

**Easter 4**  
**April 26, 2015**

*"Sheep Stand Up to Roaring Lions"*

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### **ACTS 4:23-33**

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**On** their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. <sup>24</sup> When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. <sup>25</sup> You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? <sup>26</sup> The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.' <sup>27</sup> Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. <sup>28</sup> They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. <sup>29</sup> Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. <sup>30</sup> Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus." <sup>31</sup> After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly. <sup>32</sup> All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. <sup>33</sup> With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all.

Domesticated sheep have no way of defending themselves. They are not like the family cat that can rear up and claw the eyes out of a dog that is attacking it. Wild sheep can jump up to the top of sheer cliffs to escape the mountain lion. Sheep on the farm are easy prey for the wild animals who want a quick and easy meal.

God's Word tells us that we are sheep that go astray. We would be lost forever if Jesus had not come to be our shepherd and give his life to rescue us. Now we are under his care and protection. His goodness and mercy follow us all the days our lives.

The early Christians joyfully came under the care and protection of Jesus their Shepherd. Their enemies gathered around them like roaring lions to attack them for witnessing so boldly to Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Instead of retreating in fear, they banded together and prayed for even greater boldness to stand up to these roaring lions.

At this point in my life I do not have to fear someone taking me out of this pulpit because I have been speaking about Jesus' resurrection from the dead. But there is another fear that faces you and me. We fear standing up for Jesus and speaking about his resurrection before people we know and love. Let's take a closer look at how these sheep under the care of Jesus their Shepherd stood up to roaring lions. I pray that will help us overcome our fears and give us greater boldness in our witness for Jesus.

## **The lions will roar**

Peter and John heard the lions roar. They came face to face with the very people who condemned Jesus to death. They were threatened with prison and death if they did not stop speaking in the name of Jesus and witnessing to his resurrection from the dead. Did Peter and John keep these threats to themselves? No, immediately they went back to their people and reported what the chief priests and elders said to them.

What did the early Christians do when they heard the vicious threats? They gathered together and prayed: "Sovereign Lord, you made the heaven and earth and the sea, and everything in them." That's a good way to begin a prayer in time of severe crisis and challenge, isn't it? Remind each other that the Lord made the heaven and earth and sea. He is all powerful. He is our Father in heaven. In Isaiah 40 the Lord says, "Lift your eyes and look to the heavens; Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them by name." The all powerful God who created billions of stars in our galaxy and billions of galaxies in the universe, can certainly protect us and defend us when the lions roar or even when we need help to be more bold in witnessing to Jesus' resurrection among family and friends.

These early Christians were not shocked by what was happening. They saw the same thing happen to Jesus. They read about it in the psalms. So they pray from Psalm 2, "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One." They saw the people who were like raging bulls and roaring lions beneath the cross of Jesus. Herod was still king. Pontius Pilate was still governor. Caiaphas was still the high priest. It would not be long before these roaring lions would start systematically killing Christians. Herod would have James the brother of John put to death just as he once beheaded John the Baptist.

Dear Christian don't be shocked if a time comes to us when the lions will roar and persecution will increase. Listen to what Jesus said to his disciples the night before he died. "All this I have told you so that you will not go astray. They will put you out of the synagogue, in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God." Don't be shocked if people we know and love are polite but not interested in hearing about Jesus and his resurrection.

God's plan was to use Herod and Pontius Pilate to crush Jesus for our sins. The God who controls all the stars in the universe also knows the various levels of suffering and rejection we go through for the name of Jesus. He knows exactly how to extend his kingdom through us when people reject us for what we believe. Jesus never said, "Take up your easy chair and follow me." No, he said, "Take up your cross and follow me."

What is it about the Christian faith that makes it so despised and hated by those who don't believe? It is the words that Jesus spoke from the cross when he finished paying for our sin, the words "It is finished!" I recently heard someone say of their congregation, "We want to tell people as many people as possible in ten thousand different ways, 'It is finished.'"

I was born with a sinful human heart that wants to take some credit for putting things right between me and my God. I was born as this majestic mountain sheep that believes it can jump to the heights and save itself. Then the Holy Spirit plants a whole new person inside of me that leads me to believe that my problem of sin that makes me a lost sheep has been totally taken care of by Jesus. Those who are not born again cannot tolerate someone singing "Living, loving, dying, rising, Jesus did it all for me." They do not want to be a sheep totally dependent on Jesus as their Shepherd.

The lions roared, but that did not intimidate and frighten these early Christians. Instead of retreating and hiding, they gathered to pray for even greater boldness to stand up for their faith. "Now Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness." They want to speak the word with great boldness. Instead of retreating and hiding from the lions that roar, they want the power to stand up to them, not with a sword or spear but with the power of God's Word. They even ask the Lord for more signs and wonders to draw even larger crowds that would give them more opportunities to speak about Jesus' resurrection.

How does the Lord answer their prayer for greater boldness? "After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly." Notice it does not say that the place was shaken and they spoke in tongues. That happened on Pentecost. Here the place was shaken. These humble sheep gathered in the name of Jesus their Shepherd are given power from above to speak the Word of the Lord boldly. Jesus had promised them power from above when the Holy Spirit came to them. Now they have that power.

This morning we think of our brothers and sisters in Christ who are being killed with the sword by Islamic terrorists. We saw them standing on the beach in Africa in orange jump suits with the persecutors behind them clothed in black. If that were me, I want to think I would have the courage to ask the Lord to give me the power to witness boldly to Jesus one more time before I die. The real challenge does not come in dying for Jesus. The real challenge comes as we live for him in a world that politely tells us to stop talking about Jesus and his resurrection. It's a world that says, stop telling me, "It is finished!" I don't want to hear it.

### **The sheep help each other**

When the lions roar, we need Jesus to protect us. We also need each other to support us and encourage us in our faith. It says that the believers were one in heart and mind. They were on the same page when it came to what was really important. They shared their possessions with each because they were totally focused on bringing more of God's Word to more people more often. That's a good focus for us in these last days: Bring more of God's Word to more people more often. When the persecutions increased, they were ready to help those who lost their homes until they could get their lives back together.

What was the result of banding together in the Word and encouraging each other? "With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all." God's grace was on them all. God's grace strengthened them to face the roaring lions and even bring them the Word of God to them as they were

dying just as Jesus had done before them.

In his book *Against the Night*, Charles Colson tells about a young Christian man Armando Valladares who spoke out against the communist regime in Cuba. He was placed into a notorious prison of huge circular cell blocks. Armando wrote about those early years in prison when they heard prisoners, fellow Christians, taken to the firing squad in the middle of the night under the cover of darkness. Before the shots rang out they heard the shouts of *Viva Cristo Rey!* Long live Christ the King. The executioners had to gag the Christians to keep them from shouting out and encouraging other believers. The sheep stood up to the roaring lions. They stood up for Jesus just as we do with the strength we receive from the Holy Spirit whom Jesus promised us.

In our congregation we often pray a prayer that was developed in our evangelism committee some years ago. We call it our prayer for boldness and it was developed from this section of the book of Acts. We stand for this prayer: "Lord God, You know the challenges we face in a world that does not want You. Place Your hand of blessing on Your servants and make us bold to proclaim Your pure Word. By Your Holy Spirit lead many to know Your Son, Jesus Christ, the only hope of salvation. Amen.