

But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him." When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people, stood up and gave orders to put the men outside for a little while. And he said to them, "Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. For before these days Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. After him Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered. So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!" So they took his advice, and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.

I know I've shared with people some of these "good news / bad news" jokes for pastors. The good news, pastor, is that church attendance has been up significantly for the last three weeks. The bad news is that this corresponds with the weeks of your vacation. The good news is that the elders have decided to send you to the Holy Land for a study tour. The bad news is that they are waiting for the next war to break out. The good news, pastor, is that Mrs. Jones is crazy about your sermons. The bad news is that Mrs. Jones is also crazy about the Texas Chain Saw Massacre and the Gong Show.

We live in a constant tension between good news and bad news. For us, as the people of God the good news is the news that we continue to celebrate today and every Sunday. It is the good news that the angel announced to the women that first Easter morning: **"Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said.**" (Matthew 28:5-6 - ESV) It is the good news that Peter declares in our text: ***The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.*** The good news is the good news of the Gospel, that wonderful news that Jesus Christ, crucified for us, has atoned for the sins of the whole world. It is the good news of that empty tomb, for the Lord of life has destroyed our enemies, as He rises from the dead and conquers sin, death and hell for us. The good news is what we sang as we came together in the Lord's name this day: ***He's risen, He's risen, Christ Jesus, the Lord; He opened death's prison, the incarnate, true Word. Break forth, hosts of heaven, in jubilant song and earth, sea, and mountain their praises prolong.*** (LSB 480, st. 1)

With such wonderful good news, what could be bad? There have been several things this year that remind us just how much the church has to struggle in the world today. One that caught my attention involves three people in the United Kingdom who have been criminally charged for praying silently in front of abortion clinics. Just as we have here in Canada, there are "Public Space Protection Orders" (PSPO) to create "safe spaces" around abortion clinics. These are defined as an area encompassing several city blocks. In England, the ordinance prohibits protesting 'whether by yourself or with others,' and it defines protesting to include prayer. When police found Adam Smith-Connor hanging around outside an abortion clinic in Bournemouth, England, his back to the building, they asked him what he was doing and he said he was "praying for [his] son, who is deceased." Thirty years ago, Smith-Connor paid to have his son aborted and is now grief-stricken for what he did. But his silent gesture of atonement was illegal. Silent prayer is a prayer. Two others faced similar charges. We have gone from policing speech to policing thought; from restricting religious expressions to restricting religious thoughts.

The other news item that caught my attention was that three 9-year-old children and the three adults killed by the transgender woman-identifying-as-a-man at a Christian school in Nashville were labelled as villains for being "anti-trans". The media coverage seemed to sympathize with the shooter, showing again how the world in which we live is hostile to Christians. Of course, our Lord Himself tells us: ***"If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you."*** (John 15:18, ESV)

There is no denying that it is hard for the church to carry out its ministry to the world in this day and age. But the truth is that nothing can stop the Good News from going out into the world. I don't think Gamaliel truly understood just how true his words

were when he said in our text: ***“if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them”***. God wants His good news of forgiveness and life through the death of Christ on the cross and through His rising from the dead to be proclaimed to all the world. As Jesus said to His apostles and His church in our Gospel lesson today: ***“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”*** (John 20:21 - ESV) At the command of Jesus, we go to share the hope and life we have in the living Christ with all the world. And, sure of His power at work in us; sure of His Spirit filling and blessing us, we know that nothing is going to stop us now, for the Living Lord goes before us to build His church and to bring His life and light to the nations.

Sometimes the struggles that the church has in its ministry to the world are of our own making. The residential school scandals; the abuse of children at the hand of religious leaders—how sad they are! But for Peter and the apostles, the early struggle was the persecution that came as they proclaimed Jesus as Lord. Our text is one of the early accounts of the days after Pentecost. The apostles are going out, proclaiming the message of Christ crucified and risen again. God blessed their efforts, and we are told ***And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women,*** (Acts 5:14 - ESV).

But their success brought the jealousy of the Jewish leaders. The apostles were arrested several times because of their preaching, but God provided the means for them to continue. Just before the events of our text, we are told that the apostles were put in jail, ***but during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.”*** (Acts 5:19-20 - ESV)

They do just that—they go and preach. Now, once again, they are brought before the Sanhedrin, and are told to stop preaching. Peter answers that they can’t stop, for ***We must obey God rather than men.*** As the Jewish leaders contemplated putting the apostles to death, we hear the advise that Gamaliel gave—if this is from men, it won’t amount to much, but if it is from God, you can’t stop it. I’m sure that Gamaliel thought that the new “Jesus movement” would die out, since Jesus had been crucified. But he didn’t believe in—or realize the impact—that the resurrection would have. Yes, earthly charismatic leaders have led many into various causes, only to see those efforts end with the death of the individual who started it. But the Saviour is not dead. He lives to bless and guide His church.

That is why nothing is going to stop us now. Missionary Hudson Taylor once said, “God’s work, done in God’s way, will never lack God’s supply”. When Peter made his great confession, saying to Jesus: ***“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”*** (Matthew 16:16 - ESV), Jesus told him, ***on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*** (Matthew 16:18 - ESV) St. Paul reminds us: ***for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*** (Philippians 2:13 - ESV) The apostles heard the command of Jesus to go—and they weren’t going to let anything stop them now. They would endure the persecution of men. They would face the thought of arrest and even martyrdom. They had this glorious, wonderful news that had to be shared. They had the message of hope that the world desperately needed to hear. Christ sent them to proclaim forgiveness in His name. He sent them to lead others into the wonderful new life we have in Christ—a life free from the influence, depravity and decadence of sin. Alive in Christ, empowered by His Spirit, they went into the world. Our text says: ***And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.***

Even though there are many like Thomas in our world today who doubt the resurrection, the work of the church goes on because it is of God. Even though there are many who do not see the evil of their sin or the need for the forgiveness and life that are in Christ, we proclaim both law and Gospel, because God is at work in our world. Even though there are many who look at the church and are sceptical because of the things they see and hear among Christians, we don’t give up. The church doesn’t have the trust of our world as it once had. We deserve much of the blame for that, for we, in our sinfulness, have not always been faithful to the truth of God’s Word. God grant that His church may repent, and cling again to the clear testimony of Holy Scripture! Thankfully, we still have this promise, this life, this joy that can set hearts free. We have the forgiveness that comes to us in Christ. The truth of God’s redemption can make a difference in our crime-ridden, identity confused and greed-driven world. It has made a difference through the years since the resurrection, and it will continue to bring hope to many until the day when Christ comes again. But the news will always be bad, if we don’t share that living hope that fills us.

I encourage and urge you to attend our circuit convocation with President Teuscher, as we talk about some of the challenges that face the church. Yet we will also see that Gamaliel was right: You can’t stop what God is doing. God will bless His church with success. In the midst of the good and bad, in times of persecution, hatred and struggle, we go in the name of Jesus. We may suffer for what we believe. Evil men will still try to corrupt the church and oppose the will of God. We may not always see the good or the glory at the end. But nothing can stop us now, for God is at work. Therefore we rejoice, for as Paul says: ***And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.*** (Philippians 1:6 - ESV). Amen.