

Text: Colossians 4:2-18
Theme: Power to Preach
Preacher: Rolfe Westendorf, retired
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It's the Sunday after Easter. The excited, yet timid, disciples are again behind locked doors, for fear of the Jews. They have seen the risen Christ. Yet they have not been eager to share the good news, news so good that it stretches their capacity to believe it. They had seen the risen Christ. Yet some doubted what they had seen with their own eyes.

They had not been eager to share the good news, except with Thomas, who had been absent the week before. He did not believe it, not only because it was too good to be true, but also because he had not seen it.

But then Jesus appeared again. He defied Thomas's unbelief. "Put your finger here. See my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

Thomas's unbelief could resist no longer. Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" My supreme and all-sufficient God!

Now all twelve had seen him. Did they go into the temple courts and shout out the truth of Jesus' resurrection? No. They went fishing. They had seen the greatest miracle in the history of the world, and so they went fishing.

Even as Jesus was preparing to return to his throne in heaven, they asked, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" Now we know you are God. Now we know you can make us rulers in your kingdom here. You have already done so much for us. Now show the world how great you are by establishing Israel as the greatest nation on earth.

Of course, Jesus had no such intentions. A kingdom would be established, but not an earthly kingdom. Rather a spiritual kingdom, a holy nation, a royal priesthood, a people belonging to God, a kingdom consisting of all who have come to faith in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, God's only-begotten Son. Only Jesus was not going to build that kingdom by himself. They were going to do it.

"It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

I can imagine what the disciples were thinking. "Lord, you know us. You know how weak we are. We are not God. You are the supreme and all-sufficient Creator of the

universe. Don't expect us to do it. You have to build your kingdom on earth."

They had no idea what it meant to have the Holy Spirit come upon them. They could not imagine what they could do with that invigorating power. Yes, Jesus was true God. He would build his kingdom, his church on earth. But he would do it through them.

And that's just what happened. It became obvious on Pentecost when 3000 were converted by Peter's powerful sermon. That congregation consisted of Jews. But Saul, the persecutor, became Paul, the apostle, who went out into the Gentile world where he was beaten, imprisoned and finally sentenced to death. But through his preaching, the all-powerful Jesus was building his kingdom here on earth. Groups of believers gathered together, not only in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria, but also in Galatia, in Corinth, in Ephesus, Philippi and Thessalonica, and also in a place called Colossi.

During the past weeks we have been sharing with you words that St. Paul wrote to the congregation in Colossi, words that affirm the supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus Christ. Today we see how this all-powerful Jesus uses Word and Sacrament to build his kingdom on earth, the Holy Christian Church.

Paul was a prisoner in Rome. He was not isolated in a dungeon cell. He had some freedom and mobility. But he was chained to a Roman soldier. And how much ministry can you do in that situation?

Paul wondered about that too. He asked his brothers and sisters in Colossi to pray for him. "Pray that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should."

And Paul had opportunities to proclaim it. We don't know the names of the Roman soldiers who were guarding Paul, but we do know that he explained to them the mystery of Christ. We also know how he proclaimed that mystery through the letters that he was able to write and send, letters that still enrich our faith today.

But he was not satisfied to do it all by himself. He instructed the Colossians to carry forward the banner of Christ. "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders. Make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone."

Since he could not visit Colossi himself, he sent Tychicus and Onesimus to encourage the congregation there and to let them know how Paul was doing in his imprisonment. He also sent them greetings from another prisoner, Aristarchus, and from Mark and Justus and Epaphras and Luke and Demas. He wanted them to know that these brothers in the faith cared for them and were praying for them. He told them to expect a visit from Barnabas, another apostle. He was especially concerned about one of the Colossians named Archippus, that he would complete the work that the Lord had given him to do.

Finally he sent his greetings to other congregations, one in Laodicea and another that was meeting in the house of a lady named Nympha.

The church had come a long way from that timid group of disciples hiding behind closed doors on Easter Day. Only a few of the people mentioned by Paul were Jews. The others had not known of the God of Moses and the promises he had made to the children of Israel. They had been heathen, worshiping man-made gods who could neither help nor save. But the all-powerful Christ who had created heaven and earth, who had conquered sin and death, now displayed his power in the activity of his people who were now showing forth the praises of him who had called them out of darkness into his marvelous light.

And, of course, the march of the Gospel did not stop there. Ambassadors for Jesus Christ carried the Gospel to Africa and Asia and Europe during the lifetime of the apostles, traveling on sailing ships or horses or on foot, communicating by word of mouth or letters, each one written or copied by hand. This was no high-powered advertising campaign using the latest technology to communicate an attractive message. This was the supreme and sufficient Creator of the universe, Savior of the world, sending the Holy Spirit to energize frail and doubting sinners to proclaim the message that offers hope and life and peace to everyone.

The risen and victorious Christ inspired his messengers to suffer persecution, and when human weakness had corrupted the organized church, he raised up a German monk who defied pope and emperor to repeat Paul's message that we are saved by grace, through faith, and that not of yourselves. It is a gift of God, lest anyone should boast.

Historians view the Reformation as a struggle between the powerful and the oppressed. But we see the Savior whom Luther served as the power that restored the Gospel of salvation by grace through faith alone.

And it is that same supreme and sufficient Christ who has brought us into the presence of his holy Word and Sacrament and enabled us to receive by faith the blessings that have been promised to us there.

There is, of course, a human history that has brought to us the good news of Christ's victory over sin and death. Human agencies, impaired by human weaknesses, have made it possible for us to learn of the Son of God who died to pay our debt to God. Parents and pastors and teachers, in some cases missionaries from a foreign land, have taught us how God loved the World and gave his Son, that we might not perish in our sins but have eternal life in heaven.

To this day we complain about the mistakes and failures of the agencies which are responsible for sharing the good news. We see our Synod recalling missionaries. We see declining numbers in our schools and congregations. We see offerings struggling to keep pace with rising standards of living. Sincere Christians remaining silent when they want

to share their faith. And we pray for the end to come, since the Gospel isn't going anyplace anyhow. And we forget that this is Jesus' work, not ours.

The same Spirit that energized Paul and Tychicus and Onesimus is still at work today. We need to back away from the trees so that we can see the forest, a multitude of souls who are glad and grateful that Jesus died and rose for them. Christians remaining in faith in spite of vigorous persecution in some places and numbing materialism in others. How can simple, child-like faith survive in spite of all the intellectual arguments arrayed against it? Why is there any faith at all when failings within and attacks from without are so perfectly suited to destroy it?

The answer is that Jesus is not dead. He died and rose again to prove that our salvation is secure, and ascended to God's right hand to care for his church, his holy bride, until he comes again. Apart from that there would be no message from the master this morning, because that message would never have gotten to Colossi in the first place. And our supreme and all-sufficient Master will provide for his church, in spite of our faults and failings.

Do you think that the Christians who first received Paul's letter were any stronger than we are today? Maybe. Probably not. Certainly less organized and informed. Why else would Paul send Tychicus and Onesimus to encourage them? Perhaps we are among those who have lost our first love, but we have not lost the supreme and all-sufficient Christ. Then let's take to heart the encouragement that Paul sent to Colossi.

"Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders. Make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone."

Remind yourself constantly of the inheritance Jesus has earned for you. Find personal peace in the forgiveness that he provided through his perfect life and innocent death. And display that faith in your words and attitude. Let others see how Christians love and forgive each other. Let your conversation be seasoned with salt, so that it will taste good to those who hear you. And don't worry about the results. Forty-seven years of ministry have taught me that the results will be there, not necessarily the ones you worked for, but the results that Jesus had in mind. He who created the heavens and the earth and everything in them has not grown weak and tired. Just let others see Christ in you, and let him take care of the rest.

Lord Jesus, Creator and Savior,

We thank you for all the messengers that have brought the Gospel to us, from the time of the apostles to now. We thank you for sending your Spirit into our hearts so that we can believe that message. Now grant us skill and courage to share this message with those around us, and with the generations that come after us. And grant us the joy of seeing your blessing upon our humble efforts. In your name we ask it Amen