

“True Grit”  
Acts 5:27-32  
April 11, 2010

Acts is quickly becoming my favorite book in the Bible. There’s some good stuff in there – the disciples, for one thing. Most of the year, they are the butt of jokes. In the gospels, they come across as followers who don’t really GET Jesus. They are obsessed with who will sit on his right and his left “*when you come in all your glory, Lord.*” And, even we know better than that. They try to ban the little children from Jesus, and come on, didn’t they know about the least of these? Even we know that. They misunderstand his parables and have to ask for remedial instruction, and we know sooo much better than that.

But, to top off all their shenanigans, Jesus is murdered, and none of his disciples have the grit to stay with him, and even worse, they betray him into the hands of his murderers and they deny even knowing him. What a mess. God has to step in because quite obviously, the world is missing his message of love. God steps in and does this really cool thing called resurrection. And, the disciples get a second chance. They see Jesus again, they recommit to their love for him, and in Acts, it’s like they FINALLY get their footing. They change from the ugly duckling to the beautiful swan and they get it now. They understand the gospel. They have the power of the Spirit. They can heal. They can preach. They can do all the things that brought them such grief when they literally walked in the shadow of Jesus. By the time we get to chapter 5 of Acts, those disciples have morphed into a force to be reckoned with. They show us the potential we have when we get things right with God and with each other.

They also show us the true grit that you need if you take the resurrection seriously. Grit is a John Wayne/Rooster Cogburn kind of thing - not something we Christians think a whole lot about. It’s not included in any list of Christian values. It’s not a fruit of the spirit and it’s not part of the Ten Commandments, yet when you read Acts, you start to understand that discipleship is a gritty business – not for the faint of heart.

Some days that makes me question why anybody would want to be a disciple particularly back in the old Bible days. For starters, the early Christian community had considerable expectations – some would even say “unrealistic” expectations. You want some old time religion? Read Acts 4:32 – 5:11. See the expectations with regard to possessions. Hear how accountable those believers were to God and to each other! And, if that does not send you running away as fast as you can, the early Christian community also had big mouth Peter and the other disciples who always seemed to be telling someone off or setting someone straight. Usually, that was a someone with the power to have them killed. By chapter 5, they are on their second arrest, and frankly, the old guard was jealous of them, according to verse 17.

First impressions of the story are “You tell ‘em, Peter!” But, a little more thought, and I question the approach the disciples took early on. Wouldn’t you want to make nice with the people in power? Don’t you get more flies with honey? Wouldn’t you want to placate them just a little until you got settled? Compromise your message just until you had their trust? Not if you are Peter. Peter kept forging ahead not caring whose toes he stepped on or whose peace he disrupted, and while that all sounds very exciting and dedicated, it seems harsh for a Christian response. If I have to be aggressive or if I have to harden my heart just to survive ministry, I don’t want any part of it. That’s not what I signed up for.

How about you? I signed up for Jesus being the answer to all my problems. I mean, if resurrection from the dead can happen, my gripes and issues ought to be a piece of cake for

Jesus, right? I signed up for giving my life to Christ and then having a warm relationship with God and everybody else who calls themselves a believer. I signed up for baptismal waters that would strengthen me as a new person ready to follow God right on. I signed up for the peace that passeth all understanding. I am learning slowly that to be a disciple, to be a person of peace means far more than warm relationships and the absence of conflict. Peace can be an unhealthy thing if it comes out of cowardice or out of a desperate neediness for harmony. Me, I want the lion to lie down with the lamb 24/7, and for them to agree on what kind of pizza they'll have delivered. I want to live in a world where people say gushing, glowing, glorious things about one another's haircuts and new ties, whether or not it's entirely true. I want people to be aware of each other's differing views on the current nations at war and political decisions and plans, but not challenge each other at parties or places of worship or work – at least not while I'm in the room. My mother is from South Alabama, and like any good southerner, we like our doughnuts and our conversation frosted with sugar.

It is a good thing that Peter and the disciples had matured beyond that point when Jesus ascended into heaven because He did not leave a sugary glaze in his wake. Some would say he left a bitter taste to the point that they did not like his disciples. Remember, the disciples were filled with the Spirit, and people accused them of being drunk. When they were teaching the good news of resurrection, Acts 4 tells us that the temple leadership was “annoyed” – that’s the word– “annoyed,” and had them arrested - told them not to preach about Jesus anymore. “We don’t want to hear it. That’s not the direction this temple wants to go.” A more fearful group of preachers –some might say a smarter group of preachers - may have thought, “Ok, they are not ready to hear what I have to say. Let me tone it down.” But, not Peter and his cohorts. You know what they did? It took grit. They prayed... for MORE boldness and kept at it. We must obey God rather than any human authority.

That brings up a couple of issues for us. You can imagine how well Peter’s response went over. If we read the rest of the chapter, we read that the authorities “were enraged and wanted to kill them.” So, in two chapters, Peter’s actions have made the authorities jealous, annoyed, and enraged. While I really want to spend the rest of the sermon talking about how it’s ok to annoy and enrage people – because it is sometimes, I stop. Peter was talking to good religious people, like us. He was talking to the preachers and the teachers and the elders and the deacons and the committee chairs and the board members. He was talking to the keepers of the faith. He was talking to everybody that dared to put a claim on God.

His faith and his audacity made all the good religious people jealous. Their own apathy kept them from tapping into the power that now seemed to flow so freely from Peter, and it made them mad. Peter annoyed all the good religious people who could pray the right words but were complacent in their responsibilities to actually live the good news. Peter enraged all the good religious people who puffed themselves up with their public mission and ministry but who had no real interest in building the kingdom of heaven on earth.

The story does not sound quite so comfortable when we realize that the voice of faith to good religious people is not always one of reassurance – it can be one that slaps us in the face. Our task is to listen to how faith challenges our natural instincts – our task is to be corrected every day by the authority of God. What would God correct in a world with all of our technological advances and all of our wealth, but a world where people still go to bed hungry? What would God correct in a world that doesn’t even blink at violence anymore and, in fact, accepts it as entertainment at the movie theatres? What would God correct in a world that prides itself on dividing people and keeping those divisions at all costs – liberal, conservative, male,

female, black, white? What would God correct about the way we do church here in Wilson's Mills, what our priorities are, how we manage our words, how accountable we are for doing our part to make "Thy kingdom come on earth" a reality? Might God challenge us in way that makes us jealous or annoyed or enraged? Not everybody heard the resurrection as good news – which is a reminder that whenever we start to feel jealous or annoyed or enraged, it is a good idea to stop. Close our mouths and pray. God, what is happening in me? God, what do I need to change? God, where is the good news in this situation? Nobody likes to be challenged. None of us thrills at the idea of someone highlighting sins that we have. Nobody relishes the task of looking within, of admitting that we need to look within, and then letting God do his thing. It takes true grit. It takes a real man, a real woman.

Peter knew that. He'd been there, done that. He had denied Jesus Christ. Don't you think it took some grit to get past that? Don't you think he had to ask himself some hard questions? Of course, he did. And, he came out on the other side, so when he spoke up, he had integrity. He knew the forgiveness and the life that was available to everybody and he would not settle for anything less.

In the book, *Leaving Church*, Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor writes about her decision not leave the Christian faith but to leave the role of pastor. Reading her book, I had the feeling that she was burned out for reasons among which was the difficulty of sharing her exuberant faith with people who wanted a tamer version of it.

In one of her sermons Taylor writes this about the early Christians: Easter had changed everything for them. They were all different. Things they had been afraid of did not frighten them anymore. They had found new strength in themselves, new wisdom they never knew they had. They had true grit. This resurrected Jesus that Peter just had to talk about is offering everybody a ticket out of their jealousy, their annoyance, their rage. You want to know what you should do? Do Easter. Let go of how you've always been and find the grit to walk into the river of death with him. Go under with him, and while you are down there let the current carry away everything that stands between you and him. Then, when all your breath is gone, let him give you some of his. Take his breath inside of you. Let it save your life, and when he rises, rise with him, understanding that your life is no longer your own. You are borrowing his life now. Let someone remind you of that, and join the community of those who call themselves his body, because they believe his heart beats in every one of them.

People, that's salvation right there. That's why Peter spoke as he did – the resurrection put the heart of Christ in all of us. May we have the grit not to settle for anything less.