the Sanhedrin: our country's powerful religious Supreme Court. And, we *knew* what was coming: we'd seen it ourselves only a few days ago when they put our friend Jesus thru that so-called 'trial' and then sentenced him to death.

Some kind of 'trial' *that* was: late at night, in secret – not even one witness...People had been talking about it all week: its brutality and what a 'sham' it'd been: he hadn't done anything wrong – even the Roman Governor, Pilate said *that*... the guy was just another itinerant preacher who had somehow, made the Sanhedrin mad when he came over from Nazareth.

And that in itself was rather strange - because the big joke for years around here had been: "Could anything *good* come out Nazareth – you know – like Page County?...

That anyone from that poky, backward, ill-bred, dust-covered, wide place in the road" would even have been *noticed* by the Sanhedrin was, well, surprising, to say the least.

Some of the Jews had come to call him their long-promised 'Messiah' – even had a big parade for him a few days before. That's what probably *really* got the Sanhedrin's goat... Pilate had said they could call him anything they wanted – except "Guilty." But, they did.

Something had changed while we were in town for the Passover: all those gleeful cries of "*Hosannah!*" had unexplainably morphed into blood-thirsty shouts of "*Crucify him! Crucify him!*" And, in the end, that's what they *did* - they even let a known murderer go, so they could nail *Jesus* on a Roman cross. To be honest, we weren't expecting anything less – because, after Jesus died, they came looking for us.

"Subversives," they called us. "Blasphemers..." we were neither of those - just a bunch of frightened and confused and, yeah – distrustful - men feeling...I don't know: betrayed? Gullible? *Stupid?* After all, we had come to call him 'Messiah,' too. And, now he was dead. Stone cold dead in a tomb.

All we could figure was that the Sanhedrin wanted to make an example out of us to the rest of the people that: as

long as you kept your head down and your mouth shut, didn't rock the religious 'boat'...if you went quietly to Temple on Sabbath, toed the Party Line, brought your contribution to keep the temple afloat and the Sanhedrin in the lifestyle 'to which they had become accustomed,' the authorities would generally leave you alone. You could get by.

But, that wasn't us. They *knew* we'd been his followers...so, we hid - as long as we could: Andrew bolted the door, Bartholomew boarded-up the windows – we took turns being 'lookout'...it was scary – especially after the women barged-in last Sunday after visiting the tomb crying "*The body is not there!*" "Jesus is gone!" "*He has risen!*"

None of us bought that idle tale - but, Thomas had become the most cynical – he even left us for a while - Peter, too. They didn't come back until just last night...but, I digress... back to the courtroom:

As we walked in, I glanced around and saw that *everyone* was there: Clarence Darrow, Johnny Cochran, F. Lee Bailey – even Darryl "The Hammer" Isaacs: defense attorneys and ambulance-chasers from all over the world...but, like we had money to hire *any* of them...I guess they just came to watch...

Over in the corner – clustered behind a makeshift fence – there was a media pool unlike any I'd ever seen: Al Jazeera *and* Al Roker...Israeli TV and Fox, MSNBC, CBS – Chris Wallace, Tom Brokaw – even Jim Vance and Pat Collins (who brought his 'snow stick' along) from my TV station back home... ("*Hi, guys!*")

Where were they a little over a week ago - out at Golgotha – when they nailed Jesus to that roman cross. If they'd only *known*...

We had to push our way thru: the courtroom was jammed: people even in the windowsills – all of them nervously whispering about what had become the 'talk of the town:' in the marketplace, down by the well – especially over at the river where the women do their wash: everybody was talking about what some were claiming happened last Sunday.

It was almost like the women had been *right* – and, as it turns out, they *were!*

Found that out for sure that just about an hour ago: we were locked in the house – windows shuttered, door: double locked... and he showed up! *Jesus* showed up – right in the middle of the room...*again!* He'd come last week, too – but, like I said: Thomas wasn't there, and when Peter told him

about it – well, he was pretty firm in his response: ‘Unless I put my finger in the mark of the nails, and my hand in his side, I will not believe.’ And, that was *that*. Thomas always was the skeptical one in the bunch...

It’s almost like Jesus showed back up just for *him* – like that one sheep he told us about that time: going to find even though the other 99 were all OK...Wow! ya’ think he’d really have done that – just for Thomas? Pretty remarkable. And, that’s the *only* thing that got Thomas to come with us today. We didn’t know what we were in for – but anticipated the worst. Anderson Cooper from CNN had cleverly labeled our trial “*The Tale of a Resurrection.*” He’s clever that way, you know...

No sooner had the Bailiff had us sit down at the table than the other guard said, ‘Hear ye, Hear ye’ – blowing the shofar in our ears ‘This Court is now in session, the Honorable Caiaphas – high priest of the Court of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, presiding...’

And in he strode: pompous and defiant as ever – with his cohorts shuffling-in behind him looking like they always did: so cock-sure, so all-knowing. But, there was a look of – *I don’t know – fear, maybe? Uneasiness* when they looked us over - like maybe a chink in their armor had been dented a little since that last trial...

“First witness,” Caiaphas bellowed out, and Peter – who Jesus had made our leader - the ‘Rock,’ he called him – gathered his tunic a little tighter and walked to the bench.

‘Petros’ is my name,” he calmly said. “Peter. The Rock,” as some have recently come to call me...

In all the 3 years I’d known him, I *never* saw Peter as calm, cool and collected. He could be a bit of a hot-head at times, and he didn’t listen very well: always starting to talk before the other person had finished. So – well, just like the *rest* of us – he got a lot of things wrong...

But, it was obvious that he’d thought a *lot* about his testimony: measuring his words, outlining each syllable, weighing his sentences carefully. Acting in your own Defense was a bold step – a dangerous and maybe even fatal – one. I think Peter knew this was a “make-it or break-it” moment for this ‘Jesus Movement’ as some had already come to call it: it was a movement Peter hadn’t *asked* to be in, but one with which - since he’d been drafted - he had become quite enamored. *Finally*, Peter had *thought* before he spoke – put his brain in-gear before his mouth!

Caiaphas cleared his throat: “Ahehm...we gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you are determined to bring this man’s blood on us – how do you respond?”

You could hear a pin drop – it became so quiet in the room...Peter – who was a pretty big guy to start with – pulled himself up to his full height and took a deep breath:

“We must obey *God* rather than any *human* authority,” he said – a little quietly. ‘The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree...God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, so that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.’

He took a breath. “And we are *witnesses* to these things - and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.’ And, he sat down.

That *could* be where the story ends...but, it’s not... When the Sanhedrin heard this, they were enraged – I mean they were hot! They wanted to kill all of us! Lucky for us, this guy named ‘Gamaliel:’ a teacher of the law, a Pharisee in the Council who lots of people respected stood up and told the guard to take us outside for a little while. That was good – because, by now, we *needed* a break and a little fresh air.

But, we still didn’t know our fate...it wasn’t until afterwards – when we read the transcript – that we found that Gamaliel was able to talk a little sense into these guys: ‘Consider carefully what you propose to do to these men,’ it read. ‘Remember when that guy Theudas rose up claiming to be ‘somebody,’ and about 400 men joined him? And, after him the guy from Galilee got all those people to follow him? Neither, you’ll recall, had a very pretty ending for us...

You best keep away from these men and let them alone. If this is of *human* origin, it will fail; but if it is of *God*, you will not be able to overthrow them...’

Evidently, they listened. so - since they felt like they had to do *something* to us just to save face - they had us flogged, and let us go.

But, you know what? The very best thing about all of that was that *we* – a band of poor fisherman and a tax collector and a couple of others – as we left that courtroom – a little achy and sore from the whips - actually *rejoiced* to have been considered worthy of suffer dishonor for the sake of the name of Jesus. And every day: in the Temple and at home, we *never* stopped telling everyone we met about Jesus our Messiah.

And, oh yeah: before he left this morning, Thomas did, indeed, touch the scars the crucifixion had left on Jesus – and he fell to his knees saying ‘*My Lord! And my God!*’ I think he was finally convinced.

But, you know, Jesus asked him a rather interesting question, too: “Thomas,” he said, ‘have you believed because you have *seen* me?’ I’m glad we could work that out. But, you know, even more ‘blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.’

And, like Paul Harvey used to say: ‘*Now you know... the rest...of the story.*’ To this very day.

Thanks be to God. Amen