

**Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People**  
Fifth Sunday of Easter – Year A

**RCL Readings** – Acts 7:55-60; Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16; 1 Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14

**ACNA Readings** – Acts 17:1-15; Psalm 66:1-11; 1 Peter 2:1-12; John 14:1-14

**Introduction.** Easter is a full seven-week season of the liturgical calendar. It is one of the longest seasons in the Church. Second only to ordinary time after Pentecost. Every day of Eastertide – the season of Easter – is to be a reflection of the joy and triumph of Resurrection Sunday. Thus, traditionally it was forbidden to fast during the 50 days from Passover to Pentecost. The resurrection turns all of our sadness and mourning into joy and gladness.

**Common Theme.** Many of our readings this week offer encouragement and assurances to the believer even in the face of opposition, uncertainty, confusion, and death. This assurance is especially all the more relevant in the light of the resurrected Messiah. The resurrection is the realization of all our hope of the promises of God. And that eternal life begins in the here and now in and amongst the people that are called by God.

**Acts 7:55-60.** The Acts reading contains the dramatic conclusion to the persecution of Stephen, which began in Acts 6 and now ends in the first martyrdom of the new Jesus movement. Stephen is described here as full of the Holy Spirit. This is not to say that he did not have the Holy Spirit prior to his martyrdom – Acts 6:3 portrays Stephen among those of good reputation, full of wisdom and the Holy Spirit. It is now here at the conclusion of the drama when danger is close at hand and death looms large before him that Stephen needed boldness, courage, and more of the Holy Spirit than ever before.

Jesus has promised that he would never leave us or forsake us and here he keeps that commitment. Stephen is given an overwhelming measure of God's grace and presence through the Spirit that he sees into the very heavens themselves. Jesus, who is described in the Scriptures and in the creeds as sitting at the right hand of the Father, is now honouring his faithful servant by standing to receive his soul. He is welcoming Stephen home. What was a blessing and an assurance for Stephen was blasphemy to the Sanhedrin! And their reaction was extreme and without regard to the Roman law that forbade the Jewish people from enacting capital punishments. As a part of the Godhead the Holy Spirit is full of mercy, loving kindness, and grace. The Spirit imprinted these godly traits in Stephen, who full of the Holy Spirit, can now forgive and even plead mercy to the Lord for his murderers as they commit their crime.

**Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16.** In all times of adversity and trouble, this psalm offers words of comfort and assurance in God, who is described as a refuge and safe place. David uses strong words of stability like rock and fortress which can be comforting in seasons of uncertainty and confusion. In those uncertainties of everyday life, we all need a safe place at some time. The psalm begins with a declaration of trust in God and an appeal for deliverance through the righteousness of God.

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How does the righteousness of God work on our behalf for deliverance? The word righteousness is  $\text{תְּדָבָר}$  *tz'dekah* – which contains within it the meanings of righteousness, charity, and the redemptive activity of the Lord. Micah 6:5 describes the deeds of the Lord during the Exodus from Egypt. The RSV translates this verse as 'Israel saw the saving activity of the Lord' when most translations render it as 'the righteous acts of the Lord'. Micah is reminding the people that they have seen God constantly save them, through the plagues, the giving of water from the rock and mana from Heaven, and his consistent presence guiding them through the desert. Here we see that one meaning of the word  $\text{תְּדָבָר}$  *tz'dekah* is the redemptive saving activity of God.

Following this thought into the Gospels when Jesus says in Matthew 6 "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness," this could be read as seek first the kingship of God – that is, make God your King – and his redemptive saving activity and everything else is added to you. God's Kingdom and his redemptive saving activity go hand in hand. The resurrection is the ultimate act of redemption giving us the assurance and a solid foundation of faith that can sustain us through adversity and trial. If Jesus rose from the dead then truly he has the power and authority to come to our assistance during times of testing. The Gospel of Luke (23:46) has Jesus quote verse 5 of this psalm "into Your hands I commit my spirit" as one of his last words on the cross. When Jesus needed assurance from his Father the most, he chose to recall the words of this psalm.

**1 Peter 2:2-12.** Peter makes strong use of the allegory of the Temple, stones, Israel, and the new people of God. There is always the danger when using allegory as an interpretive method of exegesis in taking the allegory in its literal sense instead of the text itself. Taking allegory too literally can lead us into some very unhelpful places. In the Hebraic exegetical tradition, all interpretive methods are valid, including allegory, provided it does not contradict the literal sense of the text. For example, you cannot spiritualize the resurrection by claiming the resurrection did not occur, as that would be denying the literal meaning of the resurrection.

Jesus is called a living stone – an allusion also to the resurrection for Jesus is alive and not dead. We then also live because we are connected to him who is alive. Peter was familiar with the Temple in Jerusalem and the levitical priesthood that tended to the temple service. Now just as God has called and chosen Israel to be his dwelling place, the new people of God – both Jews and Gentiles – are also called and chosen. Israel had a priesthood and there would also be a priesthood for God's new people that would include everyone. Everyone has access to the Father and the ability to offer sacrifice and praise directly to him.

The allegory continues in that the living stones of the spiritual temple need a firm foundation. And that foundation is the Messiah Jesus whom Peter describes as the *Chief Cornerstone* from Psalm 118. Cornerstone might not be the best translation here as the Hebrew is *Rosh Pina* which in its archaeological context is used to describe the *capstone* and not a stone found in the corner flooring. A

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capstone is the final stone in a supporting arch that binds the whole structure of the arch and building together through the application of force and not through the binding of the mortar itself.

There is an interesting midrash on Psalm 118 in which the Jewish sages tell a story of the construction of the Temple under King Solomon. Stones for the building of the Temple were hewed and shaped offsite and then transported to the Temple. They were not cut or shaped onsite and so construction of the Temple was done in reverent silence. The story goes that one day a stone arrived from the quarry that simply did not fit anywhere. Not in a wall, not in the floor. It was deemed by the builders to have been a mistake and rejected or set aside. As the Temple neared its completion the last and most important supporting arch was in need of a final stone, the capstone. Lo and behold the only stone that was found to fit into place and that could hold and support the full weight of the completed Temple was the rejected stone that the builders had laid aside.

**John 14:1-14.** The gospel passage opens with some troubled disciples. Jesus has warned them in the previous chapter that one of their number would betray him, so it's understandable that now we find them concerned about this accusation. Jesus invites them to believe in him just as they believe in God. Faith in Jesus will not keep troubled times far away from us, but it will definitely help to encourage our troubled hearts during those times. Jesus then provides a reason for the faith and enragement, he will provide a "room in his father's house." In its earthly context the Temple of Jerusalem – which Jesus had called his Fathers house – had many rooms for all kinds of different purposes. However, here Jesus is describing something of the world to come.

Unfortunately, some translations describe these rooms as *mansions*, when the Greek might be better rendered as *dwelling places*. This has caused some people to think that we all get a mansion in heaven. If we think this through logically we might start asking ourselves why we would possibly need a mansion in heaven in the first place. What exactly are we going to put in it? A bed? Why would you need a bed in heaven? Where would you get the furniture from, who is making this furniture and for what purpose? Is the mansion to protect us from the weather?

The question as to why we would 'need a room in heaven in the first place' should lead us to the Hebraic context of what Jesus is saying. In Hebrew, we would say "there is to you a place in the world to come." Not a physical room or structure, but a place like a role, station, or function. These are words of encouragement and assurance. The way to this place is through a person, the person of Jesus. Jesus says of himself that he is the way, he is the resurrection, he is the truth and the life.

Jesus reveals the love of God the Father proven through the resurrection of the Son. Our response to this grace and mercy is obedience. We are invited to believe in God and to believe in the Messiah. Belief is not only a system of doctrines and dogmas. As even demons believe in God and even know quite literally that Jesus rose for the dead. The Gospel of John does not use the word faith, only belief. But

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even in John the sense of the word belief implies action. Jesus plainly tells his disciples that, 'he who believes in me, the works that I do, he will also do'. Belief in Jesus will result in action. If not, then it simply is not belief, it is something else.

Jesus tells us that we are to do more works than he did. How is this even possible? I think the answer lies in the blessing of being part of the body of Christ and not an individual follower of the Messiah on our own. Jesus healed many people in the gospels. How many people has the church healed throughout history? Countless millions upon millions as we have established hospitals all over the world, fought back against plagues and diseases, and yes, even cured people through miracles. How many people did Jesus teach? Several hundred in his time on earth. How many people has the church taught throughout history? Again countless millions! Mission agencies not only brought the gospel but they also established schools and educational facilities all over the world. All this and more has been done in the name of Jesus.

This is not a magical formula that we tack on the end of a personal prayer to get the Lord to do things for us. In its Hebraic context saying *in the name of someone* indicates loyalty to that someone. When we declare in the name of Jesus, we are declaring our loyalty to him, to his kingdom, to his will, and to his rule and reign over our lives and families. It is not that Jesus is working for us but rather through our declaration of loyalty to him, we are working for him. This is something the demons cannot do as they might acknowledge his resurrection they will not acknowledge his kingship.

### ACNA Readings

**Acts 17:1-15.** The truth sets us free but that does not mean the proclamation of the truth will not be resisted. Unfortunately, Paul encountered more than his share of resistance to the gospel. In Thessaloniki, the good news of Messiah is received by both Jews and Gentiles in large numbers. Luke has an emphasis that notes prominent Greek women are among the new followers of Jesus.

However, as had happened in the previous cities of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra opposition develops amongst jealous Jewish agitators who reject the message of the resurrection. Interestingly, their opposition to Paul and the growing church includes a veiled half-truth. The agitators stir up resentment by highlighting that the message of the gospel has political implications with a *new king* opposed to Caesar. This is a half-truth; while Jesus is indeed proclaimed King and Messiah with the right to rule and reign over us, that does not detract from our obligations as good citizens of the nations in which we find ourselves in this world.

Incidents like this might be the reason Paul does not use terms like the kingdom of heaven in his epistles as it might end up being taken the wrong way by his Gentile readers. Opposition to the gospel in our modern world can also come – not only in the form of violence and persecution but in the subtle

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misunderstanding and twisting of the truth we proclaim. The sacred history of the church as recorded in the book of Acts demonstrates that despite agitators and opposition the good news resonates with both Jews and Gentiles and continues to grow. The kingdom of heaven continues to advance until this very day.

**Psalm 66:1-11.** In the Orthodox Churches, this psalm is called the Psalm of Resurrection and is prayed as one of the prayers on Easter Sunday. The whole earth is invited to engage in joyful praise to God. Salvation in the book of Psalms is not limited to the people of Israel but always to the whole of creation. Jewish prayers and blessings always acknowledge that God is not only the Lord over Israel but also the King of the Universe.

One of the main ways we are invited to praise the Lord is through the proclamation of his awesome deeds. There are many allusions to the exodus from Egypt in the psalm. For the Jewish people, the exodus is indeed a defining act of redemption in the history of Israel. For the whole world, including Israel, the resurrection is the ultimate act of redemption.

The psalmist acknowledges that sometimes the blessings of God occur during seasons of difficulties and testings. The images used are common ones in the Scriptures – such as being refined like precious metals or going through fire and water. The hope and assurance in the psalm is that the *affliction* was actually allowed by God and that he has journeyed through the troubles with his people and brought them – and us – out to rich fulfilment. Paul reflects this theology when he writes – quite challengingly – that suffering produces perseverance, character, and hope. Hope is the beautiful end, but the beginning, unfortunately, was one of suffering. We often desire that difficulties can be avoided but the reality is that trials and tribulations are often the defining moments of faith and character.

**About the author.** The Rev. Aaron Eime is a deacon at Christ Church Jerusalem and a teacher for CMJ Israel. Aaron studied in the master's program at Hebrew University with a focus on early Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Bible. He also studied psychology and sociology at Queensland University in Australia. Aaron is a dedicated Bible teacher exploring the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith. He reads Aramaic and ancient Greek and is fluent in German and Hebrew. He has taught internationally, including in Europe, North America, Hong Kong, and China. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and three children.