

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

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Acts 5:27-32

NRSV

Peter and John have been arrested by the religious authorities for teaching and proclaiming that “in Jesus there is resurrection of the dead” (4:2). The Sanhedrin has ordered them “not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus” (4:18). So popular are they with the people that the Sanhedrin does not punish them. But later the growth in believers leads the high priest to take further action; he and the Sadducees see the disciples doing what they cannot do, i.e. healing the sick. This time, all the apostles are imprisoned; however, a divine messenger sets them free (v. 19). They go right back to preaching – in the outer court of the Temple (v. 21). The temple police bring them to appear before the council.

Now the high priest imputes that the apostles place the blame for Jesus' death on the religious authorities (“you are determined ...”, v. 28). Led by Peter, they insist that they must obey God's will rather than the Sanhedrin's orders (v. 29). They explain in Jewish terms: the “God of our ancestors” (v. 30) is the God of Israel (and of Christians): he has “raised” Jesus from the dead. The Law prescribed that a person guilty of a capital offence be hanged “on a tree”; Peter interprets *cross* as being the Roman equivalent to the Jewish *tree*. Moses was “Leader and Saviour” (v. 31) of Israel, under God; Jesus is much more so: he *goes before us*; now with the Father, he continues to rescue us from sin and death. Jesus' message was first to “Israel”. Both the apostles and the “Holy Spirit” (v. 32), given to the faithful, are “witnesses” to Christ's actions.

The council members are so enraged that they want to kill Peter, but a famous liberal rabbi, Gamaliel, cautions them: “if this ... is of human origin, it will fail” (v. 38); but if it is from God, they “will not be able to overthrow them” (v. 39) and they will be working against God. Peter and John are flogged for their earlier offence. Despite being ordered not to preach the Good News, the apostles continue to do so, both in the Temple and in homes.

Psalm 150

NRSV

The psalter ends with a *doxology*, praise to God. In Hebrew, v. 1 begins with *Hallelujah!* V. 1b calls on all the people to praise God in his earthly “sanctuary”, the Temple. Hebrew poetry uses a device called *parallelism*: here v. 1c parallels v. 1b: it calls on the heavenly council to praise God in his heavenly *temple*. He is to be praised for his supreme power in the actions of creation and of restoring people from waywardness (v. 2). Vv. 3-5 tell us how psalms were accompanied: with various (to us) traditional instruments, with *modern music* (“clashing cymbals”), and with liturgical “dance” (v. 4). V. 6 returns to the theme of v. 1: may all living creatures praise the Lord!

John begins and ends this book as a letter. Literally, it is “to the seven churches that are in Asia” (v. 4), Asia being a Roman province in western Asia Minor, but “seven” symbolizes totality, so John may speak to all churches in the province, or to all everywhere. The salutation combines both Greek (“grace”) and Hebrew (“peace”) forms, and is from God, here described as being throughout time, meaning *eternal*. The salutation is also from “the seven spirits”: this may mean the Spirit of God (in Isaiah 11:2, it operates in seven ways) or the seven angels (Michael, Raphael, etc.) closest to God (“before his throne”) in contemporary Jewish thinking. Further, it is “from Jesus Christ” (v. 5), who is: (1) “the faithful witness”: he revealed the Father perfectly in his earthly life, and crowned this by the sacrifice of his life; (2) “firstborn of the dead”: in his resurrection, he inaugurated a new era; and (3) “ruler ...”: being now exalted, he has power over all creation. Vv. 5b-6 praise God: (1) Christ loves us continually and, by his death, he has freed us from sins; and (2) he has marked us as God's, and has made us all “priests”, mediators between God and the rest of humanity. “Amen” is literally *It is true!*: it is both valid and binding. V. 7 combines two Old Testament prophetic sayings to predict the return of Christ at the end of the age. Those who put him to death and all unbelievers “will wail” for showing hostility to Christ and his Church: they will be condemned when Jesus comes to us as judge. V. 8 tells us that, from *A to Z*, God is sovereign over all events of human history; he exists now, existed before time, “is to come”, and is supreme in power (“Almighty”).

John 20:19-31

NRSV

Early on Easter Day, Mary Magdalene has discovered that Jesus' body is missing from the tomb; the stone door is open, so it looks as though someone has stolen it (v. 1). She has seen a man standing near the tomb. When he speaks to her, she recognizes him as Jesus. She has told the disciples: “I have seen the Lord” (v. 18).

Later the same day, Jesus joins the disciples, gathered behind locked doors. He shows them that he is the one who was crucified (v. 20). Jesus confers on “the disciples” (not including Thomas, but perhaps a group larger than *the ten*) “peace” (vv. 19, 21) and “the Holy Spirit” (v. 22). As God “breathed” life into Adam, the *proto-human*, so Jesus now breathes the new, spiritual, life of recreated humanity into his followers. Aided by the Spirit, they continue Jesus' judicial role in the world, forgiving the sins of the faithful and holding others blameworthy (“retain”, v. 23) for their actions. Thomas is expected to believe without having seen, but he demands: *show me the evidence!* (v. 25)

The next Sunday, the community gathers again (v. 26). Upon seeing, Thomas makes the most complete affirmation of faith of anyone in the gospel (v. 29). Henceforth the faith of all Christians in all ages will rest on the testimony of the first believers. Vv. 30-31 tell us John's purpose in writing the book. His eyewitness account is intended to help us, who were not witnesses of Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension to “come to believe” and thus “have life in his name”, eternal life.