

***Words and Deeds: The Early Church***  
***By Jason Huff***  
***May 6, 2018***  
***Psalm 16; Matthew 20:17-19; Acts 2:22-41***

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Acts 2:22-41. May God add His richest blessing on His holy and sacred Word. “[Peter said,] “Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. David said about him: “I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will live in hope, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.” Brothers, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay. God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said, “The Lord said to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.” Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call.” With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.”

What does it all mean? This last weekend marked the biggest movie launch of all time with the release of *The Avengers: Infinity War*. It's a simple movie; you can describe the plot in twenty seconds. Yet the question is, what does it all mean? The movie only starts the story, and it ends in a really shocking spot. If you haven't watched the other 18 movies in the series, you might be confused – Who is that? Why are they here? What's their motivation? The facts are easy, but answering what it all means is impossible unless you've read the original comic books.

It's true in the real world too. The facts about who we elect to office are pretty simple. But no one can agree what it means that we voted for these guys and not the other guys. The big question about global warming is not the data; it's what the data means. What does it mean that gas and groceries cost more than they did four years ago? Is the economy getting better, or are things getting worse and people needing more money to survive? The facts are simple – you check your receipts and see that costs have gone up. But what it means is a huge question.

Today, we get into the meat of Peter's first sermon. Last week, the Holy Spirit fell upon the believers on the Day of Pentecost. Tongues of fire rested on them, and they started speaking languages from all over the world. Some folks doubted what they were hearing, but Peter worked to convince them that the reason the disciples could speak in foreign languages was God's work through the Spirit.

In today's segment, he's going to give us the big picture: what Jesus' life, miracles, death, and resurrection actually mean. This is the beginning of the church, as people come to understand the meaning behind the events they've seen over the last several years. The meaning Peter gives us in this passage is at the core of what all believers hold to around the world, no matter the denomination. This is the heart of the gospel.

The first important thing we need to note is this: *there is no dispute that Jesus was a miracle worker who performed signs and wonders*. Maybe the hardest thing for most people to believe today is that Jesus actually did all the supposedly impossible things the Bible claims He did. For the past three hundred years, since the so-called "Age of Enlightenment," intellectualism has said that miracles are impossible since they can't be reproduced. Some segments of the church tried to follow suit, trying to explain away miracles as natural events Jesus inspired or just errors in understanding, the result of superstition and tall tales.

But the funny thing is, Peter doesn't have to convince anyone of Jesus' miracles. As he puts it, "Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know." None of the people in Jerusalem debated whether or not Jesus did what was claimed. Ancient Jewish records from the Talmud claim that Jesus was a sorcerer whose disciples healed people in His name. Even Jesus' enemies give testimony that He did signs and wonders; they only disputed what they meant!

As we study through Acts, we will be compelled and convicted to share more of Jesus with more people. That's what I'm praying for, anyway, because the vast majority of people in the world come to know Jesus as Savior because a close friend told them about Him. Sometimes you will feel inadequate to answer objections – I've studied a lot, and I still feel those. But we don't have to explain things that are already givens. There are plenty of books out there that do a good job of defending the historic reality of Jesus' miracles, and we can refer a skeptic to them if we need to. But we don't need to doubt the miracles or steer clear of them when talking about Jesus. Jesus' friends and enemies alike were agreed that He did in fact do miracles! The debate was not over the facts. It was over what those miracles meant.

Next key thought from Peter: *the crucifixion was not an accident*. Peter says, "This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross." Peter doesn't discount the responsibility of the crowds who called for Jesus' death or the leaders who could have intervened and defended Jesus. Peter uses the plural, meaning "y'all did it." Guilt lies on the shoulders of the Jewish leadership and their Roman counterparts who made it happen.

Yet the crucifixion only happened because God purposed it to happen. Had God not wanted it, it wouldn't have occurred. On more than one occasion, crowds rose up against Jesus, but He silences them and walks away. Jesus knew exactly what He was walking into; He told His disciples many times that He was going to Jerusalem and would be crucified. It was His intent. John's gospel even tells us that when He was betrayed and the Jewish officials arrested Him, when He first confirmed who He was, they all drew back and fell on the ground. Nobody took Jesus to the cross except by His own will.

It's popular to think that Jesus was a revolutionary whose revolution got ahead of Him, that things got out of hand. It's the theory in the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar* and the book *The Last Temptation of Christ*. But Jesus knew exactly what He was doing. There were so many ways that He could have avoided His death. But it was the Father's will that He should die on the cross for our sins. The event designed to remove Jesus from history wound up becoming the centerpiece of history. That was because God designed and planned it. While those involved had responsibility, God never had His hands off the wheel for even a second.

Peter goes on: "God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him." Then he quotes David who had visions and revelations about the Messiah. David's death proved that his revelations were not about himself but one of his descendants. David said, "My body also will live in hope, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay." As Peter said, "he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ."

Third key thought from Peter: *the resurrection makes sense both as an expected event and as a natural consequence of holiness*. The resurrection of the dead is a significant concept in both the Old and New Testaments. Even the Pharisees, for all their faults, believed in resurrection and defended it against the Sadducees. Scholars argued about what resurrection was and if it was going to be literal and what it would be like. But they knew resurrection was an Old Testament promise – and that the Messiah, the Holy One, would not die but live. No Jewish person should have been surprised at the resurrection of Jesus if they took Scripture seriously.

But just as important, it was impossible for death to keep a hold of Jesus. That's due to His holiness. Jesus never went against the will of the Father. He never did anything that wasn't acceptable in His sight. Death cannot hold down a perfectly righteous person; it would be unjust.

So when someone asks you how resurrection can be true if we've never seen it, ask them: do you know anyone who is 100% genuinely, completely, from birth to death perfect without any moral flaw? If they say no, then they have their answer. It is not that resurrection is impossible; it's that only once in the history of the world has anyone lived up to the standard by which resurrection is possible. Science has shown that a human being could potentially run up to speeds of 40 miles an hour. The world's fastest runner, Usain Bolt, has only traveled 28 miles an hour. Just because he hasn't been done doesn't mean it can't be!

Peter's next point is this: *God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact.* Over 500 people saw the risen Jesus. This was a really large number of people at the time. Nazareth, Jesus' hometown, had 400 people. The city of Capernaum that was Jesus' home base during His ministry had 1,500 people. There were hundreds of villages throughout Israel, but we're talking a group larger than a standard village all proclaiming they had seen Jesus. We've talked a lot about this recently, so I'm not going to cover it again, but the eyewitness accounts were reliable, from people who had nothing to gain from telling the truth.

Finally, Peter ends – Jesus has been exalted to the right hand of God, and what He received as a gift from the Father He now pours out on us – the Holy Spirit. He quotes David again, showing what he says has been predicted – the Father has given the Son everything, including the Spirit that now allows the disciples to speak in foreign languages. Jesus is the Lord and Christ, this same man they killed.

Peter shifts the focus in this moment from God to us. God has done what He promised; He has raised the Messiah to life and taken Him into heaven to be with Him, to lead His Kingdom and to save His people. But now there's the rub: Jesus who is Lord of all is the guy you had murdered on a cross.

That's our next thought: *It all matters, it means something, only when it's personal.* The crowd is cut to the heart. Peter has spoken truth. Yet that truth only matters if the crowd will do something with it. Their response is, "Brothers, what shall we do?" They know this must make a difference in their lives. The good news of Jesus is only good news if it changes us.

Some folks think the earth is flat. I think they're wrong. Yet it really doesn't matter because it doesn't affect how we live our lives. I can know every detail of every one of Marvel movies I talked about earlier. Yet that trivia isn't worth anything. It may be true; I might be able to name every minor character and plot point. But it doesn't matter.

For us to be saved, Jesus has to matter. It was never about believing that He was a miracle worker; the crowds already believed that. It was never simply about Him being the Son of God; the demons that Jesus expelled called Him that through gritted teeth. They knew the truth but it didn't save them. It doesn't mean anything to them. Believing that God exists? The Pharisees that Jesus called the "sons of the devil" unwaveringly believed that God was there.

This is why I talk about faith and trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord often, even though we're a small group and most have us have heard the message many times. Because being saved by God after death is not primarily about being in church Sunday mornings. God is not checking off attendance in a cosmic checklist. You can be here every Sunday, every Bible study, every event, every service project, and not be saved. You can still be on the path to hell. Because it has to mean something to us; it has to matter personally. What does Peter say? Jesus is the Lord and Christ. For Jesus to be Lord means that you are under His loving care and authority. What He says, you do. You are no longer your own, but you belong to Him. He gets to call the shots in your life because He is your King.

That's why Peter's command is important: this is how we come under the Lordship of Jesus. "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Repentance is the lynchpin, the key. Repentance is a change of heart and mind. It's willingly saying, "I will go your way, Lord, rather than my own." It is turning from sin and turning toward God. It's embracing Jesus.

How can you know that you are under Christ's forgiveness and blessing and salvation? It is through faith by which obedience comes. We have faith in what Jesus did, so we repent. We have faith in Jesus' promises, so we are baptized. Because we believe, we obey. It is not knowledge that saves; obedience without faith doesn't save either, but faith leading to obedience.

That's our call today. Examine your heart. Do you believe – not just in the facts, but in the meaning beyond the facts? That Jesus died to save you from sin, that He rose from the dead and even now lives, and that He wants you to be His disciple who lives in His ways? And does that belief move you to personal action – to change your own behaviors?

Does it lead you, if you haven't been baptized, to want it? Because baptism is a sign of the Christian; we don't do it because it has some sort of physical effect or somehow saves us on its own; we do it simply as our act of obedience. (For those who are baptized as infants, whose parents brought them into the covenant, we still ask them to declare their faith publically to confirm their baptism, again simply out of obedience.) The sign of true faith is a continuing desire to be close to God, to want to do His will, to desire Him, because of His great love for us. Going to church doesn't save you, but going to church out of a love for and obedience to Jesus is a prime sign of salvation. Reading Scripture doesn't save you, but reading it to know Jesus better and to please Him fits the bill.

And here's the thing – Peter knows this promise is for us too. He says, "The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call." He may have meant physically far off, people who didn't live near Israel, but it also means us, those who are far off in history. Things haven't fundamentally changed. This sermon is to us just like it was to Peter's first hearers.

Peter's sermon continued, and perhaps the best thing we can get from it is that he pleaded with the crowds to follow Jesus. This is so important. This is not a lifestyle choice. This is not one option of many. This is eternal life we are talking about. This matters for your family and friends and loved ones and co-workers and everyone you know. We can't make them believe, but we can stress its importance. It is tragic to get to the end of someone's life and not be sure if they knew the truth from us. Let's not let that happen.

"Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day." This is the start of the church. We'll hear a lot more about the early church next week. But this sermon was its start. And what we can take with us this week is that the church was founded on the rock of Jesus Christ and what His life, death, and resurrection meant. It was not a movement based on nice principles or ideas, but on the facts of history and what they mean to our eternity. Thanks be to God for giving us His church so we could know and understand and be a part of it, and a part of His Kingdom.