

“And They Arrested Them” - The Risk of Love and the Mission of the Church

Introduction

The Text

A. Let me remind you where we are now in the book of Acts:

1. We just finished [ch. 3](#), where Peter and John are heading into the temple, and out in front there, they come to a man who has been crippled from birth.
2. Moved by Holy Spirit, they heal him in Jesus' name.
3. And when the crowds see it, they all come running and gather around the apostles. And Peter preaches what seems to have been his second sermon, so far as the book of Acts records.
4. And whether he is able to finish the sermon or not, we're not entirely sure. One thing we know: it's not just the Jewish people there in the temple who catch wind of what's happened, the authorities there are onto it as well—and it seems they want to make a swift end of all the commotion and restore order to the place.

B. So here's what we read . . .

¹ And as they [Peter and John] were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, ² greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. ³ And they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. ⁴ But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand.

⁵ On the next day their rulers and elders and scribes gathered together in Jerusalem, ⁶ with Annas the high priest and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. ⁷ And when they had set them in the midst, they inquired, “By what power or by what name did you do this?” ⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders, ⁹ if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, ¹⁰ let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well. ¹¹ This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. ¹² And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

¹³ Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus. (Acts 4:1–13)

Love God. Love Neighbor. Be Safe?

A. I was at a family reunion in Michigan this past summer . . .

1. And my immediate family stayed a couple days later than all the rest just to have a little time to ourselves to enjoy the area a bit more.
 2. We were staying just outside of Traverse City. And we decided to make a day of driving and exploring the Old Mission Peninsula—it's this narrow finger of land that extends into the Grand Traverse Bay on the eastern side of Lake Michigan.
 3. It's stunningly beautiful. The water's so clear and crystal blue that you almost feel you're on a tropical island somewhere. We had a great time.
- B. But, near the beginning of our journey, we passed by an old Lutheran church. And it had this sign out in front that caught my eye. Here's what it said: "Love God. Love neighbor. Be safe."
1. Now that might not seem all that striking or concerning to you. You may have just driven right on by and not given it more than a passing thought.
 2. But I'd been preaching through the book of Acts to this point and I had this early church on my mind. And here's what struck me . . .
- C. "Love God. Love neighbor. Be safe." It's three little exhortations.
1. The first two—"love God, love neighbor"—what could be wrong with that? Nothing is wrong with that. That's straight Bible. Those are what Jesus identifies as the two greatest commandments in all the Scriptures. So of course. Do that. No problem there.
 2. But the problem for me was introduced with that third little exhortation: "Stay safe." That's what troubled me as I read it.
 - a. Because the first two are right on target—they even line up in many ways with our Mission and Values here at Mercy Hill.
 - b. But then this third, in my estimation at least, threatens to sabotage and undermine it all.
- D. So far as I see it, you can't really do the first two if you're committed to doing this last one. To put it plainly: you can't love God, love neighbor, and keep yourself safe from all harm at the same time.
1. Indeed, to love God and love neighbor in the name of Jesus is to throw yourself open to all manner of risk and danger.
 - a. When you open your heart, or your home, or your hand, or your mouth in love for God and others—you're going to get hurt, you're going to get rejected; it's not always going to be easy or comfortable . . . or safe.
 - i. But if you want the kingdom of God to advance in this city in and through you, you can't avoid this. This is how it works.
- E. And that's what's so clear in the book of Acts, and in our story today, right?
1. They're loving God and they're loving neighbor . . . and they're being arrested for it, they're behind bars because of it—later on, some are going to get killed as a result of it.

- a. If they were attempting to follow this little threefold motto, the church never gets out of the gate! They would never have stepped out from behind those closed doors they had locked back when Jesus had first been crucified.
 - i. Their commitment to staying safe would have kept them from going out!

Love God. Love Neighbor. Take Risks!

- A. So I was troubled by that sign out in front of the church. So help me God, such a thing will never be out in front of any church I pastor.
 - 1. If you want a sign that's more aligned with the call of Christ on us in the Scriptures, perhaps it could go something like this: "Love God. Love neighbor. (And in Jesus' name) Take risks!" Now that's a sign I can rally behind!
- B. Megan and I got a little taste of this even as we were signing up to help with Beautiful Day—that outreach event we've been announcing, where churches from around the Bay Area are joining up to bless our cities in the name of Jesus.
 - 1. A number of Mercy Hill folks will be serving and doing work at Emma Prusch Farm. And, if you signed up, you may have noticed, but in the details for the day, it tells you not to wear the colors red or blue. Why? Well, presumably because of gangs. The farm is on the east side, and you've got to worry about some those things in the neighborhood there, I guess.
 - a. Well, how does that make you feel? I want to love God and love neighbor . . . but I want to stay safe. So you have to choose. Are you going to go and serve and love on these folks? Or are you going to stay home?
 - i. You see how the three collide? To go out is to risk.
- C. This is going to be a challenge for us, no doubt. Because, it seems to me, we live in a culture that prioritizes safety and risk management. We just want to be free from exposure or danger or the known (or unknown!) threats out there.
 - 1. So we have our security systems and our video camera doorbells and our deadbolts. And we have our insurance policies and our retirement accounts and our contingency plans and all of this. We're always trying to make sure that we're covered, that we're protected, that we're kept from harm (and even mild discomfort!) . . . that we stay safe.
 - 2. And, while I would never say that these sorts of things are wrong in and of themselves, in their place (of course, I lock the door to my house at night, I have insurance in case things go wrong, and all this)—when we go too far with this, when we find our security in these things rather than in Jesus—it can seriously hinder the cause of Christ and the advance of the gospel through us to others in our city.
- D. When we're so obsessed with minimizing risk that we shuffle our feet back from the edge of full-hearted obedience to Jesus—from showing and sharing the good news of the gospel with others,

however it might mess up our lives as a result—we also inadvertently minimize our kingdom impact, our spiritual vitality, our eternal reward.

1. We choose to live within a little circle we can control rather than in the wild freedom of the children of God, swept up by him and set on the adventure of a lifetime.

- a. But that's what he wants for us. That's what I want for us, for me and my family.

- E. So that's why we're going to dial into this topic together this morning. I signal to this for you there in the title of this sermon: *"And They Arrested Them' - The Risk of Love and the Mission of the Church."*

1. I want to help us consider this as it's worked out in four different dimensions: (1) In Our Text; (2) In Jesus; (3) In History; and then we'll come out at the end and wrestle a bit with whether or not it's working out (4) In Us?

(1) In Our Text

- A. Let me start by showing you the connection between the risk of love and the mission of the church as we see it in our text here in [Acts 4](#). Obviously, I've already alluded to it, but I want to consider it now in more detail.

1. Let me quickly make four observations for us: (1) They (these apostles) Take a Risk in Love; (2) They Suffer Because of It; (3) Jesus Gets Them through It; and (4) The Kingdom of God Advances.

Observation #1: They Take a Risk in Love

- A. The first thing you have to see is that these apostles took a risk.

1. As they're rolling into the temple, when they see this beggar in the dirt, listen, if they had just kept their heads down, diverted their gaze, and walked right by this guy, minding their own business (like so many of us do!) . . . they could have avoided this whole disaster.

2. But no! Instead, they were moved by his troubles. They were cut to the heart with compassion. They knew Jesus had something for this brother today.

- a. And they didn't shy away from it, they leaned in, they were willing to take a risk in love for God and neighbor.

- i. They knew it would probably draw attention, both good and bad—just like Jesus' miracles always did. They knew it could get them in hot water with the authorities. But they didn't care.

- B. And of course they didn't just show the love of Jesus to this brother. They spoke about the love of Jesus to the crowds that gathered around.

1. If it was a risk to heal him, it was an even greater risk to connect that healing to the gospel. But they did it anyways. They opened their mouths and they proclaimed the good news of the cross and the resurrection. They called people to repent and believe.
 - a. And, again, they know, some folks are going to hear and find the gospel to be the sweetest news in all the world.
 - b. But others, they're going to be offended by it—it's like nails running down the chalkboard of their fallen hearts. And they're going to get fed up and even ferocious.
 - i. And that's what happens next . . .

Observation #2: They Suffer Because of It

- A. So we read in vv. 1-3 there: “¹ And as they [Peter and John] were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, ² greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. ³ And they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening.”
 1. These religious authorities here, they see the miracle, they hear the news, and they're not moved by it, they're not changed by it . . . they're “greatly annoyed”—they're provoked, they're disturbed by it.
 - a. So they arrest them and put them behind bars.
- B. And the next day, when they drag them out before the Sanhedrin (which was basically the Jewish Supreme Court), I love how Peter begins there in vv. 8-9. He brings attention to how ridiculous the whole thing is. He says we are in trouble, we are “being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man . . .” (v. 9).
 1. “This is ridiculous. We're not on trial because we did some act of evil or injustice.
 2. We're on trial for an “act of kindness”—because we healed this brother in the name of Jesus.”
- C. If I could just say it again: listen, if you're going to truly love someone, anyone, it's going to cost you. You open your heart, you share your things, you talk about Jesus, you put yourself out there . . . you will suffer, in one way or another.
 1. It's risky. But there is no other way to reach people. So it's scary, I get it.
 - a. But here's what's great: Jesus doesn't leave us alone in that. He's with us in the midst of it. He gets us through it. And that's what we see next . . .

Observation #3: Jesus Gets Them through It

- A. They're not alone. Did you catch that? When these dudes drag Peter and John before them and ask: “By what power or by what name did you do this?” (v. 7)—what's the very next thing we read in v. 8: “Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them . . .”

1. What's that mean? Simply put: Jesus is here. They're not alone. Peter isn't left to his own resources. He doesn't have to dig deep and figure out what to say and do. He's "filled with the Holy Spirit."
- B. This is precisely the sort of thing Jesus promised his disciples to expect back when he was with them during his earthly ministry.
1. Consider what he says in Luke 12:11-12: " ¹¹ And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, ¹² for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say."
 2. He says something in a similar yet even more pointed fashion later in Luke 21:12-19 as the end for him is drawing near: " ¹² [T]hey will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. ¹³ This will be your opportunity to bear witness. ¹⁴ Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, ¹⁵ for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. ¹⁶ You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. ¹⁷ You will be hated by all for my name's sake. ¹⁸ But not a hair of your head will perish. ¹⁹ By your endurance you will gain your lives."
 - a. There are a couple things here I want to draw your attention to . . .

(1) The Whole Trinity Comes to Our Aid

- A. First, where Jesus said back in Luke 12 that the "Holy Spirit" (v. 12) will give them words, here he says that he himself will do it ("I will give you a mouth and wisdom" [v. 15]). And what's even more intriguing is that, in a parallel text in Matthew's gospel, he brings attention to the Father's activity in all this: "For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you" (Matt. 10:20).
1. In other words (here's what I want you to catch): the whole Trinity—Father, Son, Holy Spirit—is mobilized and unleashed in service of these risk-taking, suffering saints.
 - a. We are surrounded by God, in the fullest sense of the term, in these moments of danger. We are, emphatically, not alone. He's with us. He'll get us through.

(2) Even If We Die, We Live!

- A. But the second thing I want you to see is this: when we take a risk in love for God and neighbor, even if we should die for it, we live. Did you catch that?
- B. "[S]ome of you they will put to death" (v. 16). That's interesting, not all, but "some".
1. As we'll see later in Acts, there's this crazy chain of events, where in the very same chapter (Acts 12), on the one hand, Peter is miraculously freed from prison by an angel.
 2. And yet, on the other hand, James the brother of John is killed by Herod's sword.

- a. But here's what I want you to catch: both live!
 - b. In fact, it could be argued that James here enters into a life more full and more complete than Peter could have even imagined at this point. He's not less alive, but more.
- C. That's what Jesus is getting at when he says that, even if they kill you, "[not a hair of your head will perish](#)" (v. 18).
 - 1. What's that mean? For us bald guys, we're especially confused. "The hairs of my head perished a long time ago." What is Jesus saying?
 - 2. Here's what he's saying: "When you risk your life in love for God and neighbor, it's true, they may be so upset by you that they lop off your head . . . but you will get all that back and more in the resurrection, in the age to come."
 - a. And bald guys everywhere rejoice. It may be as barren as the Mohave desert up on your head right now, but someday soon in the new heavens and new earth, you're going to have a flowing mane the likes of which even Aslan will be jealous of.
- D. Even if you risk in love and die, you're not going to die. "[By your endurance you will gain your lives](#)" (v. 19).
 - 1. As Paul writes in [Phil. 1:21](#): "[For to me to live is Christ](#) [I'm going to live for him and love you], [and to die is gain.](#)"
- E. When you really get that, doesn't it just free you up all the more to take risks in love for others?
 - 1. In one sense, it's a risk, right? You put yourself in danger potentially.
 - 2. But, in another sense, you've never been safer, more secure. Because he's with you, he's got you, and he's going to get you through.
- F. And, wouldn't you know it, as people see you live this way in love for God and them, yes some will oppose, but many will be amazed and attracted and added to the Lord, and the kingdom of God will advance . . .

Observation #4: The Kingdom of God Advances

- A. Did you notice that little note there in [Acts 4:4](#)? "[But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand.](#)"
 - 1. Now, the last time we were given a headcount was in [Acts 2:41](#) where we were told that, after Peter preached on the day of Pentecost, some "[three thousand souls](#)" came to the Lord.
 - a. But here now, if you notice, the number has grown from three thousand to "[five thousand.](#)"
 - b. And, what's more, whereas in the first count, Luke was recording the number of "[souls](#)", now he's only giving us the number of "[men](#)"—which means, likely, there

were many more women and children that have come to faith who aren't even accounted for here. Some estimate, therefore, the early church may have grown to somewhere in the range of 10,000 people at this point.

- i. So the church is growing at a remarkable pace.
- B. And when you really step back and think about it, it's crazy isn't it? This isn't how you would at first think the church would grow.
1. We think: here's our plan for church growth—make the environment as comfortable as possible; put on a good show at our services; avoid any awkward silences and things like this; promise them health and wealth and prosperity . . . and then of course they'd come to Jesus.
 2. But this is opposite in many ways. Look at it.
 - a. Peter and John are being man-handled and arrested in front of this crowd.
 - b. And yet, the people, seeing this, are like: "Let me in on that! Wow that looks good. I want this Jesus too!"
- C. Imagine if, in the middle of my sermon this morning, all of a sudden you hear sirens approaching outside, and police push in through the doors, and they stop me mid-sentence, and they're cuffing me and clubbing me or whatever, all because of my faith.
1. And then imagine that, while they're doing that, I decide it's as good a time as any for an altar call. And I start inviting you to Jesus: "Repent and believe the good news. Don't you want what I have? Doesn't it look awesome!"
 - a. How many of you are coming to the altar? How many of you are signing up? With every head bowed and eye closed, how many of you are raising your hand to get in on that?
- D. You'd think people would be reluctant. But they're not. It's electric. It's magnetic. They're drawn to this Jesus Peter is heralding.
1. Why? How come? Well, don't you see?
 - a. They're not just hearing about this love of Jesus who laid his life down for them.
 - b. They're seeing it displayed in the life of his messengers.
 - i. It's not just empty words to these apostles. They believe it. They really think they've seen the risen Christ. They're willing to risk it all in love for us. There must be something to this Jesus. So the people want in. And the kingdom advances.
- E. And, you know, this is how it's always been for the church throughout history . . .

(2) In History

The Rise of Christianity

- A. On this point, Joey reminded me of the book by Rodney Stark entitled *The Rise of Christianity*, where, in it, this well-respected sociologist is trying to account for how this little Jesus movement somehow exploded in history the way that it did—to such a degree that, in just a few short centuries, the whole Roman empire had seemingly been turned upside down by it.
1. Well, one of the things he points to, interestingly enough, is the willingness of Christians to risk and suffer in love, not just for their own, but for those outside the faith as well.
- B. This became particularly evident during the various plagues that struck the empire in these early centuries A.D. These were devastating events. Some estimates say that perhaps a quarter to a third of the population of the Roman empire died as a result.
1. People were fleeing the cities, trying to get somewhere safe—even the physicians were running for the hills.
 2. But not the Christians. They were willing to risk their lives in love for God and neighbor.
- C. So for example, Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, wrote the following concerning the epidemic that befell Rome in the mid-third century: “Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead.”
1. He goes on to contrast this Christian response with that of those outside the church: “The heathen behaved in the very opposite way. At the first onset of the disease, they pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest, throwing them into the roads before they were dead and treated unburied corpses as dirt, hoping thereby to avert the spread and contagion of the fatal disease; but do what they might, they found it difficult to escape” (Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 7.22).
 - a. So, on the one hand, followers of Christ were willing to subject themselves to illness and even death if only to help another.
 - b. But, on the other hand, the pagans were willing to abandon and discard the sick if only to save themselves.
- D. And if you object to this account of the early church because it comes from a Christian source, perhaps you’d be interested to hear from a prominent pagan on the matter.
1. The Roman Emperor Julian (332-363 AD) was fed up with the way Christian charity was drawing people away from the pagan gods and traditions, and so he was trying to establish pagan charities of his own as a sort of competition. Writing in the fourth century now, here’s what he says: “Atheism [by which he actually means ‘Christianity’ because it’s a rejection of

the Roman gods] has been specially advanced through the loving service rendered to strangers, and through their care for the burial of the dead. It is a scandal that there is not a single Jew who is a beggar, and that the godless Galileans [i.e. 'Christians'] care not only for their own poor but for ours as well; while those who belong to us look in vain for the help that we should render them."

- E. Why did Christianity grow through the early centuries, ultimately overcoming pagan religions and all of this? Because the Christians were willing to risk in love.
1. This isn't just something we see in the book of Acts.
 2. It's something that carries on through the pages of history.

(3) In Jesus

They Had Been with Jesus

- A. But now we come to that all important question: Why? Why are the apostles this way? Why is the early church this way? Why have Christians throughout history acted in this way? Why are they willing to risk in love the way that they do? Where does this come from?
1. Well, I suppose I've already alluded to the answer, but I'll give it to you here again in just a word: Jesus.
 - a. When they risk, when they move towards, when they take on themselves the burdens of others, when they forego safety and lay down their lives in love, they are merely following in the way of their Master.
- B. You saw it there in [Acts 4:13](#), didn't you?
1. When the religious leaders saw the way that Peter and John were acting, with such boldness and courage and kindness and compassion, what did they conclude? "[And they recognized that they had been with Jesus.](#)"
 - a. There's only one source for this kind of holy insanity, if I could call it that. Jesus Christ of Nazareth. He's the one who's laid down the rails, paved the way, made such a thing possible, even reasonable, for mere men.
- C. Think about it. If Jesus wanted to merely stay safe he would have never come to earth, he would have never left the glory he had with his Father and taken on flesh in the first place.
1. I've heard it put like this: The incarnation of Jesus didn't just make God human, it made him killable. Do you get that?
 - a. Now he could be touched and hugged, oh yes.
 - b. But he could also be slapped or run through with a spear.

D. This is what accounts for that wildly paradoxical statement Peter made back in [Acts 3:15](#): “[Y]ou killed the Author of life”

1. “You killed God.” How is such a thing even possible? The incarnation. When he stepped into human flesh he made himself subject to human mortality, he made himself vulnerable, he became killable.

E. To move towards us in love endangered his life. But he didn’t pay it any mind. He didn’t care.

1. Indeed that is why he came in the first place—to lay his life down “as a ransom for many” ([Mark 10:45](#)); to take our wounds upon himself, so that we could be healed; to suffer under the weight of our sins, so that we could be forgiven; to be condemned and killed, so that we could be saved and truly live.

- a. Listen to me: if he doesn’t step down from the comforts of glory, the church doesn’t exist. Do you get that? There is no grace, no mercy, no healing, no salvation.

- i. The only reason we are here this morning is because the Son of God forsook safety, endangered himself, and came down in love for his Father and for us.

F. And so, of course, that’s why his people go and do the same. They’ve been transformed by it.

(4) In Us?

A. But now we have to ask: What about us?

1. Are we living like this? Are we taking up our cross and following after Jesus come what may?
2. Or are we trying to love God, love neighbor, and be safe?

B. To be clear:

1. I am not saying in all this that we should be careless, or thoughtless, or anything like that. You still need to be prayerful and wise. Taking risks in love for God and others doesn’t mean being foolish (cf. [Matt. 10:16](#)).
2. But I am saying: don’t let your first response be to self-protect and keep yourself safe at the cost of love.
 - a. Don’t live your life acting like you don’t have a Father in heaven who promises to provide for you and keep you to glory. You do (cf. [Luke 12:32-33](#)).
 - b. Don’t live like Jesus is still in the grave, when truly he’s alive and he’s already overcome Satan, sin, and death and anything else you could ever really be worried about. He has (cf. [Rom. 8:35-37](#)).
 - c. Don’t live like this life is all there is and you better keep what you have safe and stored up in barns or else all is lost. It’s not!

- C. You realize that there are at least two ways to be foolish in the Scriptures, right?
1. One, as I mentioned, is to be too careless—so you take silly risks, you just run off without thinking or praying.
 2. But the other is to be too careful—so you never risk, and you store it all up, and you pad your life, and you keep everything safe and secure.
 - a. Jesus says in that parable in [Luke 12](#) that God's going to come to the guy who lives like that and call him a "fool". Because you may have a nice posh life now, but you have nothing when it comes to eternity (cf. [vv. 20-21](#)). You loved yourself, but not God nor anyone else.
- D. I thought of that now famous statement by Jim Elliot, the missionary who was killed by the very people he was trying to bring the gospel to there in that Ecuadorian jungle. Here's what he said: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."
1. And let's be clear: he gave a lot. He wasn't even thirty years of age. He had his whole life ahead of him. He had a wife and a little daughter.
 - a. Some would say he's a fool. Some would say he lost in that transaction.
 - b. But Jesus wouldn't. No, in view of eternity, it's no question. He gained.
 - i. And, wouldn't you know it, some of the very men from Waodani tribe who had speared him to death on that day would, because of his risk in love, soon after come to Christ.
- E. This is how it works. We see it in our text, we see it in history, we see it in Jesus . . . but do we see it in us?
1. So listen, I don't know if, lately, you've been cowering behind closed doors, dead-bolted up and down the side. I don't know if you've been governed more by fear or by freedom, by self-concern or by self-sacrificial love.
 2. But I think know what Jesus would say to all of us this morning, wherever we are: Love God. Love neighbor. Take risks!