

WHO IS THE GREATEST  
SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

ACTS 5:12-32  
APR 3, 2016

<sup>12</sup> Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. <sup>13</sup> None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. <sup>14</sup> And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, <sup>15</sup> so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. <sup>16</sup> The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed.

<sup>17</sup> But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy <sup>18</sup> they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. <sup>19</sup> But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, <sup>20</sup> "Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life." <sup>21</sup> And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach.

Now when the high priest came, and those who were with him, they called together the council and all the senate of Israel and sent to the prison to have them brought. <sup>22</sup> But when the officers came, they did not find them in the prison, so they returned and reported, <sup>23</sup> "We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them we found no one inside." <sup>24</sup> Now when the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed about them, wondering what this would come to. <sup>25</sup> And someone came and told them, "Look! The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people." <sup>26</sup> Then the captain with the officers went and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people.

<sup>27</sup> And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, <sup>28</sup> saying, "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us." <sup>29</sup> But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men. <sup>30</sup> The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. <sup>31</sup> God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. <sup>32</sup> And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."

It is hard to escape political advertisements these days.

Each candidate is trying to show they are the greatest.

One way to do this is by making the other look bad.

because evaluation depends so much on comparison.

What makes you or me good? is an inescapable question.

We too constantly evaluate ourselves, often by comparison.

fortunately we can always find one who seems worse.

Text reminds us there is one who is great without compare,  
which is God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

It is his judgment of us that really counts  
and he does not do it by comparing us to others  
but he himself makes us good by taking away our sins.

PEOPLE FILL WITH JEALOUSY OVER GREATNESS  
OUR GREAT LORD IS IN FULL CONTROL  
WE CAN SHARE A GREAT WORD GIVING FULL LIFE

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If there was a mirror on wall of temple in Jerusalem,  
able to declare who was greatest religious leader of all  
It might have said the greatest individual was High Priest.  
and the greatest group was the Sadducees,  
the religious faction he came from  
One thing that helped keep them in power was  
accommodation with political & cultural status quo.  
They believed in value of rituals like sacrifices & tradition  
as well as secular values of prosperity and pleasure.  
But didn't believe in silly spiritual superstitions  
like angels or resurrection after death.

But lately their mirror said someone else was greater: Jesus,  
which was impossible since they had killed him,  
and his group of supporters, the apostles,  
who's supposed miracles people didn't stop talking about.  
They were filled with jealousy. What could be done?  
One thing was to humiliate them by throwing in public prison.  
That would give people something else to talk about.  
Their crime wasn't so much healing without a license -  
they believe in health & happiness as much as next guy-  
but for drawing attention to Jesus, whom they had had killed,  
which made them look bad.

People are same today. Why do they pick on & bully others?  
It is to make selves seem big because they are insecure.  
We constantly evaluate selves not by reflection in magic mirror  
but by our reflection in those around us.  
Those who are good are a threat because  
we may look guilty or like a failure in comparison.  
Even those who are weak are a threat because  
we may look like we have similar weaknesses.  
So bullies have to prove to themselves they are better.  
We too find ourselves pressured, even if not with violence,  
to conform to the common culture, go with the flow,  
and follow the lead of those who are idolized.

But Jesus interferes with all this  
& makes people uncomfortable, maybe even us.  
Jesus' disciples certainly are impressive.  
They do miracles by touching people with just shadow.  
Why can't your pastor do things like that?  
Even those who don't dare join them think they are great.  
Sadducees, who deny resurrection are frustrated  
by continued claims & signs of Jesus' resurrection  
Even when they arrest them, they themselves end up the fools  
because it just gives them opportunity for another miracle,  
disappearing from locked, guarded cells.  
And don't tell them angel did it. They don't believe in angels.  
So now when they have to arrest them again, while surrounded  
by admiring crowd in thier own temple,  
it not only makes it obvious they failed the first time  
but they have to do it very politely because,  
while not long ago they had people ready to stone Jesus,  
now they fear crowds are ready to stone them.

And when they get them inside & do best to intimidate them,  
this crude fisherman, Peter, who not long ago  
would admit to servant girl he even knew Jesus,  
starts lecturing the High Priest to his face about him.  
They won't even say Jesus' name, just "this man"  
but Peter is no longer afraid to say it out loud.  
It is becoming undeniably obvious who is the greatest.

#### OUR GREAT LORD IS IN FULL CONTROL

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God is so totally in control, even when it looks like he is losing  
he is winning.

Nothing bad can even happen unless he allows it  
in order to use it for his own purposes.

Not long before this, same Sanhedrin was totally frustrated  
by Jesus' raising Lazarus from the dead,

which is what made them decide to finally kill Jesus.

Jesus had deliberately stayed away when Lazarus was sick,  
telling disciples it would not end in Lazarus' death

but in revealing Jesus' glory.

Same thing happened when Jesus himself died.

He predicted it and it happened according to his own will  
and by his own authority, as he pointed out to Pilate,  
and resulted in his victory over death and the devil  
and accomplished his plan to save the whole world.  
so that he is exalted as leader and savior.

Now same ones who can't keep Lazarus or Jesus in grave  
are powerless to keep the apostles' in jail

and, in fact, this just gives them more opportunities  
to talk about how great Jesus is.

which is also just what Jesus predicted beforehand,  
that they would be seized and brought before rulers  
and this would give opportunity to testify about Jesus  
and the Holy Spirit would empower them to speak boldly.

All this leaves Jesus' opponents puzzled and powerless.  
But what can't be shut up or stopped  
is God's powerful word & preaching of the gospel  
unless God for his own ultimate good purposes  
temporarily allows it as when Jesus died  
only for the purpose of defeating death.  
God's word is so powerful and unstoppable,  
of course they must obey it rather than men.  
The sick are not always healed.  
Believers are not always kept from dying  
or released from jail.  
But the signs and wonders are not just these things  
but the transformation of the heart to fearless faith.  
So, is this still true today? Of course it is.  
Powerful forces still try to stop those who want to obey God:  
political or religious powers or cultural forces  
or whatever seems to be latest and greatest,  
and it continues to appear they are being successful,  
but Jesus powerful word is still bringing healing to helpless  
and truth to deniers and those in darkness,  
and forgiveness to the guilty, and life to the dead  
because Jesus' word cannot be stopped by walls or doors  
or official declarations or the failures of his followers  
or Satan's shaming or even death.  
No matter who is filled with jealousy  
Jerusalem is still being filled with the teaching  
of the full message of this life.

#### WE CAN SHARE A GREAT WORD GIVING FULL LIFE

<sup>19</sup> But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, <sup>20</sup> "Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life." <sup>21</sup> And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach.

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Here, those locked behind doors are freed by God's angel  
who tells them to go speak God's word

In gospel reading Disciples are locked behind doors  
they locked themselves because of their fear  
but they are set free by the peace and power  
of the Holy Spirit Jesus them  
as he tells them to go speak his word.

Because he gives keys that set everyone in world free  
unlocking the gates of heaven by unlocking chains of our sin  
with God's word that gives repentance and forgiveness.

Because Jesus is victorious his disciples are not intimidated  
but neither are they vindictive or vengeful.

The message the apostles set free to preach  
is the same message they preach to their captors:  
repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

This, the greatest of gifts, is for the greatest of sinners.

Peter says repentance it is a gift worked by God himself  
and it is a gift that is a blessing to receive.

When we are pegged and labeled by people,  
it is hard to change, even if we want to,

We can feel trapped in dead end ways.

But God gives even the worst opportunities to change  
by helping us see our mistakes

and showing us we are indeed guilty of this man's blood.

But he brings us to this point in order to show us way out.

We can't change ourselves or fix the problems  
but he changes us by taking away our sins.

which sets us free from Satan's prison of shame.

He goes on to give us gift of faith to receive gift of forgiveness  
and then Spirit does one more thing: all the words of this life  
include the commission to share it with others

We get to tell others they are forgiven in Jesus' name.

we are not stuck in our sins and are not stuck in  
bitterness or holding grudges either.

Easter is about the blessed news of new life for Jesus  
which he shares with us for us to share with others.

We don't have to hold on to the failures of others  
in order to prop up our pride in our own goodness.

We are not made great by comparison with others  
but by the grace of Jesus which declares us

to be totally righteous by being totally forgiven.

This is why we can fearlessly go out and obey God  
and proclaim Jesus without fear.

even though...

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and do their best to stifle others

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and uses even prisons for his purpose

and opposition as opportunities for preaching so that

WE CAN SHARE A GREAT WORD GIVING FULL LIFE

through the gifts of repentance and forgiveness

which set people from sin and death forever