

“Graham Crackers, Chinese Gooseberries, and the Power of Resurrection”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

Acts 4:1-22

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Third Sunday after Pentecost

What we’ve got in this story is a group of powerful people missing the point and doing whatever they can to hold onto their power with disregard for what’s best for the people. I know what you’re thinking: “I’ve never heard of such a thing! How strange biblical times were!” Of course misguided corruption isn’t all we’ve got here. We’ve also got the proclamation of the Gospel in response. And we’ve got healing and salvation.

But first, we’ve got the rulers and elders and scribes — oh my! If we were reading Luke and Acts together as volumes one and two, it would’ve been just six chapters earlier that this same group conspired to have Jesus arrested and then sent him to be executed by Rome. These guys are very concerned about what has been happening at *their* temple. Peter and John have been teaching the crowds and talking about resurrection through Jesus and they had healed a man who used to be carried to the temple so he could beg. The rulers and elders and scribes were losing control of the narrative. They were losing control of the people.

They ask their captives, Peter and John, a tricky question: “By what power or by what name did you do this?” They choose not to indicate what “this” is. Teaching? Healing? Using Jesus’s name? They’ll let the defendants open their mouths and implicate themselves in whatever crimes they care to confess. That will be helpful to the rulers and elders and scribes. But what they’re really after is a name. What is this powerful name that is causing trouble and threatening their grip on Jerusalem?

In 1904, a missionary returned from working as a teacher in China to her home in New Zealand. Her name was Mary Isabel Fraser. She brought back with her some fruit seeds and she gave them to a farmer friend. About 6 years later, they finally bore fruit. The fruit was decidedly weird looking. But it was so sweet and tasty once you cut it open. It was a bit like a gooseberry, so it was dubbed the Chinese Gooseberry.

And so it stayed until the late ‘50s, when an exporter got the idea of shipping this fruit to the North American market. An importer told him “You’ve got to change the name. Chinese Gooseberries won’t sell over here, man. Haven’t you heard of the Red Scare? Americans won’t be buying any communist produce! And what’s a gooseberry, anyway?” The New Zealand exporter tried calling the fruit a “melonette,” but found that there were high tariffs on melons. He needed a new name, and then he realized that like the national bird of New Zealand, his fruit was small, brown, fuzzy, and could not fly. Today, kiwifruit bring over a billion dollars into the economy of New Zealand.¹
Names can be powerful.

¹ Under the Influence, CBC Radio podcast, Season 7, episode 5

Whenever we tell one of the stories of Jesus casting out a demon, we talk about the importance of names in this ancient world. Names had power — holy power, terrible power, fear-inducing power. If you knew the name of a demon, you could control it (Luke 10:17). This kind of importance of a name leaks into our world. I wonder if you've ever sat in that waiting space, or with someone who was in it, yearning for a diagnosis. Somehow, knowing the particular form of cancer or the medical name for the disease or condition is helpful and reassuring. There is power in knowing what you're up against.

The rulers and elders and scribes have no idea what they were up against. They're asking for a name, thinking they can regain control. After Peter's Spirit-inspired speech, they huddle and then order Peter and John not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus. As if they had power over this name. As if not speaking it would silence Christ's resurrection power in the world. As if they could contain the hunger for healing and salvation that had broken out in their land.

I guess I must be hungry myself, so I want to tell you another piece of food history. In the first half of the 1800s, there was a Presbyterian minister living in New England who became obsessed with healthy living. Whole grains and vegetables were the start, but he went a whole lot further. He came to believe that impure thoughts and naughty behavior came from eating anything that was...well, flavorful. He claimed that mustard and ketchup could lead to insanity. Spices and other stimulants caused depravity, which — depending on the nature of your wickedness — could lead to blindness or death. These sinister urges needed to be resisted and constrained. Gotta stomp 'em out. His cure for what ailed the Christian soul was a very plain diet, including flavorless bread baked from coarsely ground flour made at home. His teachings became a bit of a fad, with restaurants and inns and even entire college campuses adopting the diet prescribed by the Reverend Sylvester Graham.

A recipe was developed at some point by his devotees for a cracker made from unbleached flour, bran, and wheat germ. Its blandness was a feature. It was bound to bore you to good behavior. Ol' Sylvester must be rolling in his grave at today's Graham crackers, filled with sugar and honey and processed flour.²

The power of resurrection grace and love and hope could not be tamped down by rulers and elders and scribes. Peter and John replied to their warning: "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard." You can hear Peter and John's certainty that they couldn't stop living as transformed people, even if they wanted to. You can also hear some snark: "*whether it is right to listen to you rather than to God.*"

Throughout the book of Acts we find this confrontation between God's action through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and the people's rejection of what God has proclaimed and promised and done. God's faithfulness and humanity's faithlessness are put side by side and then we, confronted with

² Under the Influence, CBC Radio podcast, Season 7, episode 11

this confrontation, are pushed to choose between them.³

Here, Peter answers the question about the name boldly, saying that the healing was done “by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead.” God has acted in the incarnation of Christ, and in resurrection, and in the healing that flows from it. And yet, it is Peter and John who are on trial by the leaders of the faith. Peter is saying to the rulers and elders and scribes that the religious disorder is not healing or teaching or the name that saves, but that healing and teaching and salvation are being interfered with by people afraid of losing earthly power. He’s channeling Al Pacino! “Rulers and elders and scribes, you’re out of order! You’re out of order! The whole trial is out of order!”

Peter notes that this whole charade comes because a man was healed. A good deed was done. One of God’s own has found relief from his misery. And the rulers and elders and scribes are stuck on how it could have happened without their oversight. This man stands before them, healed and with dignity restored and the community expresses awe and wonder. The rulers and elders and scribes express suspicion and vexation and immediately get litigious. How odd that it never occurred to them that such a healing might have happened through their very own God. They see salvation before them, and their first instinct is to assign blame instead of rejoicing. Instead of enjoying the fruit of God’s grace, they deemed the whole thing sour and in need of stomping out.

What different responses to a story of hope!

Those responses are simply continuations of what happened when Jesus was healing and teaching and causing trouble on the rulers’ and elders’ and scribes’ turf. Standing in the beautiful city — the city of David with its glorious temple and mighty arches — Peter reminds them that “the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.”

Thanks be to God, the God of Israel has spent millennia refusing to let human rejection have the last word. The ultimate power that humans achieve may end lives and cause destruction and deny hope and scoff at God, but it cannot snuff out the story of life that persists among those who have experienced something that they simply cannot stop speaking about.

Let our minds be bigger than the rulers’ and elders’ and scribes’. We all get in grumpy moods and cynical streaks. And I continually lift up curiosity as one of the greatest of human virtues. But what if the questions we came to when a story of of hope was given to us were less about punching holes in it and more about finding the true source of the hope? What if we always wanted to know more, in order to find a jumping-off point for our own next story of hope? If we are given Chinese Gooseberries, let’s slice them open to find out if there’s anything tasty inside. Let’s see what we can do to let the sweetness of God break forth instead of looking for ways to constrain God’s power.

³ J.R. Daniel Kirk, commentary at https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3630

There are places way easier to get to than Jerusalem to find healing and salvation stories we can dig into in our search for resurrection power. Friday night was the prom at the Magic City Acceptance Center. I heard a story this week of a mom who was desperate to get out of the hospital to see her transgender son go to prom. It would be inappropriate and potentially damaging for a church group, even ours, to show up at the Acceptance Center to impose our search for hope on their safe space prom. But, y'all, the Center's director told me on Thursday that they were going to blow through all of their yummy snacks in celebration, and so when Edgewood's shipment of Pentecost-themed flamin' hot snacks shows up on Tuesday, it will be an answer to a quiet prayer. Inspired by the Spirit, in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, we have a tiny connection to that story of hope.

UKirk Birmingham is another place I see healing and salvation bursting from resurrection power. Having a college-age worshipping community in this city that is both unabashedly Christian and proudly LGBTQ-affirming is no small act of divine grace. At UKirk, students are encouraged to share the Good News about Jesus and about themselves that they can't tamp down.

There are so many more stories to find, if we'll look for the fruit of God's outpouring of love with eagerness about resurrection power and leave our cynicism for those who try to get in its way. My prayer this week is that we will, with purpose, be open to these stories and then not be able to keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.

Amen.