

Jesus the Victor!
 A sermon by David Roquemore
 First Presbyterian Church, Newton NC
 April 14, 2024

Acts 3: 12-19

Today I am preaching on Acts, rather than the gospel lesson. Brandon, you will have to get used to this — for the next few weeks anyway!

There is a certain construction you often see in liturgical churches. For example, on Good Friday if you were to visit a Greek church, you would hear, “Today He who hung the earth upon the waters is hung upon the Cross.” Jesus who hung the earth is hung on a cross. Jesus who did x has x done to him. That’s the pattern. There are a lot of these. They are called antiphons.

There are two of them in the text for today from Acts:

3:14 But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you,

3:15 and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses.

Let’s look closer: you all rejected the Righteous One. Jesus is the righteous one, who has no sin, who is holy and good. But we rejected him and instead asked to have a murderer given to us. That would be Barabbas. Barabbas was a murderer, a man who was guilty of that crime, and probably others, who may have been an insurrectionist, opposed to Roman rule. The people would want someone who would overthrow Rome.

The writer Per Lagerkvist wrote a novel about Barabbas back in 1950; it was made into a television movie with Anthony Quinn - maybe you remember it? In that story, Barabbas becomes obsessed with Jesus. He watches the crucifixion, and along the way, he encounters Christians. Finally he too is crucified for some crime he commits. The novel ends with Barabbas still questioning, having never found faith.

We don’t know much about Barabbas, but we do know this: he was not a righteous man. Yet his life is spared when he is freed instead of Jesus. Jesus is the righteous one, yet he dies so that Barabbas can live — he dies so that all of us, unrighteous though we are, may live.

Verse fifteen continues: you killed the Author of life. Jesus is the author of life, the creator of us all. We killed him, took away his life. We killed the creator of life, but God raised him from the dead!

Peter goes on: this name — Jesus’ name — has made this man strong; Peter and John have healed a man born a cripple. They tell him to walk in the name of Jesus, and he

does. And that power, that name, that healing and salvation is available to us! Peter tells them to repent and believe, so that their sins will be forgiven.

Well, I don't think that Jesus' death was some sort of exchange, in which we are set free because he dies, or that he dies as a substitute for us. I don't think his death is made actual or real for us the moment we say some words or pray a prayer. It isn't a transaction. But his death was sacrificial — in what sense, though?

The traditional view many of us grew up with is that Jesus was punished for our sins, on the cross, because God is so holy that He cannot countenance us, that forgiveness simply means that when God looks at us he sees the righteousness of Jesus. Jesus substitutes for us on the cross, taking the punishment that should be ours. This is known as penal substitutionary atonement. Most people believe some version of that, even if they haven't thought it through. That's just what Christian faith is....

It isn't that God is angry with us and wants his righteousness to be honored, and so needs to kill someone to do away with sin. It isn't that God needs a sacrifice in order to protect his honor and glory. But God does want to see evil destroyed, and death done away with — how is God to accomplish this?

What Jesus does in his death and resurrection is conquer death — that is why we sing so often that death is destroyed. Death cannot hold him, so to speak. Don't ask me why — I suppose it is because he is righteous and without sin. Some things remain a mystery....

You know, there used to be a series published by the Christian Century, entitled, "My Mind Has Changed," in which famous theologians would tell you why they had changed what they believe over the years. Well, my mind has changed because I see that the substitution theories of the atonement make God the Father into some kind of supernatural grouch who is mad at us. Mad at the world. Mad at everyone. And that doesn't square with the God of love I find in the Scriptures. People will say, "don't you believe the Bible?" And I will say, yes, I do. That's why I have changed my approach to what Jesus did on the cross.

You may not agree with me; you may find a transactional approach more comforting. That's fine; we can disagree. But we all agree that Jesus Christ is the Risen Lord, and is our Lord and King. We all agree that salvation comes through the actions of Jesus, his "work" on the Cross.

Jesus is the victor, the one who conquers death and sin. He conquers them, robs them of their power over us, and conclusively deals with them as God. Jesus forgives our sin, and calls us out of them, calls us to new and better life. Jesus wants us to stop sinning, to the degree that we can do that, relying on his grace to do it. When we can't stop, when it is inevitable that we sin, we rely on his forgiveness, remembering that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

Jesus sends the Spirit to us who supports us and aids us in breaking from sin, who calls us from death to life, who wants to see us obey Jesus Christ. The Spirit prays for us with

sighs too deep for words, and fills us with power and grace from above so that we can avoid sin; when we can't avoid sin, the Spirit is there endlessly calling us back to Jesus. Jesus is the victor over sin and over death — these need no longer frighten us. It isn't that some angry god is going to condemn us for these things: we have Jesus the Victor on our side. It isn't that we are left with the results of our sins: we have Jesus the Victor on our side. Sin will not defeat us, and death need not scare us. Jesus the Victor promises that we will live forever with him. In glory, or paradise, or heaven, however you conceive it. We will be with him. That's all we need.

In all of this we see the love of God the Father, the love of the triune God, creating us, redeeming us, and sustaining us through the good and the bad, through the dim scary times and the bright light of his presence, so that we can continue to walk with him, and be one with him, so that one day, we see Jesus face to face.

Thanks be to God! Amen.