

Good News Marches Victorious Over Restraint

Acts 5:17-32 • 2022-04-24 • 2022 Easter Series "Victorious"



Easter Sunday is past. So, what happens next? You might see attendance going down in many churches. The excitement of the holiday has passed. The stores have moved on from their commercial and sales hype. The left-over Easter themed items are quickly removed from the shelf to make room for the next major holiday that is heavily commercialized. In this case it is Mother's Day. Sadly, many who attended worship on Easter will not return to worship until then. But how can what we celebrated on Easter morning be set aside so quickly? Of course, the stores need to market the next big holiday. But how could anyone who celebrates Easter as the day of the resurrection of Jesus ever move on or move past such an event? The good news of the resurrection is restrained by our own sinful nature which doesn't want to put our neck too far out in a hostile world. It is restrained by the world that never even wanted to acknowledge the Christian's aspect of the Easter holiday. And it is restrained by the devil who wants to silence any mention of the victory of Christ over death.

But the joy of the resurrection is not something you can really restrain. Despite the attempts to stop or silence it, we continue to share the gospel. We'll take a look at Acts 5 to see just how the gospel marches victorious over restraint.

A decline in attendance is hardly what happened after the first Easter Sunday. In the book of Acts, we have a record of how the church continued to grow and grow in numbers of believers. Luke mentions over and over how the Lord added to their number those who were saved. More and more came to faith in the Savior who was crucified and rose again. Jesus had told his disciples to share the good news of forgiveness of sins. He gave them the gift of the Holy Spirit and told them "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And daily they were teaching the people in one of the most prominent places in ancient Jerusalem, the temple courtyards.

But this on-going preaching and teaching caught the attention and the jealousy of the spiritual leaders of the people. The high priest and the Sanhedrin wanted the Easter celebration to stop. They wanted everyone to quit talking about the man Jesus and his resurrection from the dead. Since many of them were Sadducees, they hated the idea of a resurrection from the dead. But they hated all the more the idea that someone like Jesus rose from the dead.

Their solution was to restrain the apostles. They had the twelve disciples arrested and put into the public jail. They had already threatened and warned them not to speak about the resurrection of Jesus. Their next step was to restrain and humiliate Jesus' disciples. These apostles who had now fished some 5000 men to become disciples of Jesus were basically told, "You've reached your limit, you have to stop."

That's how it happens today. The devil puts restraint on the gospel message. Faithful witnesses of the resurrection under are given strict orders not to speak about Jesus. There are places where we carry out mission work but cannot carry it out directly. If I were to mention them and post it online, it would endanger our missionaries. These men carry out work under the authority of Christ to spread the gospel. But their local and national governing authorities forbid them from working openly. And when a Christian is caught in one of these places they are made into an example. Some are arrested and silenced, and sometimes others might even disappear from all traces of contact.

That's what is happening in some of the mission fields we support together. It is happening throughout the Christian churches around the world. But what about when you and I go about as fishers of people? Are there any restrictions placed on our work? Some are evident. We cannot operate any military chaplaincy without allowing for all faiths. If you were to preach exclusively that Jesus is the only way to be saved, you wouldn't be allowed to officially be a military chaplain. That's why our military chaplains operate independently of any state support.

And what about your personal witness? Would you do what the apostles did and go to one of the most public places and start using it to openly proclaim Jesus as the living Savior? Many business owners that make their Christian witness clear are mocked for it. Many Christian politicians hide their affiliation to Christ. Prominent celebrities are ridiculed if they make their Christian faith known. Restraint can be found everywhere the gospel goes. The more you try to carry out the call to be fishers of men the more you will find restraint in your work. The devil will come along and use the local authorities to say, "You've exceeded your limit. You've passed the size restrictions."

It seems ridiculous, but the restraint can even be found in many homes. Recently I met a child who occasionally likes to scooter past our church. She lives close by. She and her uncle came asking for a bandage after she fell off her scooter. She knew who I was because her cousin participated in our summer music program. Without hesitation she told me, "I want to go to church here but my parents won't let me come." And a husband will say to his wife, "We don't need to give to church again. We did that last Sunday." A mother will plead with her children, "It's Mother's Day. You haven't come to church with me since Easter Sunday. Now will you come and join me to hear the gospel in worship?" Why do we see such restraint placed on such good news even within a home?

Luke records two reasons why the gospel is restrained. The leaders of ancient Israel reveal the devil's tactics. Firstly, they were jealous. They didn't like giving up anything to God. They hated the idea of losing some of their own influence over others around them. Secondly, they felt guilty and didn't know how to address their guilt other than trying to silence it. They charged the apostles, "You are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood. Stop it!" Both of these restraints on the spread of the good news of Jesus are the work of the devil. He plays off our sinful flesh to make us remain slaves to sin and death.

That's why there is restraint placed on the gospel today. It's a matter of jealousy and control. Governing authorities feel threatened by the way people give supreme allegiance and their highest devotion to Jesus. Others feel threatened that Jesus might get a share of their family's attention or wealth. Restraint is placed on the gospel because someone is jealous that someone else is excited about Jesus and his resurrection. It's an awful and selfish reason to silence an amazing message! A ruler silences the message of peace in Jesus so that his people keep thinking they will only find peace in their political party. A family member spurns the message of Christ because they want to keep their family bound to their selfish priorities.

The gospel is also silenced today due to the struggle against guilt. Someone who feels guilty over their sin wants to silence the message of the cross instead of repenting and turning to God for mercy. They don't want to have a Savior carry their sins, so they silence the message of salvation. The restraint placed on the spread of the gospel is really a restraint placed on the spread of life and peace. They remain in darkness and want others to remain with them.

But what we read earlier in Revelation stands true. The risen and living Lord Jesus stands among his churches. And he powerfully puts an end to all restraint on the spread of his gospel. The Lord sent an angel to release the apostles from prison. Then the angel told them, "Go back to the temple courts and share the message of this new life!"

Imagine the surprise and shock of the Sanhedrin when they found out the apostles were not in the jail, but somehow had returned to preaching and teaching in the temple courtyard! They were so shocked. And yet were so afraid that they had to gently bring the apostles back to stand trial. They once again tried to put restraint on the gospel. "Didn't we command you to stop speaking about this man?"

Then we see a side of Peter which had unfolded since he first denied Jesus. His own selfish and cowardly nature had once put restraint on the gospel. In fear he once denied even knowing Jesus. In fear he once hid from the world and the authorities. But everything had changed. He had received the gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit. He had seen the risen Jesus. He and all the apostles boldly spoke up, "We must obey God rather than men."

Everything has changed. The old way is past, and the restrictions of jealous control and guilt are gone! The famous cartoonist Gary Larson is known for tackling some extreme topics. In one comic he captures both the horror of nuclear weapons and the stifling restrictions that some people feel. He depicts two men sitting in a boat with their fishing lines hanging over the side. In the background there are giant mushroom clouds that represent the immediate aftermath of a nuclear weapons attack. The two fishermen are staring at the horrifying prospect of nearby cities destroyed, one of them realizes their situation has been altered greatly. He says, "You know what this means, Norm? No more size restrictions and forget about the limit!" If you know any die-hard fishermen, you might understand the humor.

Something even more life-altering has taken place to shatter all restrictions on something far more important than fishing. We are all called to be die-hard fishers of people. And the Lord has given us something that removes all restraint and all limits on our work. "Go, and make disciples of all nations," he tells us. The devil tries to put restrictions and restraint on our work. But God has removed all restraint on the good news by his powerful act of raising his Son from the dead. When the disciples saw that empty tomb and witnessed the living Jesus, they knew what it meant. "Do you know what this means, Peter? No more limits on forgiveness, no more size restrictions on being fishers of men." They shared a message and began fishing thousands of people into God's kingdom of grace. It was what the angel called, "The message of new life."

All restraint came crumbling down. Peter tells us what has changed. Life would never be the same. *"The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."*

Did you catch that? Peter saw no limits to his role as a fisher of people. Jesus was raised to life and gave repentance and forgiveness of sins. God gave the Holy Spirit to Peter. He has given you that same message of repentance and forgiveness of sins. By his Holy Spirit you can share without restraint the message of new life in Jesus. That person who feels jealous of Jesus or guilty of their sins can hear the good news. Jesus lives. Forgiveness of sins! Eternal life!

Even though the initial holiday celebration is over, the victory continues. And we know that whatever the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh might try to do to restrain the gospel, it will not fail. The good news marches victorious over restraint.