

## Rise Up and Speak: You Have True Encouragement!

A sermon based on Acts 13:15-16,26-33

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.

It's probably the most famous and recognizable hymns in the Christian world today (although oddly enough, it wasn't in our previous hymnal, The Lutheran Hymnal). I bet you can get it in less than three guesses. What is it?

*Amazing Grace.* Beloved by so many people, probably a majority of you as well. What do you know about it, besides the tune and probably a verse or two?

Well, it was written by John Newton, a man who actually knew what it was to be a wretch. A rebellious teenager, a deserter of the Royal Navy, and that's not the worst of it. He was a slave trader. He worked on a slave ship. But in 1748, while sailing off the coast of Ireland, his ship was battered in a violent storm. He would later point to that experience as the turning point in his life, his conversion. An experience that compelled him to later compose. "I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see."

*Amazing Grace.* A widely popular song. A simple gospel message. A hymn providing encouragement. Right, isn't that why we have and sing a lot of our hymns? Yes, they are a wonderful way to proclaim the great things God has done. But just as importantly, these hymns, they give encouragement. They tell us, "You are not alone in your struggles. You are not lost in sin. Jesus forgives you. Jesus is here for you."

And today...Jesus has risen so that you can let others know the same. Jesus has risen so that now...today, you can rise up and speak because you have true encouragement.

"I once was lost, but now am found...was blind but now I see." If you can remember back to last week, we might say Paul's conversion experience probably falls into the same boat as John Newton (sorry, no pun intended!). Paul...someone whose past wasn't all that great...persecuting followers of Jesus...persecuting Jesus. And yet, it took just one moment of Jesus bringing him to his knees, and everything changed. Paul, who once was blind (literally...and spiritually), but now he could see (again, literally...and spiritually). God's amazing grace changed everything for him.

Well, today, we see how the early Christians really welcomed him...and how quickly they did, too. Paul and his friend and associate, Barnabas, were in Pisidian Antioch. On the Sabbath, they went to the synagogue (or church) to be fed with the gospel, but then it turned into them having the opportunity to speak.

They asked for a message of encouragement, and here's what Paul gave them: "God's given us the message of salvation to speak. There were some (Jews) who refused to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, even though the words of the Old Testament prophets clearly pointed to him as the Savior. And if that wasn't bad enough, they killed him. But Jesus is risen! He is risen indeed! His disciples have seen him. I've seen him. We are his witnesses. God's promises of salvation and forgiveness have been fulfilled for you through Jesus, just as Scripture says."

It doesn't take too long to understand the gist of his message now, does it? And yet, what a great and comforting message/sermon from Paul. I know, at first glance, it seems so basic, so simple, short, and sweet (maybe you wish Pastor's would follow suit a little more often!). It's just law and gospel. But what an amazing and powerful message. What a profound effect. Just a few verses later, we're told the people were encouraged and enamored with Paul and Barnabas and their message, so much so they invited them to speak again the following week.

Does that simple message have the same effect on you? What you hear here, Sunday after Sunday, is not all that different. The words may not be the exact same as Paul's, but the basic message is...law and gospel...the message of salvation

Does that message of law and gospel, does it fill you with encouragement? Or, have you become so attuned to it that you've started to tune it out. "Oh, I already know what Pastor's going to tell me. I'm a sinner, but Jesus loves me and has taken away my sins. Now I get to go to heaven."

Or, maybe for you, it's become somewhat repetitive...boring. "I could close my eyes for a few minutes or people/kid watch or start figuring out my grocery list for the week while Pastor's up there because I know I won't miss anything I didn't already know."

Or maybe that's what keeps you from reading your Bible or attending Bible class or reading your Bible more or participating in Bible class more. "Call me when there's something new." I'll admit there've been times when I've skimmed through my Bible reading for the day because I've read that section, heard that section, learned that section so many times I feel like there's nothing new there for me."

Do you know what worship is without the message of salvation? Do you know what life is without the message of salvation? Empty...worthless.

It was my vicar year, or the year at Seminary when I interned with a pastor, when I met Joanne. You probably know someone like Joanne...just loved church, always had something to say (even if it was the same story you've heard at least 3 or 4 times), could really just talk your ear off.

Anyways, her mom died. She didn't belong to a Lutheran church (I don't remember exactly which denomination she belonged to), but Joanne and my supervising pastor went to the funeral. And to talk to her after the fact was so eye-opening. "Vicar, after I left that funeral, I just felt so empty. All they talked about was how good a person my mom was and all these great things she did and how she was smiling down on us from heaven, and I wanted to stand up and say, 'You're missing the best part! You're missing my mom being a sinner but Jesus being his Savior who died and rose for her.' It was all so empty."

Have you ever been there? It doesn't even need to have been a funeral. These talk shows on TV, these self-help books and magazine articles about becoming a better you, these social media quizzes which focus your attention on you and all your great qualities, your friends who have that knack of bumping up your self-esteem when you really need it...it's nice. It makes you feel good. But in the long run, it doesn't last, does it? It doesn't provide true and lasting comfort and encouragement.

Without Jesus...without the message of salvation, it would be us, sheep, wandering this world of sin with no real purpose, lost, easy fodder for the wolf...Satan. Without Jesus...without the message of salvation, this all is worthless...empty.

If you feel that way...if you've ever felt that way – lost, blind, wretched – I, like Paul, have good news to share with you. Here's some true encouragement...from the voice of the Good Shepherd: **"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."**

Here's some true encouragement: **"The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever."**

Here's some true encouragement: **"I am the good shepherd...I lay down my life for the sheep."**

Simple...basic...the message of salvation speaks to every one of you. From Psalms to John's Gospel to the book of Acts, we can see and hear how the promises of God were found and fulfilled in the message of salvation...in Jesus, your Good Shepherd.

Your Good Shepherd, who came to you when you were just a sheep, lost in sin, blinded by unbelief, a poor and miserable wretch deserving hell...he came to you and lived for you, died for you, rose for you. The Good Shepherd, the perfect Shepherd, laid down his life for you on the cross...to find you, to make you see, to make you rich in grace...to save you. Jesus emptied himself, poured out his blood, became worthless and humbled himself to death on the cross...he did that so you could be filled up with his forgiveness and righteousness...he did that so you could have the priceless gift and inheritance of eternal life.

Simple...basic...the message of salvation. Are you encouraged? I know I am. For all the times I stray day after day, for all the times I get trapped in sin and temptation, that calming and comforting salve of God's Word and especially that message of salvation can't be applied too much. And when I hear the gospel, even when it's the same basic message week after week, I do not feel empty. I do not feel worthless. I feel God's love. I feel full of his lasting forgiveness. I hope you do, too.

Are you encouraged? And I don't just mean are you comforted by the good news of salvation. That's just one of the meanings of encourage. Do you know the other? It's to fill with courage. Right, like enlighten means to fill with light, so encourage means to fill with courage. Filled with courage for what? To live for Jesus each an everyday, yes. I sincerely wish that for all of you.

But look at our verses. What were Paul and Barnabas filled with courage to do? To rise up and speak. Paul had every reason to be discouraged. He had suffered sickness, endured a difficult journey to Pisidian Antioch, dealt with the emotional pain of his good friend Mark deserting them. And let's not forget the huge elephant in the room, how not too long ago, Paul was on the opposing team, arresting Christians and putting them to death.

Read his message again. No signs of discouragement there. Paul could stand there and boldly and confidently give a joyous and powerful proclamation of his risen Savior.

So can you. You've been encouraged. You have that comfort of forgiveness of sins from Jesus. And you have the courage from Jesus to share that same comfort with others.

Of course, you too could probably list off all the things in life discouraging you from rising up and speaking. But what you have to share trumps any and all of that. You, too, have the message of salvation. And friends, that message is powerful. The gospel not only tells of salvation, what Jesus has done; it's also the means the Holy Spirit uses to create saving faith. Just like Paul says in Romans, **"Faith comes from hearing the message and the message is heard through the word of Christ."** Or, even Jesus himself, in our gospel for today, **"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life."**

We have the privilege (and responsibility) to share this powerful message of salvation....that when the Shepherd speaks, his sheep listen. When the gospel about the Shepherd is shared, his sheep listen. When the gospel about the Shepherd is shared, sheep are brought into the fold.

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found; was blind but now I see." The message of salvation...simple, basic...sweet, amazing...encouraging. You are the proof of the power of the message of salvation. You are a witness of the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep.

And now, hearing his Word...filled with the comfort of God's amazing grace and encouraged, we will take the courage Jesus gives and rise up to speak this joyous news. Jesus lived. Jesus died. Jesus rose. Simple...basic...powerful. Amen.