

¹²Many signs and wonders were done among the people through the hands of the apostles. With one mind, they all continued meeting in Solomon's Colonnade.

¹⁷The high priest rose up, along with his associates (that is, the party of the Sadducees), because they were filled with envy. ¹⁸They arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. ¹⁹But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the prison, brought them out, and said, ²⁰“Go, stand in the temple and keep on telling the people the whole message about this life.” ²¹After they heard this, they entered the temple courts at daybreak and began to teach.

When the high priest and his associates arrived, they called together the Sanhedrin (that is, the whole council of elders of the people of Israel). Then they sent orders to the jail to have the apostles brought in. ²²But when the officers arrived, they did not find them in the prison. They returned and reported, ²³“We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them, we found no one inside!”

²⁴When the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests heard these words, they were puzzled about them, wondering what could have happened.

²⁵Then someone came and reported to them, “Look! The men you put in prison are standing in the temple courts and teaching the people.”

²⁶Then the captain went with the officers and brought the apostles in without force, because they were afraid that the people might stone them. ²⁷After they brought them in, they had them stand before the Sanhedrin. The high priest asked them, ²⁸“Did we not give you strict orders not to teach in this name? Look, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you are determined to bring this man's blood down on us!”

²⁹But Peter and the apostles replied, “We must obey God rather than men. ³⁰The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you arrested and killed by hanging him on a cross. ³¹God exalted him to his right hand as Ruler and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and the forgiveness of sins. ³²We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

He was in the wrong place at the wrong time, drinking his morning coffee at the diner and minding his own business. But a gun was drawn, shots were fired, and a woman had been killed. Unfortunately for him, he saw the face of the shooter. It was unfortunate because now his life was full of fear. You see, the shooter was connected to a local crime ring, and the man who could identify the shooter had received plenty of messages and even visits from the shooter's associates, warning him that it would be a real shame if he testified.

Telling what you've seen and heard is usually easy work, but it's not always so. Sometimes speaking the truth requires courage because of how the truth might be received. We see the same conundrum with the apostles today, as they have to grapple with witnessing for the faith.

Since Christ ascended into heaven, the Apostles had been preaching nonstop about the world's Savior. Along with their preaching, they performed miracles to show their words had the authority of God behind them. But at one point, the Sadducees, a Jewish group that denied that there would be a resurrection of the dead, became bothered by Peter and John preaching that Jesus had risen, and had them arrested. The Sadducees warned these two apostles not to keep preaching about Jesus. Of course, these men very boldly refused. Because the Sadducees were such a well-connected group in the government, Peter and John were risking their lives by boldly refusing to tone-down their preaching.

Now, they are back out on the streets with the other apostles, continuing to do miracles and preach about the risen Lord. People are coming to faith in Jesus and bringing out the sick and suffering to be miraculously healed. Of course, this is still bothering the Sadducees. Along with the high priest, they rise up and arrest all the

apostles. They are envious and angry that these men bearing the name of Christ are gaining such favor in the eyes of the people. While the Pharisees were popular with the common people, the Sadducees were seen as the elites. They held a majority of the political power in Israel, but that only increased the people's distrust of the Sadducees. But now they didn't just have to contend with the Pharisees. They also had these followers of the criminal Jesus who were winning the hearts of the people.

They arrest the apostles and stash them in prison. This will keep their message from spreading, at least until they can figure out the next steps. But something happens in the prison that night. The Lord sends an angel to open the doors to the prison and give the apostles a message from God: "Go, stand in the temple and keep on telling the people the whole message about this life." The instructions are simple: Get out there and keep sharing Jesus.

But while the message would be simple, getting up the courage to do this would not be. They've already been arrested once, some of them twice. And they know that those people who have threatened them to stop are the most powerful people in the land. They've got the money, they've got the courts, and they've got a usual political enemy, the Pharisees, that also wants to see all this preaching of Jesus to come to an end. If the apostles go back out onto the streets, they might not just be arrested next time. Why not put your head down and just let things blow over for a while? Why not flee the city and go somewhere where the influence of the Sadducees is less? Because God, through his angel, tells them to go back to the temple and keep talking about Jesus. And this is exactly what they do.

The next day, the high priest and the council of elders meet together. They are going to bring the full weight of the Jewish government down on these apostles to scare them off. But when they send for the prison to bring the prisoners, they get this message: "We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them, we found no one inside!" But eventually the whereabouts of the apostles makes its way to the high priest: "Look! The men you put in prison are standing in the temple courts and teaching the people." Soldiers are sent to bring them to the leaders, without force over fear that the people will stone the soldiers, and the apostles come without putting up as little as a fight. This is their government, and whether they like their government or not, God has called them to respect that authority.

When they arrive before the leaders, the high priest asks them, "Did we not give you strict orders not to teach in this name? Look, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you are determined to bring this man's blood down on us!" You can sense the panic and anger in his words, but maybe you can also see a little guilt. Instead of backing down or tempering their words, the apostles continue to zealously share what they've been sharing: "We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you arrested and killed by hanging him on a cross. God exalted him to his right hand as Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and the forgiveness of sins. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."

These men are twelve witnesses of how the Father exalted his Son. And the Holy Spirit has borne witness that these things are true through the miracles that preceded preaching of salvation in Jesus. The apostles trust that the Holy Spirit will continue to do the work of changing hearts by their message because they will remain obedient to God and his call for them to keep sharing Jesus instead of obeying the godless calls of their leaders to be silent about the Savior.

God's church is always under persecution. Christians are beheaded every day. Churches are burnt down by those who think they can scare and silence believers through violence. The faithful have to flee their homelands because opposition to the gospel grows too great. But the news of the risen Savior is too good to lock away in a

safe. “Hide it under a bushel” is never an option, so they gather to proclaim Christ, even under threat of fires and guns a bombs.

Things are different here. Our church phone gets a lot of calls from scammers warning us that our car warranty is about to expire or that there is a problem with our Google business listing, but I’ve never gotten a call about a threat to our church. Sure, St. Mark got egged one time. People have spread rumors about our church. But by-and-large, we do not face head-on threats to our faith.

But that doesn’t mean we live lives free from persecution. In fact, the deceiver is crafty in using our own times against us, convincing us that our faith is never under threat and that no one is trying to stop us from proclaiming Jesus. But if that’s true, why is it that people here in the States are so much more hesitant to talk about Jesus publicly than Christians in Middle Eastern countries where they can be jailed for sharing Christ? Why do we teach our kids that discussing your religion is as inappropriate as talking about your money or your politics? In many ways, the devil has convinced us as a culture to self-stifle the proclamation of Jesus. “Keep it in your churches, but don’t bring it to the workplace or to the classroom.”

But the example of the apostles reminds us of the service theme today, that we have a meaningful mission. And that mission is to proclaim what the Lord has given us to proclaim, to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them into the triune God and teaching them the love of God.

Remember, God entrusts us with his message, not angels. It’s not that the angels could not tell the world about the Savior. But God chooses people, the crown of his creation, imperfect messengers as they are, to share his good news. We see this pattern of angels giving the message to people to share with others. We see it with the shepherds on Christmas. We see it with the women at the tomb on Easter morning. And we see it here. This means that God does not choose you because he needs you. He chooses you because he wants to give you the ultimate privilege of sharing in his ministry and seeing the power of the Holy Spirit in changing hearts with his good word.

But that does not mean that every person we share the gospel with will believe it or even tolerate it. Just as we see from Acts 5, people will lash out in anger when the law of God is preached, because they want to silence their guilty consciences. But does that mean we should remain silent? We have the Penicillin that will cure their infection of sin, the only effective treatment. How loving are we when we withhold it to protect our own relationship with them?

“We must obey God rather than men” is not just a phrase we use when governments or bosses or parents instruct us to do something contrary to God’s word. We can also use it when our own hearts demand that we violate God’s design for our lives. Plenty of times we have opportunities to share Jesus with people, but we don’t really want to open ourselves up to rejection or threats. We don’t want to bust up that relationship with a friend. We don’t want to be persona non grata at our cousin’s house. But God calls us to share his message, so we must obey God in that instance rather than the old nature in our hearts. And God commands this, not because he wants to put us into stressful situations or tank our popularity, but because his message is the one thing needed for this ailing world. Sinners must be shown their sin, and those who feel the pain of their sin must be shown the Savior from sin.

Do not be afraid to testify from the stand as you stand and testify to the whole truth and nothing but the truth of Jesus. You have been called to witness to the truth, entrusted with a message that is not your own, because it’s better than anything mankind could ever come up with. Christ has risen! Sins are paid for! Heaven is freely ours! You know this. Now go share it. Amen.