



## Sermons from Poland Presbyterian Church

“Ordinary People”  
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Acts 3:1-4:22  
July 29, 2007

**“Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they wondered; and they recognized they had been with Jesus.”**  
--Acts 4:13 [ESV]

*Let us pray: God, speak to us in a voice and a language we can understand. Break through the obstacles that we inevitably put in your way. Open our hearts to receive what you would have us hear. And then help us to respond as your glad and faithful people. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.*

Let me begin by asking a question: Do you consider yourself ordinary?

No, I didn't think so.

For a teacher to tell the eager parents of a preschooler that their little princess, their little girl of three, is quite an ordinary child, -- well, see what a reaction that gets! For a professor or a pastor to write in a letter of recommendation that young James is quite an ordinary young man is to risk some sort of reprisal. For a physician seeking a medical fellowship to be ranked as merely ordinary is to be consigned to “outer darkness.”

When asked to assess ourselves most of us rate ourselves better than average. Drivers who have been hospitalized because of a severe traffic accident describe themselves as better-than-average drivers when it comes to safety. An educational testing service asked one million high school seniors to rate themselves with their peers. Sixty percent said

that, all modesty aside, they were better. Only six percent said they were worse. In the “ability to get along with others” category, zero percent rated themselves below average. Nobody wants to be deemed ordinary, and therefore it seems that no one is ordinary.

Yet, as Christians at least, we must confront the fact that our faith is founded upon the experiences and expectations of ordinary people. The first Easter didn’t come to the philosophically wise or to the intellectually sophisticated or even to the morally upstanding. It didn’t come to the politically well-connected, to the wielders of influence and ambition. It came to ordinary people, --- to ordinary and perplexed people much like us who, --- despite all of our efforts to cover our fears and our anxieties and to hide our ignorance, --- are often fearful, anxious, and ignorant. If that doesn’t describe us in our most intimate and honest moments of self-assessment, then I don’t know what does.

Our text this morning reminds us that Peter and John were illiterate men, untrained in the schools, uneducated, common men. By worldly standards, probably relatively little was expected from them; and more to the point, they probably expected relatively little of themselves. In the early gospel record they hardly come across as pillars of strength, do they? You remember them. Peter, on whom you wouldn’t want to depend if your life depended on it, and John, who loved Jesus and whom Jesus loves, but who also comes across in the gospel portraits as more needy than needed. Again, not a strong reed upon which to lean. There they are, and with them a motley company of women and men who lurch from mourning to rejoicing to confusion. A few weeks back from the scenes portrayed in today’s text, they were frightened, cowed by circumstances, full of the terrors of the dark, hiding out behind closed doors. Today, here in Acts 3 and 4, they are causing all kinds of trouble, all kinds of tumult, getting themselves arrested, curing the lame, preaching long sermons. What accounts for this change of circumstance?

There are at least two tempting places to look for the action. You know what I mean don’t you when I say, “look for the action.” We want to know who does what to whom, and when. We want to be able to summarize it and get a clear picture of it – causation wise. We want the causative factor.

Well, this is a longer-than-usual reading for us I know. So I am going to help you fast-forward through it, as it were. Fast forward through all this dense business here. The first place that you might want to look for the action here is in Peter’s long sermon. Peter preaches this sermon about the doings of Jesus. He proclaims the great miracle, the miracle that God himself comes in the form of a human being, a man, in Jesus Christ. God invades the world, he transforms the world, he claims it for himself.

That is the substance of the gospel and because it is, those who hear it are transformed, emboldened, and encouraged. It is the word that changes and transforms, and that is what we find in that sermon of Peter, and there is action there. There certainly is action there. It’s sometimes said “words don’t make a difference,” but you know as well as I that words can make a huge difference! Both for good and for ill. Adolph Hitler proved it for evil. Martin Luther King, Jr. proved it for good. For good or for evil, words – the right

words -- have incredible power! We see that here in Peter's sermon. Five thousand people come to faith.

But you know that. You've heard sermons and known how God can sometimes use a sermon to speak just that certain word – a word that seemed meant just for you. You know that. You know too how a good sermon can even enthrall an entire congregation – and at that, a congregation of thousands. I know you know that, and therefore we must look to the second part of this lesson to interest us and to find where the action is.

The most natural place for us to look for action that makes sense to us beyond words is to the miracle that causes all of the trouble in the first place. Peter and John on their way to the temple are confronted by this man who asks them for spare change. Now we don't know exactly what the exchange is but we do know that Peter says, "*Silver and gold have I not.*"

Remember that the next time you're passing along the street and somebody asks you for money. You can say, "*Silver and gold have I not*"; But Peter goes on, "*But I give you what I have: in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, walk.*" Now try that yourself. Don't stick around to see what happens, but try it. I suspect that whoever asks you, if he or she recognizes you later, will never again ask you for spare change. We frequently receive requests for financial assistance here at the church. I don't want in any way to minimize or put in a bad light those who come seeking such assistance. But I wonder how it would go over if we were to say: "*Silver and gold have I not, but I give you what I have; in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, walk.*"

The man did, as the text says, "*And immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. And leaping up he stood and walked and entered into the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God.*"

I bet he did! Wouldn't you be jumping and shouting? I'd be doing cart-wheels and I can't even do cart-wheels! My father had Multiple Sclerosis and became unable to walk. If he had suddenly received his legs back again I bet he would have felt like knocking on people's doors and telling everyone. There is a real miracle here. The man doesn't limp away to wait for a period of recovery and recuperation, and the translation wants us to know that not only is this a restoration but almost a new creation – he leaps – new power; and in doing all of this he attracts an awful lot of attention. Luke, the evangelist, tells us: "*And all the people saw him walking and leaping and praising God.*" They knew this fellow, he was a fixture near the temple, always there, lame from birth, "*and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what happened to him.*"

So, if you want to know where the action is, there's that great sermon of Peter's where five thousand are converted and the whole history of salvation is made clear, and then there is this vivid, unambiguous story of healing and leaping for joy. But neither of those two points is *the* point. They are good, but they are not good enough. They are really not the subject of this passage. They are illuminating and essential details but they are not the subject. The subjects of this story are Peter and John, "uneducated and common men,

illiterate and uneducated in the schools,” who, “*because they had been with Jesus,*” --- that’s the important phrase, -- “*because they had been with Jesus,*” --- were themselves transformed.

That is where the main action is. Not the sermon and not the healing miracle, but the transformation of Peter and John.---transformed by the presence of the living Christ in their lives. That’s where the boldness came from, that’s where the authority came from, that’s where the power and the courage, and indeed the joy, came from.

Why is it that people respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ? Why is it that the poor, the oppressed, the old, the weak, and the marginal –people of every stripe and station really people in all ages and at all times, -- have responded to the gospel of Jesus Christ? Why do *we*? Because we have expectations of transformation. We know that who we are as we are and where we are will not do; it is not good enough, and therefore we’re looking to the risen Christ to perform in us that which will transform us and renew us. That, I suspect, is what that binds you and me and all of us together in this place this morning: the desire to know the transforming power of the living, risen Christ. Because we, knowing who and what we are, ---ordinary people, --- also know that in Christ – we become capable of extraordinary things, of beautiful things, of courageous and difference-making things.

Martin Luther King, Jr. is known among us as a famous man, a giant, but Martin Luther King, Jr. was an ordinary man. I remember reading his biography a few years back and I learned that one night King sat alone in his kitchen. He was deep in prayer because he’d just received a death threat. A rock had been thrown through the front window with a note wrapped around it telling him that he’d better desist from the civil rights effort or his family home would be bombed. King prayed, “Lord, I don’t know if I can go on.” He really didn’t know whether he could. But in the midst of his prayer he received strength and the resolve to do it.

In Utah where I had my first pastorate a member of our church blew the whistle on his company for some sharp practices they were engaged in. He did so out of his Christian convictions and at considerable cost to himself and his family. Not long ago C-SPAN covered some congressional hearings on the health insurance industry. A physician employed by one of the HMO’s to review medical claims testified how she and other physicians were given incentives to deny medical claims. Like Dr. King we have our own kitchen moments, moments in which we have to make a difficult choice. And in these moments (when we rely in prayer on the Spirit) we are given strength and courage and peace. The continuing miracle of Easter is that we are empowered, emboldened to speak, to act because of the transforming power of the risen Christ. Not just in times of crisis but also in the little moments that (in looking back) are not so little, that are indeed *everything*.

Paul Tillich once said that the saint is a saint not because he is good, but because he is transparent for something that is more than himself. Being a window of opportunity, being a means of grace, being the place in which the Holy Spirit makes its dwelling, is

the vocation of ordinary people. In addition to the ample silver and gold that we all have, we may give something that the world needs: power and the love of the risen, living Savior Jesus Christ. That is the vocation of every one of us, ordinary people that we are.

*Closing Prayer*

Lord, you know the trials each of us must face.

You know our fear, our anxiety.

Lead us, embolden us in your Spirit.

Give us the faith and the strength of courage we need.

Transform us by the living power of the risen Christ.

Amen.