

Message: Believe in Jesus

[*Watch Easter People video – Chuck Knows Church¹*]

Who are the Easter people? We are! Chuck’s right. All too often we, or our loved ones, focus on death, darkness and the bad things that happen. We ask ourselves, “What would we die for?” when the question we really should be asking is ...

What would we live for? That question has a lot of meaning when we consider our fascination with the culture of death. Jesus came back to life to prove there’s a culture of life.

That’s an important shift. The darkness of the world lives inside us. That’s one of the reasons we struggle with doubt, anxiety and depression. It flows from our fears. And the darkness loves to tell us lies about our fears – how weak we are, how futile resistance is, how limited God is, and more. That’s the influence of the negative.

Jesus gives us the power of the positive. Through his resurrection and new life, God literally brings new creation. The powerful changes Jesus made affect all of us and the world we live in. We live with confidence, content, peaceful and encouraged. This flows from love and forgiveness. A life lived that way is a life worth living for everyone.

Let’s compare our two Scripture readings for today to see this new life in action. The first is from John’s narrative, two stories of the disciples’ encounter with Jesus. Thomas is a focal point for what it means to believe in Jesus, even if we don’t see, hear or touch him.

The second is from Luke’s second narrative, the fifth chapter of Acts. It’s about the first time the disciples are persecuted. Jesus has taken the heat; now they’re beginning to experience it. There’s a change in the disciple’s words, attitudes and actions. Why? Let’s see

In the days and weeks after Jesus’ death, some disciples doubted. Thomas wasn’t the only one. Matthew’s narrative supports that claim. Matthew 28:16-17 records the scene, “*Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus told them to go. When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted.*”

¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tF6_ANb54ps

Jesus knew they’d struggle. After all, they were dealing with something difficult to understand. That’s why Jesus appeared among them. He wanted to give his disciples the proof they needed.

Jesus’ presence, words and actions defused the tension.

“Peace be with you,” he said. “Shalom.” The familiar Hebrew greeting calmed the disciples down. Their hearts and minds caught up with their emotions. They found a moment to breathe ... to rest. They overcame their fear. They overcame their doubt. And it changed them, as we’ll see in a moment.

Luke captured an early incident the disciples faced about three months after Jesus rose. The apostles are doing miraculous things among the people. They’re meeting regularly in the outer courts of the temple; teaching and helping people. The group is remarkable for their harmony and diversity – Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor; no one is turned away and everyone is welcome.

They’re so successful that people are coming from miles around.

There are sick people waiting in the streets on stretchers and bedrolls, hoping to be touched by Peter’s shadow when he walked by – talk about faith! Luke tells us that all of them were healed.

This upsets the Chief Priest and his favorite group in the temple, the Sadducees. They decide to take action against the disciples.

Let’s pause there for a second. The same disciples who were hiding behind locked doors are meeting in public in the temple and doing the work Jesus taught them to do – healing and caring for others.

What a turn around! But then, what they feared would happen does. They’re arrested by the temple authorities and thrown in jail.

What’s next?

That’s when an amazing thing happens. During the night, an angel of God opens the door of the jail and lets them out saying, “*Go to the Temple and take your stand. Tell the people everything there is to say about this Life*” (v19, MSG). As soon as the sun was up, the disciples were in the temple teaching.

This is where it gets interesting. The Chief Priest and his accomplices get up in morning and gather the High Council - their Senate, to take action. They’re going to put it to the disciples! So they send the temple police to get the prisoners. There’s only one problem.

When the police get to the jail, they can’t find the prisoners. They go back and report, “*We found the jail locked tight as a drum and the guards posted at the doors, but when we went inside we didn’t find a soul*” (vv21-23). This is puzzling: “*What’s going on?*”

Just then someone shows up and says, “*Did you know that the men you put in jail are back in the Temple teaching the people?*” The police chief went and got them, very gently and carefully.

Here’s the scene: Peter and the apostles are standing in front of the Senate after this amazing turn of events. The High Priest is the heavy, “*Didn’t we give you strict orders not to teach in Jesus’ name?*” (v27).

Peter isn’t going to run, hide or deny Jesus! With the apostles standing arm-in-arm, he says, “*It’s necessary to obey God rather than [humans]. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, ... God set him on high at his side, ... to give Israel the gift of a changed life and sins forgiven. And we’re witnesses to these things. The Holy Spirit, whom God gives to those who obey him, corroborates every detail*” (vv29-32).

The last time Peter made a bold, public statement was on the day of Pentecost. People heard that message, saw the mysterious flames and 3,000 of them believed in Jesus. This time, Luke tells us, the Senate was furious! They wanted to kill the apostles on the spot.

Fortunately, a wise rabbi named Gamaliel stood up and urged caution. He said, “*Let them alone. If this program or this work is merely human, it will fall apart, but if it’s of God, there’s nothing you can do about it - and you better not be found fighting against God!*” (vv38-39).

That convinced the Senate. Instead of death, they threatened the apostles, told them not to teach or use Jesus’ name, thoroughly whipped them and let them go.

Do you know what the disciples’ response was? They were thrilled! They left the Senate room filled with joy because they gave honor to Jesus even when they were disrespected on his account. They went right back to the temple and their house churches, teaching and preaching Jesus, not letting up for a minute! (vv40-42).

What happened to change the disciples from people who were living in fear to people who had no fear of other people at all?

Jesus’ presence made the difference. It changed their lives. They saw him and believed. They touched him, heard his voice, felt the presence of the Spirit he breathed into them. They knew! Each and every one of them knew Jesus was special, that he had the power of God. They believed he was the Messiah. They knew he came back to life. Sure, they had questions about what it meant. They didn’t get everything. But they felt a difference. They felt the power of the Holy Spirit and knew the way of forgiveness and love was real and true. After all, the evidence stood right in front of them!

After their encounter with Jesus, the disciples were “all in.” Nothing could stop them! There was no force on this side of heaven that could make them run, hide or deny Jesus. Jesus proved he was trustworthy and true. And so they boldly taught others about Jesus and showed them what it meant to live life as a new being.

They believed in Jesus. Do you? It’s difficult for many of us. We have secrets. We have doubts. We like the darkness inside of us more than we want to admit. We experience difficult situations. And so, we find ourselves locked inside a tomb of our own making.

Let Jesus in! Let go of what you’re holding onto. Let Jesus’ light shine into the corners of your soul. When you do, you’ll be free from those things that want to kill your soul, your being. God will give you a new heart. Jesus will transform your mind, giving you a new view on things. The Spirit will focus your will, showing you someone worth believing in – Jesus. And, believing in him, you’ll be set free!

Jesus’ presence, then and now, has a great impact. Let go of your doubts. See and believe. Your life will change for the better.

Let us pray ...

Holy God, give us the courage to let go of the darkness we carry around inside of us. Shine your light so brightly in us that we have to admit to the truth of who you really are, our Lord and Savior. May our light fill our lives so that others are drawn to you. In the matchless name of Jesus, Amen.

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Acts 5:27-32 (CEB)

The apostles were brought before the council where the high priest confronted them: “In no uncertain terms, we demanded that you not teach in this name. And look at you! You have filled Jerusalem with your teaching. And you are determined to hold us responsible for this man’s death.”

Peter and the apostles replied, “We must obey God rather than humans! The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead - whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God has exalted Jesus to his right side as leader and savior so that he could enable Israel to change its heart and life and to find forgiveness for sins. We are witnesses of such things, as is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

John 20:19-31 (CEB)

It was still the first day of the week. That evening, while the disciples were behind closed doors because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood among them. He said, “Peace be with you.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. When the disciples saw the Lord, they were filled with joy. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you.” Then he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven; if you don’t forgive them, they aren’t forgiven.”

Thomas, the one called Didymus, one of the Twelve, wasn’t with the disciples when Jesus came. The other disciples told him, “We’ve seen the Lord!”

But he replied, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, put my finger in the wounds left by the nails, and put my hand into his side, I won’t believe.”

After eight days his disciples were again in a house and Thomas was with them. Even though the doors were locked, Jesus entered and stood among them. He said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here. Look at my hands. Put your hand into my side. No more disbelief. Believe!”

Thomas responded to Jesus, “My Lord and my God!”

Jesus replied, “Do you believe because you see me? Happy are those who don’t see and yet believe.”

Then Jesus did many other miraculous signs in his disciples’ presence, signs that aren’t recorded in this scroll. But these things are written so that you will believe that Jesus is the Christ, God’s Son, and that believing, you will have life in his name.