

Second Sunday of Easter – April 8, 2018

Acts 26:19-29

19 “So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. 20 First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds. 21 That is why the Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me. 22 But I have had God’s help to this very day, and so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen— 23 that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles.” 24 At this point Festus interrupted Paul’s defense. “You are out of your mind, Paul!” he shouted. “Your great learning is driving you insane.” 25 “I am not insane, most excellent Festus,” Paul replied. “What I am saying is true and reasonable. 26 The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. 27 King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.” 28 Then Agrippa said to Paul, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?” 29 Paul replied, “Short time or long—I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.”

So what was your reaction to what you heard at church last Sunday? If you worshipped here for Easter or were visiting another church, when you heard the news that the tomb was empty, I doubt there was much surprise or shock or skepticism. That was not the first time you had heard that Jesus rose from the dead. But imagine if it had been your first time and how you might have reacted. We saw in our gospel lesson how the disciples reacted to Jesus appearing among them—there was some fear and uncertainty and doubt that turned to joy. Today in our sermon text we see the reactions of two men who were hearing this news, possibly for the first time. As we look at the reactions of Governor Festus and King Agrippa, we will evaluate our own reactions to the Easter news and see that **Easter Brings Us Peace**.

Before we get to Festus and Agrippa specifically, let’s set the stage for where we are at in the life of Paul. At the end of his third missionary journey, Paul had returned to Jerusalem. There he was falsely accused of bringing Greeks into the temple and was arrested. After a plot on his life, he was transferred up to Caesarea where he could stand trial before Governor Felix. After his trial, Felix continued to hold him to talk to him, hoping for a bribe. After two years Felix was to be replaced and so he left Paul in prison as a favor to the Jews. After a trial before the new governor, Festus, things were not seemingly going to change and so Paul appealed to Rome. Festus invited King Agrippa to hear what Paul had to say so that Festus could have something to write to Rome to describe Paul’s case.

History does not tell us much about Porcius Festus. He ruled as governor for three years. During his time in office, relations between the Jews and Rome were deteriorating, which would help contribute to open war with Rome within a few years of Festus leaving his position. Obviously we cannot know what personal beliefs Festus held, but from what he says here in these verses, it would seem likely to describe him as an atheist, that is someone who denied the existence of God, or least the Jewish religion and Christianity in particular. In verse 19, Paul had mentioned a vision from heaven. In the previous verses, Paul had recounted his experience on the road to Damascus when Jesus had appeared to him and called him to be an apostle. When Paul mentioned that Jesus had suffered and was the first to rise from the dead, Festus interrupted:

“You are out of your mind, Paul! Your great learning is driving you insane” (v. 24). To Festus, what Paul was saying seemed impossible. Talk of visions from heaven and someone rising from the dead were ridiculous and anyone who believed such things must be insane.

Paul’s response to him was simple: “I am not insane, most excellent Festus. What I am saying is true and reasonable” (v. 25). Paul knew he was not insane. He knew his statement about Christ’s resurrection was true because he had seen Jesus for himself on the road to Damascus. And so he knew it was reasonable, that he was of sound mind, because he was simply proclaiming what he had been told. He could be at peace with the message of Easter because the Lord had blessed him with the faith to believe it.

Do you know anyone who might have a Festus reaction when it comes to the message of Easter? Maybe it’s a family member who loves you but just won’t listen to what you have to say. Maybe it’s a coworker or classmate who makes fun of you. Maybe it’s a teacher or professor who belittles such a belief because they know better. They don’t have to be an avowed atheist to have that reaction. All unbelief will be resistant to the gospel message. Human reason will discount the miraculous without any visible proof. And it’s not just others around us—we each have a little Festus reaction inside of us with our sinful nature. It raises doubts at the back of our mind, did these things really happen? It questions the sanity of what we believe.

But God has also gifted us with a new self to fight against the temptations of our old sinful self. He has given us the faith to know that what we believe is true and reasonable. We have not seen the resurrected Jesus with our own eyes but we have the accounts of men like John and Paul recorded for us in the Bible that we believe is true. As Jesus said to Thomas, we are blessed to have believed even though we have not seen (Jn 20:29). We are blessed because the Easter message brings us peace. We know that we live in a sinful world that needs a Savior. We know that Savior is Jesus and that he died to pay for our sins and rose from the dead so that someday we too will rise from the dead. We are at peace knowing that our eternal future is all taken care of. Those who won’t listen or mock us or think they know better are not at peace because whether they admit to it or not, deep down they don’t have the same certainty that we do. And so like Paul we will continue to proclaim the message of Easter to them, in the hope that the Holy Spirit will give them the same faith that we have to believe that this is true and reasonable so that they too have peace when it comes to their eternal future.

The other reaction we have here is that of King Agrippa. We know about a bit more about him from history. He was the last in the line of the Herods. His great-grandfather, Herod the Great, we know from Jesus’ birth and the wise men and his execution of the baby boys around Bethlehem. His great uncle, Herod Antipas, we know from his dealings with John the Baptist and audience with Jesus during Holy Week. His father Herod Agrippa I, we know from his execution of James and imprisonment of Peter. This man was Herod Agrippa II. He grew up in Rome and so had an affinity for all things Roman that show itself throughout his reign. His father had briefly held the title of King of Judea between different Roman governors, but Agrippa was only king over territory to the north and east of Galilee. He had some authority over what happened in Jerusalem when it came to the temple and high priests, but the Roman governors, like Festus, were the ones in charge. Later when the Jewish revolt happened they would depose him as king and he would take the side of the Romans in putting down the rebellion and destroying Jerusalem.

Again we cannot know for sure the personal beliefs of Agrippa, but it would seem likely to label him more as an agnostic, someone who doesn’t deny God out of hand, but isn’t willing to commit to him entirely. Paul addressed this in verses 26 & 27: “The king is familiar with

these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.” He seemed to be familiar with the Old Testament and so the ideas of visions and the resurrection would not be foreign to him. But he was not willing to commit: “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?” Such a belief would not help his position as king. It would not play well to the Jewish leaders or to the Roman leaders as he tried to find a balance between both sides. Also there was the potential issue of his personal life. The book of Acts records that Bernice accompanied him, history tells us she was his sister. History also records the gossip that their relationship was not an appropriate one and so that may also have compromised Agrippa’s willingness to go along with what God had to say.

Paul’s response again was simple: “Short time or long—I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains” (v. 29). Paul’s current position as a prisoner was the last thing that Agrippa would have wanted. But Paul was at peace with where he was at. He did not wish his chains on anyone, he simply wished that everyone there would have the peace that came from that Easter message.

We probably know people too that would have an Agrippa-type reaction to the good news about Jesus. They’re open to God and religion, but not if it becomes inconvenient. Not if it’s going to affect their position in life, their standard of living, their lifestyle, or even the sinful habits they prefer to enjoy. And we too have that same Agrippa reaction in our own sinful nature. We feel the temptations to put other things first ahead of God and are not willing to face possible sacrifice for our faith.

But the message of Easter brings us peace here as well. When we have to sacrifice something in our lives or even face the extreme of something like Paul’s chains, we have the peace of knowing that whatever our station in this life, we have that eternal life in heaven waiting for us. When we are faced with the choice of following God’s will or our own sinful temptations, our new self will choose to follow God out of thanks for the peace that God has given us, knowing full well that the strength to do so only comes our Savior who died to pay for our sins.

Unless last week was your first time hearing the message of Easter, there was no surprise or shock or skepticism. Of course for many of us we have it heard it so many times that the danger comes in having no reaction at all. So let’s not forget the importance of what that message means. We are at peace because Jesus rose from the dead, guaranteeing our own eternal life. We are at peace because we believe this to be true and so we have full confidence. We are at peace because no matter what conflicts and temptations we face in this life, we know that such sacrifice will all be worth it in the end. As we live and work among the Festus and Agrippa types of this world, we pray that whether in a short time or long that they become what we are and know from their own experience the peace that Easter brings. Amen.