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Salvation in No One Else (Acts 4: 5-14)

Easter 4

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Since Easter, we've been exploring the theme of what it means to be the community of Christ, the community called into being by the resurrection of Jesus and commissioned to live differently in the world because of it.

Two weeks ago, we focused on what it was about the events of Easter that had as its immediate consequence the formation of a new community, a community characterized by a sense of boldness, freedom, generosity and possibility. It came about, I suggested, because what had become apparent, in the wake of Jesus' resurrection, is the extent to which human culture is in thrall to death and to the forces that deal death. Even now, so much of how we live and experience other people is characterized by threat, by the fear of being shamed or found to be inadequate, rejected, disappointed, killed off. Power belongs, it seems, to those who have power over – whether that's the totalitarian tyrant, the unreasonable boss, the corrupt banker, the manipulative spouse or parent, the bitchy kids at school, the 'like' algorithm on Facebook and Instagram.

Even when our sense of threatened-ness is not that overt, even when we're not feeling particularly oppressed, just think about how much of our energy is spent trying to impress or 'make it', hoping not to get in trouble, being frightened of being hurt or humiliated. What if I get this wrong, what if I fail, what if I offend so and so, what if they don't like me? The effect of this culture of death is to alienate us from ourselves and isolate us from each other, as we seek to keep our heads down, align ourselves with the 'right' people, and avoid the place of shame by being really good or pretending really well or attacking someone else.

What Jesus has done is to break open this trap, this death-dealing culture, from the inside. He's entered into our experience and been given over to a system, a group of powerful people who maintain their power by violent means. And he is killed. But in the resurrection, he returns to his disciples. All of them are to varying degrees stuck, still run by death and the fear of it; but he reveals they no longer have to be. Death and shame are not the ultimate reality. There is life that is un-killable, and this life is the love of God. So their experience of Jesus risen and come back to them in friendship releases the disciples' capacity to see themselves and each other as they have been – frightened, threatened and defended, and at the same time as God longs for them to be – accepted, unafraid, free to be. The community of believers is simply the community of those who share this knowledge, this experience, and who long for others to be liberated for love and shared life by this same knowledge, this same experience.

Which brings us to our passage tonight. Peter and John have been imprisoned for proclaiming Jesus' resurrection to the people and because they're gaining a following, after having healed a man lame from birth (Acts 3: 2). They've been brought before the rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem. They're asked, 'by what power or by what name did you do this?' In other words, what is your authority? Who's given you licence to act this way? Then Peter tells them that their authority, their power is from 'the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth whom you crucified'.

At this moment, Peter himself is clearly experiencing being radically unthreatened. He is 'filled with the Holy Spirit', alive with the life of God, and so he's free of the power of this court, when only days or weeks before he'd been cowering and shamed in the high priest's courtyard. It must have been deeply confusing for the authorities – here's someone over whom they ought to have had absolute power, acting as though he doesn't give a damn – and what's more, claiming that the source of his power and freedom is someone they've already publicly disgraced and gotten rid of. In this context, Peter's claim that there is 'salvation in no one else', that

there is 'no other name under heaven ... by which we must be saved', must have seemed completely bizarre – an impossible subversion of the way of the world. No doubt it would have been dismissed out of hand were it not for the strange authority of their 'boldness' and the indisputable fact of the 'man who had been cured standing beside them'.

As I've thought about this vivid little scene, three things strike me as significant for us. First, I want to comment on what may seem the discomfiting exclusivity of Peter's claim that – 'there is salvation in no one else'. We've seen that when these words were first spoken, they were profoundly counter-intuitive - a radical challenge to the established structures of power, an invitation to imagine a wholly new basis for common life. Twenty-one centuries later, we and our contemporaries struggle to hear them that way. That's because, since early in the 4th century, Christianity in the West has been a religion of empire. And in this context, the claim that there is 'salvation in no one else' has mostly been deployed ideologically, coercively. As if you have to be on the inside of the church, or say certain words, or conform to certain norms, for God to accept you, forgive you, keep you from hell. But can you hear how that's a travesty of their meaning? The name of Jesus is the name of the one who suffered at the hands of just such ideological religion, just such a coercive system, and who reveals that God is nothing to do with them, nothing to do with the death they threaten. His salvation is not about joining the winning team. It's about the lived experience of a love that cannot be denied you by any system or religion or worldly power, any failure or rejection or judgement.

This suggests, and this is my second thought, that the point of Christian community is to be a place where we can come to this 'lived knowledge', this experience of salvation by love. This happens, I think, in various ways. It happens as we tell the story, re-present it to ourselves and others and so encourage each other to learn how to trust it as a way of life; it happens as we're changed by our exposure to this love through our prayer and listening, and so contribute to each other's and the world's healing; it happens as together we create a space where it's safe to have

failed, or to be undone, or to face up to our less helpful patterns or ways of being, and to embark on the journey of transformation and reconciliation.

And this brings us, third, to the question of what a community like ours, a community whose life is sourced in resurrection faith and the experience of deepening transformation, can be and can enable in the midst of the world. There are some obvious things I could say here – things about the work of justice, solidarity and care. These matter deeply and later in the year, I'd like to explore some of these themes more directly. But for now, I want to name the significance our simple existence, the fact of there being a corporate, incarnate witness to a reality that counters and subverts the dominance of death-dealing power and expedience.

That's how the church is called to be. Often, we know, it's betrayed its calling – it's ended up being not much different to the powers of this world. Little wonder that many who are drawn to the spiritual life want to dis-identify with organized religion. But what a privatized 'spirituality' cannot do is to make visible and to practice embodying an alternative world – an actual community of persons sourced in responsiveness to God and in the process of discovering what gifts we may release and enable in one another. This is what our life together at Benedictus is about. It seems to me that we offer something together that we cannot offer simply as individuals, even if we're individuals on a journey of transformation and bringing the fruits of that journey into the rest of our lives – and part of what we offer is a space, a context where we and others can experience what salvation looks and feels like when it shapes our common life, and so imagine the whole of life differently.