

**THREAT TO THE STATUS QUO; ACTS 5: 27-33; EASTER II, APRIL 3, 2016;
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There's a famous scene in the movie *Cool Hand Luke* in which Luke, a prisoner on a Florida chain gang, played by Paul Newman, steps over the line after the Captain of the guards spells out all the rules and punishments for not following the rules.

The Captain tells Luke that he's going to learn to toe the line which he refers to as 'getting his mind right' and then has leg chains put on Luke; at which point Luke says, "I wish you'd stop bein' so good to me.' That comment amounts to disrespect for authority because Luke isn't yet afraid enough of the authority. So the Captain strikes Luke, hard, with his stick; Luke falls to the ground then the Captain says, to the rest of the convicts and other guards, "What we have here is a failure to communicate."

You may remember the other time that line is used in the movie. Luke and one of the other convicts decide to attempt an escape. Eventually, the posse of cars and dogs and armed guards catch up with them; the two are holed up in a small church. The other convict gives up. Luke is in the church talking with the God who he refers to as 'the Old Man', and says "You made me this way, but it's getting pretty hard to keep going; every way out is blocked. How much longer do I have to keep this up?" The other convict is outside trying to talk Luke into giving up, then Luke steps into an open window of the church, stares out into the head-beams of the cars and says, "What we have here is a failure to communicate." At which point he is shot in the throat and killed.

Luke is a classic Christ figure. The scene in the church evokes Christ in the Garden asking to God, the Old Man, his Father to remove his cup of suffering.

The other convict, Luke's biggest admirer who acts impulsively with almost child-like loyalty, could be the disciple Peter- especially at the end when he turns on Luke and tries to talk him out of resisting the authorities.

The movie was made in 1967 and considered an anti-establishment, anti-War film. Luke is an army veteran and some see the Captain, with his pronounced southern drawl, as the figure of LBJ.

I raise this classic of a movie to give us some insight into what is taking place in today's story from the Book of Acts.

Peter and the other apostles were brought before the council – the Sanhedrin – the same body that was responsible for orchestrating the crucifixion of Jesus. You may remember how after the arrest and crucifixion the disciples scattered in terror and hid in fear of being caught by the authorities as accomplices of Jesus the criminal of the state.

But that has changed. Now, in chapter five of Acts, they are emboldened apostles (meaning those sent out) because back in chapter two the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples on Pentecost and empowered them to form the church for the purpose of spreading the good news of resurrection and Easter.

In today's story, they are all 'Cool Hand Luke's' if you will, hauled in by the authorities, told what the rules are, not to preach resurrection and then like Luke they promptly go out about bucking the system, proclaiming the end of the reign of death. The Sanhedrin, like the Captain, is furious at their disrespect for their authority and bold violation of the 'rules.'

So the Sanhedrin conspires to put the upstart, followers of Jesus to death. Now it's authorities who are frightened; they are afraid if they lose their grip on these nobodies from Galilee they will lose their control of the system; others may start rebelling; just as Luke had to be made an example of, so the Sanhedrin will make an example of the apostles. If word spreads that death has been defeated there is no telling what the people might do, how far they will go to overthrow the authorities.

This is a familiar scenario. It is why some voters are enamored of 'outsider' candidates and suspicious of 'insider' candidates. But the insiders – whether of a church or government or school – are willing to go to lethal ends to defend their power and keep the status quo intact. Remember Al Pacino, the retired, blind Vietnam veteran in *Scent of a Woman* who exposes the duplicitous, fraudulent rich kids and their parents at a New England boarding school and the faculty and head master they control. Or Mark Ruffalo, Michael Keaton and Leiv Schreiber in this year's Best Picture *Spotlight*, that tells the story of the church's cover-up of child abuse.

Often, the status quo is protecting someone's position and power. It's why there was a Reformation; it's why Calvin and Luther – a non-ordained French lawyer and a lowly Augustinian monk – were condemned and hunted by the ecclesiastical authorities when the proposed changes to the Roman Church.

The importance of today's story from Acts on the second Sunday of Easter is that it reminds us that the resurrection of Jesus on Easter day wasn't just about the resurrection of a dead body; it was about the ongoing resurrection of calcified, oppressive social/political systems.

In other words, Easter isn't confined to the realm of personal spirituality; it is a movement that has implications for all of the structures of authority which claim jurisdiction over people's lives.

What the resurrection and good news of Easter announces is that God intends the human family to be liberated from all the reasons, systems, policies and ideologies that keep people from living abundant, fulfilled lives.

You might find a follower of Jesus challenging a racist remark overheard in the locker room or getting people to sign petitions to re-institute the Voter Rights Act in southern states that are now trying to impose new restrictions and obstacles to the poor and people of color to prevent them from having access to the ballot box – knowing that those poor voters are not likely to keep the candidates of the system in power. The question of Easter for the church, for those who belong to and support the mission of the church is "where is our community, our nation, our world are people being held captive by some antiquated status quo that serves only to protect the people in power?"

I suspect once we started identifying all the places where the Kingdom of Death is making life difficult, if not impossible for particularly for the vulnerable, the people who've been relegated to the social and economic margins, I suspect we'd find all kinds of places where the Holy Spirit is calling us to preach resurrection.

The question is not if will we take on the system; but which system we will take on – the education system, the health care system, the banking system, the system that hires workers on the construction projects in Buffalo and has failed to reach out to minorities; the system in Albany that cuts deals in smoke filled rooms; the legislature of North Carolina that has turned its face the other way rather than to confront discrimination based on sexual orientation; or the GOP dominated Congress who have decided to brazenly abdicate their constitutional duty to hold hearings for the President's nominee for the Supreme Court.

A local church has an important role to play in preaching resurrection to the wider community and world. Sometimes just naming the injustice and those who perpetuate it is enough; but often it takes more – petitions, community organizing, protests, marshaling the democratic process to bring change – we do after all live in a democracy. All the churches, all the clergy and all the members have an important role to play in bringing the Kingdom of God about; the question for us is: where are we being called preach Easter? To preach resurrection?

The reassuring thing is that it is the power of God, not our power, that topples old systems and raises up new and just policies and elected officials.

Our task is to discern which wall of Jericho we are being called to blow the trumpet against; which tomb of death we are called to visit and proclaim, "He is risen, He is risen indeed!"

Preaching resurrection is what this congregation does well. It's time again to find out which Sanhedrin we are being called to disobey.
Amen.