



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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They Boldly Spoke the Word of God

Acts 4

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June 21, 2026

Chapter and verse breaks in the Bible are not part of the original text. Chapter breaks were added about eight hundred years ago and verses about five hundred. There's an old biblical studies urban legend that Robert Estienne, the French printer who published one of the early New Testaments with verse division, marked them out while riding on horseback from Paris to Lyon, explaining the often frustrating way they cut through thoughts and sentences. Chapter breaks can be just as annoying. I say this because last week we left off our study of Acts at the end of Chapter 3, but the end of Chapter 3 isn't where this story ends. You'll remember that this story about Peter and John and the lame man followed right on the heels of Pentecost. Peter and John were on their way to the temple to pray when they met a lame man begging at the temple gate. "Silver and gold have I none," said Peter, "but such as I have I give. In the name of the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, get up and walk!" And he lifted up the man the man began to jump up and down and to praise God. And as everyone began to gather around, Peter began to preach. He reminded them of their own story, of God's promises going all the way back to Abraham, and how all those promises were fulfilled and how the story was brought to its climax in the death and resurrection and ascension of Jesus. I won't repeat everything I said last Sunday, but needless to say—and even if you aren't familiar with the story—you probably knew that trouble was coming. But that pesky chapter break. It saved you from an

hour-long sermon, but it also cut the story in half. So we'll pick up after the break, with Chapter 4, now. [It's page 1083 in the pew Bibles.]

Luke continues: "As they were speaking to the people, along came the priests, the chief of the temple guard, and the Sadducees. They were greatly annoyed that they were teaching the people and proclaiming that the resurrection of the dead had begun to happen in Jesus. They seized them and put them under guard until the next day, since it was already evening. But a large number of the people who had heard the message believed it and the number of men grew to five thousand."

The idea of the resurrection of the dead was a big deal for the Jews and you'd think that announcing that it had somehow begun in Jesus would be good news. And obviously it was for the thousands who believed. Not so much for the Sadducees. They were sad, you see, because they didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead. Okay, not really. Their name goes back to Zadok, the high priest in the days of David and Solomon. That name, Zadok, is also related to the Hebrew word for righteousness. So the Sadducees thought of themselves not only as the sons of Zadok, but also as the righteous ones. And in the First Century, they controlled the priesthood. They were aristocratic and they were in power and people like that don't usually like revolutionary ideas, and if there was there was a great revolutionary idea alive in Judah, it was the idea of the resurrection of the dead. Resurrection means that things are broken and that God will, one day, come to set things to rights—and that implied that the Sadducees were part of the problem needing to be set right. So they're upset at Peter's preaching. The Pharisees didn't like this talk either. As far as they—and everyone else who hoped for resurrection—were concerned, *all* God's people would be raised from the dead at the end of the age. The idea that Jesus was raised all by himself

was like heresy. And, of course, if Jesus had been raised, it meant he was the Messiah and they refused to accept that idea. So no matter how many eyewitnesses there were to the risen Jesus, it had never happened, so far as they were concerned.

But back to the Sadducees. They controlled the priesthood and the priests were the gatekeepers of Israel. And this talk about Jesus as Messiah and his being resurrected, which means he'd initiated the age to come already, that was the sort of talk that might spark a revolution. And, of course, a revolution was what was already happening as the gospel and the Spirit were beginning to do their work. But just as they hadn't recognised it in Jesus, the leaders of Israel refuse to recognise it now and they have Peter and John locked up for the night. Even still, Luke goes to the trouble to make the point that thousands believed anyway. The gospel cannot and will not be stopped!

Verse 5: "On the next day their rulers, the elders, and the scribes gathered in Jerusalem, along with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, Alexander, and all the members of the high-priestly family. When they'd stood them in the midst, they asked, 'How did you do this? What power did you use? What name did you invoke?' Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit. 'Rulers of the people and elders,' he said, 'if the question we're being asked today is about a good deed done for a sick man, and whose power it was that rescued him, let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that this man stands before you fit and well because of the name of the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, whom you crucified, but whom God raised from the dead. He is the stone which you builders rejected, but which has become the head cornerstone. Rescue won't come from anyone else. There is no other name given under heaven and among men by which we must be rescued.'"

Do you remember that scene in Luke 11 where Jesus is confronted after casting out a demon? “You can only cast them out, because you’re one of them,” they accused him. The same thing is happening again. I think Luke wants to highlight that what’s happening here might be an “act” happening through the apostles, but it’s still ultimately Jesus acting. Or the Spirit, which amounts to the same thing. Luke makes a point of saying that Peter was full of the Spirit when he answered the accusation. So just like Jesus, when the council asks them in whose name they healed the lame man, not only is Peter bold to announce that it’s Jesus of Nazareth, they boldly assert that he is the Messiah—the one they crucified, but whom God raised from the dead. So Peter is reasserting everything: It’s Jesus. Yes the one they crucified. And this isn’t just about a lame man walking again, this is about the resurrection of the dead. It’s about the fact that Jesus is Lord and that the revolution has begun. The age to come, new creation, the kingdom of God is here. In fact, they quote Psalm 118 at the council to explain it all. Psalm 118 is a psalm of the temple. It’s about people going up to the temple to celebrate God’s new day to claim his rescue, his salvation. It’s a psalm about God’s life-giving power and it’s about God bringing his people through trouble and rescuing them from danger. It’s a psalm about trusting in God’s mercy and it’s a psalm about God’s victory over the powers of the world. “It is better trust in the Lord, than to put confidence in man...than to put confidence in princes,” says the Psalmist (vv. 8-9).

So they’re saying, “It’s Jesus. He really is the Messiah and he really has inaugurated God’s new age. But then it’s like they’re deliberately poking a stick in these folks’ eye. The Sadducees (and the Pharisees, too, and most people) were all about the temple. It was the embodiment of Israel’s hopes for God’s rescue and for the fulfilment of his promises to one

day come again to dwell with his people. And so this whole episode started with a man who’d been sitting in the temple gate for years, hoping for a rescue, yet never healed, and now suddenly healed by Peter and John—in the power of Jesus. So that’s the first thing. It says that God has, in fact, returned to dwell with his people, but instead of being in the holy of holies, he’s indwelling the disciples of Jesus. And then, in case they hadn’t made the connection, Peter, inspired by the Spirit, quotes Psalm 118 at them. Yes, the hope of God’s return is happening—in Jesus. Yes, God is now present in his temple—but that temple isn’t made of stone, it’s these Jesus people. And yes, God has come to rescue us just as he promised, to set this broken world to rights, to wipe away the tears—through Jesus. And at the same time, it would be hard for the council to miss the hint that the mortal princes, the people from whom God’s people need to be rescued are not the pagan nations, but the Sadducees and elders and scribes who are rejecting Jesus. (Yes, the pagan nations, too, but first, God’s got to deal with the corrupt leaders of his own people.)

It’s the same thing Peter has been preaching, first on Pentecost, then to the crowd who gathered around the lame man when they saw him jumping up and down. Every time, Peter grounds God’s salvation in Jesus as the fulfilment of his promises and of Israel’s story. Every time, it’s the announcement that Jesus is Lord; that he’s come to rescue his people; and every time, it’s a call to repentance and faith. This sort of situational astuteness and gospel boldness is what it looks like to be full of God’s Spirit. And the council recognised this, even if they didn’t want to admit what (or who) it was. Verse 13: “When they saw how boldly Peter and John were speaking and realised that they were untrained, ordinary men, they were astonished and they recognised them as men who had been with Jesus. And when they saw the man who had been

healed standing with them, they had nothing to say in reply. They ordered them to be put out of the assembly while they conferred amongst themselves. ‘What can we do to these men?’ they said. ‘This is a spectacular sign that has happened through them. All Jerusalem knows it, and we can’t deny it. But we certainly don’t want it to spread any further amongst the people. So let’s threaten them with awful consequences if they speak anymore in this name to anyone.’ So they called them in and gave them orders not to speak at all or to teach in the name of Jesus.”

It’s comical and I think that’s what Luke intended. It’s like they’ve completely missed the significance of what Peter and John have seen. They’ve seen Jesus risen from the grave. They saw him ascend to his throne. They heard everything he said. They saw everything he did. And now they’re doing the same sorts of things themselves in his name. They *know*, without a doubt, that in Jesus God has come, that Jesus is Lord, that the kingdom is now, and that the days of the principalities and powers, the old temple, and its priests are numbered. Peter and John know which is the winning side...without a doubt. Threatening them isn’t going to change that.

Brothers and Sisters, we really need to think on that. Don’t just read Acts and let it go in one ear and out the other. Stick a finger in one ear if you have to, but let this sink in. Because you and I have just as much reason to be as confident as Peter and John. No, we aren’t eyewitnesses to the resurrection or the ascension, but we have every reason to believe the accounts of them. Someone a while ago asked me about difficulties with the creation accounts in Genesis and with the history of the Exodus. There are difficulties in the Bible. There are hard philosophical questions for which I haven’t yet found the perfect answer. But I do know that Jesus rose from the dead. I’ve heard all the arguments against it.

And they don't hold up. I don't want to get into those details here, because that's not what our text today is about. My point is simply that we have every reason to believe that Jesus rose from the dead and just like St. Paul, confronted by that inescapable reality, we have to accept that Jesus is the Messiah and that the rest of it all is true—even we have to wait til the New Jerusalem to understand the ins and outs of exactly how some of it is true. It's true. As Matt reminded us last week: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. And not only do those three facts change everything, they ought to give us confidence and boldness to proclaim the good news that Jesus is Lord, that God has come to our rescue, and that his kingdom is now. I'm not terribly concerned, for example, about Bill C-9. But even if I were, I'm not going to let it stop me proclaiming the good news. Because Jesus is King and in him the resurrection of the dead has begun. And that truth ought to be as revolutionary for us as it was for Peter and John and the King and his Parliament and his Prime Minister ought to be just as afraid of this resurrection revolution as the Sadducees, the elders, and the scribes were.

So Luke goes on in verse 19: "But Peter and John gave them this reply: 'You judge,' they said, 'whether it's right before God to listen to you rather than to God. As far as we're concerned, we can't stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.' Then they [the council] threatened them some more, and let them go. They couldn't find any way to punish them because of the people, since everyone was glorifying God for what had happened. After all, the man to whom the sign of healing had happened was over forty years old.

Brothers and Sisters, don't stop talking about what you have seen and heard. Peter and John were witnesses to the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. You know what you're a witness to?

You're witness to the transforming power of those events. Somehow most Christians seem totally unaware of this witness. Maybe it's because we're so oblivious to our own history. Maybe we need to read up on history so that we'll be aware of the power of the gospel. The very thing that Peter and John looked forward to is now—at least partially—in our past. Luke says there were five thousand believers in those days just after Pentecost. Brothers and Sisters, today there are 2.6 billion. They lived in a world in which no one outside Judaea had ever heard of Jesus. We live in a world where Jesus is known the world over. They lived in a little Jewish pocket surrounded by pagan nations so mired in moral filth it's hard for us to image the depth of depravity, because even as bad as might think the world is today, it has been so dramatically transformed by the gospel. Our world, even the secular parts of it, value things like mercy and compassion, because of the transforming power of the gospel. Brothers and Sisters, we live in a world that has been radically transformed by the power of the gospel. If Peter and John had reason to be confident, you and I have even more.

But notice, too, what they do when faced with opposition. Verse 23: "When they had been released, they went back to their own people and told them everything that the chief priests and the elders had said. When they heard it, they all together lifted up their voices to God. 'Sovereign Lord,' they said, 'you made heaven and earth and the sea and everything in them. And you said through the Holy Spirit, by the mouth of our father David, your servant, "Why did the nations fly into a rage, and why did the peoples think empty thoughts? The kings of the earth arose and rulers gathered themselves together against the Lord and against his anointed Messiah.'" It's true, Herod and Pontius Pilate, together with the nations and the peoples of Israel, gathered themselves together in this very city against your

holy servant Jesus, the one you anointed, to do whatever your hands and your plan had foreordained to take place. So now, Lord, look on their threats and grant that we, your servants, may speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand for healing, so that signs and wonders may come about through the name of your holy servant Jesus."

It would do us well—and it would do the kingdom well—if we responded to opposition the way the disciples did. We need to pray more and fret less. There is a battle raging in the world. Jesus has won the decisive victory, but that doesn't mean that the powers of this old age aren't trying to maintain their grip. They're like the bad guys in the movies, hanging on to the edge of the cliff with their fingers—doomed, but unwilling to give up. To pray is to stomp on their fingers and to send them falling. Pray. Pray the psalms. Pray Psalm 2 the way they do here. This was Israel's prayer, but Jesus and the events surrounding those first Christians reoriented it. They cry out with the Psalmist: Why do the nations rage? Why do the peoples think with empty thoughts? The kings of the earth have huddled together against the Lord. Except this time Israel herself had become one of the nations, her priests huddled together with Pontius Pilate. They'd crucified Jesus. And yet the disciples, in their prayer, also acknowledge that God is sovereign. Remember that for Jews to quote a line from a Psalm was to call to mind the whole thing. And in Psalm 2, yes the nations raged and their kings gathered together against his anointed, but then—do you remember Psalm 2?—God laughs at them, because they're fools. And God establishes his king on Mount Zion. The once raging nations become his inheritance. And Peter and John and the rest knew that in Jesus this psalm was being fulfilled. The Psalm concludes addressing those kings, "Now therefore, O Kings, be wise" and just so the disciples pray, "Now therefore, Lord, look on their threats

and grant that we, your servants, may speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand for healing, so that signs and wonders may come about through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” Brothers and Sisters, pray the Spirit-inspired scriptures back to God and things will happen. Luke writes in verse 31: “When they had prayed the place where they were gathered was shaken. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and they boldly spoke the word of God.”

We should learn this prayer. When the principalities and powers of the old age push back, pray this prayer. When the local council or the legislature or Parliament or the King or the courts push back, pray this prayer. When the gospel gets you in trouble with your family or at school or in your work, pray this prayer. When you become discouraged, if you’re struggling to keep the faith, if you’re wrestling with sin, if you feel cornered by the world, the flesh, and the devil, pray this prayer. Remember that you are a witness to the power of the gospel in the world. And pray this prayer.

And immediately Luke shows us the church—not just boldly proclaiming the good news—but also *living it out* as a community. Luke shows us the church as the working model of God’s new creation in the midst of the old. Luke shows us the church being the new temple: the place of God’s presence and the fulfilment of his promises of abundance and generosity. Look at verses 32-37. I was tempted to save these for next week as they lead us into Chapter 5. I actually think they could warrant their own sermon. But look at them now: “The company of those who believed had one heart and one soul.” Remember Paul telling the Philippians to “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Messiah Jesus”? Be of one Jesus-like mind. That plays out in all sorts of ways and Luke shows us one here: “Nobody said that they owned their property; instead they had everything

in common. The apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus with great power and great grace was upon all of them. For there was no needy person among them, since any who possessed lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sale, and placed it at the feet of the apostles, who then gave to each according to their need. Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, to whom the apostles gave the surname Barnabas, which means ‘son of encouragement’, sold some land which belonged to him, brought the money, and laid it at the apostle’s feet.”

As I said a few weeks ago when we looked at Chapter 2, this doesn’t mean they became a bunch of proto-Marxists. Luke’s point is that they became a *family* that live out the generosity and abundance of God’s new creation. We know from what we read later, that they had their own homes in which to meet. And the focus of their charity was on the truly indigent, especially widows—on people notably with no family to take care of them. And Paul will warn in his own letters that the able-bodied should get jobs instead of mooching off the community. Again, the point here is that they very visible became the community in which *torah* itself was being fulfilled. They’ve become the land of overflowing with milk and honey. They’ve become the people who truly love their neighbours. They’ve become the new temple in which God has returned to dwell with his people. And they’re doing and being this community right in Jerusalem: showing up the old Israel, exposing the priest and the council, showing that the old temple and its sacrifices are done. God has fulfilled his promises and he’s done so in Jesus and in the people who gathered around him in faith.

And, Brothers and Sisters, we ought to be the same sort of new creation, heaven-on-earth community here. As in Peter and John’s day, the powers that be will tell us to go away and

concentrate on heaven while they run the earth. They’ll warn us not to shove our religion down anyone’s throat, while they, of course, will do their best to shove their materialism, their commercialism, their hedonism down our throats. They’ll get frustrated with us when we refuse to worship in their temples to money and power and sex and politics and war. And when that happens, Brothers and Sisters, pray. And remember that Jesus has died, Jesus has risen, and that Jesus will come again. Be shaped by that story. Be confident, knowing that God has and is and will fulfil his promises. Be bold knowing that the gospel has power and that we live in a world transformed by that power, even if everyone ignores it or denies it. Pray. Remember. Be bold. And then remember that we are the family of the Messiah, marked out by his powerful name in our baptism and that in those baptismal waters, he’s plunged us in to his Spirit. He has made us new and we’re not the family meant be and to bring and to live out his new creation, to live out heaven on earth in anticipation of the day when Jesus finally sets it all to rights. We are the family that refuses to stop singing his praises and proclaiming his glory. That’s what we were created to do in the first place. That’s what Jesus has rescued us to do right now. And it’s what all creation will one day, by his grace, do again.

Let’s pray: O Lord, hear us in your mercy, we pray, and grant that we, to whom you have given the desire to pray, may be defended and comforted by your mighty aid, and strengthened in all dangers and adversities, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*