group Bible Study – April 4, 2007

Read Acts chapters 4-6

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Well folks, we’re here. We have arrived at the most significant part of the Christian year – two weeks that capture the meaning of the Gospel and the Christian Hope more than any other. Holy Week and Easter.

What is the Good News of Jesus? If you had to describe the “Gospel” to someone, what would you say? I would say this: Holy Week and Easter. This is what it’s all about.

In Acts chapters 4-6 we read about what the apostles did and taught after Jesus was gone. They caused quite a scene – and almost got themselves killed in Jerusalem – all because they were preaching a frightening new message. They were openly speaking to the people about one thing only: “Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead” (Acts 4:10).

This was a scandal. Not only was it crazy talk, but by preaching this message to the crowds the apostles were undermining the religious and political authorities of Rome and Jerusalem. The priests and the leaders of the people called an emergency meeting to figure out a solution to this new problem. They came to this conclusion about how to deal with the apostles of Jesus: “to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn them to speak no longer to anyone about the name of Jesus” (Acts 4:17). So after a flogging and a warning against causing any more trouble, the leaders in Jerusalem set the Jesus-followers free and thought that they had ended this pesky resurrection nonsense.

A few days later what do we see? Peter and the other apostles are dragged before the council again because of the trouble they are causing, and Peter refuses to change his story: “The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead… we are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit” (Acts 5:30-32).

The church that followed Jesus Christ preached a super-simple message that had the power to change everything about our world: Jesus died, and God raised him. That’s the good news.

If the point of studying Acts is to understand what it means to be the followers of God in this "in between" time, then the death of Jesus is our strength for the journey. We can be fully present in the incomplete world of Now, because even God is fully present in it. The crucifixion is the sign of God embracing all the ambiguity of the present world. All the suffering and longing of creation is captured in the image of that one dead body hanging on a cross. The highest and greatest in the universe - the one who is supposed to be too powerful to be overcome by brokenness... dies... surrenders to the emptiness that is a part of all of our lives. And it's not even a "natural" death - it's the most profane kind of surrender, a surrender to the idiotic powers and systems of human society that destroy life. Absolute humiliation, absolute embrace of all that it means to live in this present creation.

In terms of the cycle of the Christian calendar, the reason why we focus so much time and energy on this disgusting reality is because there is no way to understand the resurrection and the coming kingdom without it. The resurrection of Jesus three days later is only important because it is the resurrection of the crucified Jesus. It is not some higher spiritual principle - it is the unexpected fact that in one time and space, in one human body, the real brokenness of the world was overcome. It is the signpost pointing beyond the world as we know it. The resurrection means that God intends for this broken world to be given a new kind of life. The death of Jesus is a part of the death that grips us all. It's what we need to be saved from. But Jesus was raised. We will be raised. God wins, death loses – and that is a promise.