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The Fourth Sunday of Easter

Acts 4:5-12

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There's a story, often used amongst preachers, about a climber way out on some remote mountain who makes a misstep and slips off a cliff. Clinging to his rope for dear life, he dangles in mid-air. Petrified, the man cries out, "Is there anyone who can help me?" Out of the sheer wilderness silence, the climber detects a voice: "Do not fear, o climber. It is me, God. I will take care of you." "God?," the climber asks incredulously. "Oh thank goodness you are there! Please save me." "I will save you," replies God. "You can trust me, but in order to help you, I need you to let go of the rope." "Let go of the rope?" asks the climber. "Yes," God replies. "Let go of your rope, and I will rescue you." The climber pauses a moment, gives this proposition some thought, and then cries out, "Is there anyone else who can help me?"

This morning I'd like to invite each of us to consider: what is your rope? What is my rope? What is the rope we each are clinging to, thinking that it is deadly important for us to grasp—when in reality that rope is the very thing or relationship or addiction or self-image that inhibits our enjoyment of God's miraculous presence. Our reading from Acts this morning shows us two guys, Peter and John, who let go of safety, security, and the predictability of a fisherman's daily life. In return, they receive risk, danger, interrogation and ultimately death from the religious authorities—and, most importantly, they receive the transformative, miraculous power of the Spirit of God flowing through their lives. For instance, in Acts 3, the chapter just preceding this morning's passage, Peter and John encounter a paralyzed man begging outside the Temple in Jerusalem. Rather than giving him their spare change, Peter says, "in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." Immediately the paralyzed man is healed, and he leaps up, praising God. The religious authorities, however, are more disturbed than impressed, and so they haul Peter and John in before them and demand to know: "By what power or by what name did you do this otherworldly deed?"

The first-century religious establishment, as is almost always the case with established institutions of power—whether political, economic, social, or religious—is deeply distressed by an "unsanctioned" movement of God. They ask the disciples how this occurred; what authority did Peter and John access that enabled them to act so powerfully without the establishment's approval? How could some powerful healing have occurred without the proper authorization? What uncanny power escapes the authorities' desperate control?

A basic problem for the ancient religious leaders of Acts, and really for any authorities—religious or otherwise—who try to control God, is that if one thing is true about God, it is that God will not be muzzled, God will not be manipulated, and God will not be controlled.

The Spirit's way of working typically seems to be in this very manner displayed here in Acts 4: undermining the self-assured authority of the established powers by flowing through individuals who utterly lack

earthly power and privilege, coursing through the channels of humble, willing hearts who are malleable, pliable, surrendered. People, in other words, who in response to God's invitation, have let go of their rope.

God seems to work in these miraculous ways, through the down-and-out crowd, the penniless, weak fishermen of the world who have nothing left to lose, because this "unauthorized" flow of power—among the weak and lowly no less—compels those in positions of earthly power to sit up and take note, since the miracles that have been done literally could not have occurred without the otherworldly power of God. God gets God's due glory, in other words, when the Spirit is allowed to flow through surrendered hearts who have nothing of their own power to add, the so-called "wretched of the Earth" with nothing to lose and everything to gain by giving all control over to God.

And the invitation remains open to each one of us: "Let go of your rope," says God, "and then enjoy the miraculously dynamic ways I will move through you. Learn from the weak of the world how to surrender."

How do we humans typically try to control God's Spirit? How do we try to earn God's blessing or favor on our own terms? How do we try to "do Christianity right"? Put more bluntly, how might we try to manipulate God, refusing to release our ropes, when all God requires is that very act of letting go? "If I just give away X amount of money, if I just go to church this percentage of Sundays, if I just serve on this committee, if I just do X, Y, or Z spiritual thing, then God will be happy with me; then I'll be doing the religion part of my busy life right; then I can check off that spiritual box as another task accomplished."

But God's Spirit won't be tamed, the power of God won't be controlled. And the loss for us is that if we try to control it, if we try to shoehorn God-stuff into our daily planner, then we, like the religious authorities in Acts, very often end up on the outside looking in when the Spirit begins to flow freely amongst the down-and-out fishermen—those rough-and-tumble folks who haven't game-planned God, who haven't read all the interesting religious books, served on the upper-echelon church committees, attended all the spiritually-hip retreats. Those lowly fishermen, Peter and John, have no plan, no agenda, apart from praying, sharing their goods with the poor, and surrendering to the nudges of God's Spirit. With their backs against the wall, opposed by the influential religious authorities—not to mention the Roman Empire—these fishermen possess very few options as they try to live out their Christian calling. As I see it, they really only have two choices: they can either walk away from God altogether, leaving behind the transformative power of Christ, or they can go all in and surrender to the Spirit. They choose surrender, and in doing so, they find that they suddenly have everything they need. In fact, that divine power was always there, available and accessible; it just took having nothing to lose, no other options, total weakness—in a word, "surrender"—for that divine power

to flow forth.

While the power of God can work anywhere and through anyone, the Spirit seems to flow most freely through those who hold whatever they have lightly: individuals who hold with open hands their possessions, status, and privilege, people liberated from an oppressive attachment to the things of this world, people who therefore have the freedom to heed God's voice and obediently let go: "whatever you want me to do, God, I'm there. I've ultimately got nothing to lose anyway, so I might as well surrender and let your Spirit flow." And as we have seen, this is mind-boggling to earthly authorities: "wait," they say, "we didn't approve this. What power could those Christians be using? Is there a rival power at work that we don't know about?" In our Acts reading, you can hear the fear, worry, and anxiety in the questions posed to Peter and John.

And we too pose some very similar questions to God: "You want me to do what, God? No, I can't; I'm not ready; I'm not capable. Can I really trust you? Who's in control here? How can you possibly expect me to let go of my rope?" And God calmly replies, "Wait, stop, slow down, grow still, grow quiet. You're raging with all these questions from a place of insecurity and fear. But I," says God, "have a deeper and much more important question for you, 'Why not just let go?'"

In that place of weakness, at the end of your personal resources, intelligence, strength, and good planning, that is where God stands ready, willing, and eager to meet you. God will meet you and me in that place where there is nothing left to do but surrender. This is not an irresponsible, immature surrender, but a wise, discerning act of obedient trust. This is not the self-serving reasoning that says, "oh, my kids are such a drag, so I'm just gonna heed Fr. Joe's "let it all go" advice, invest in some me-time, and kiss all my troubles and responsibilities good-bye down in South Beach or some tropical locale..." No, letting go of the rope is not "me-time"; letting go, surrendering to God, is not a flippant rejection of maturity or responsibility, but rather it is reaching an internal place of humble confession that God is God, I am not, and I need God to have control within me. Often this is a place where you and me, like Peter and John two millennia ago, face a situation—maybe it's a task, a calling, a danger, an illness, a loss, a death, an inner despair—that is way too much for us. Hitting the wall, you realize "there is nothing I can do." "Yes!," shouts God, "now you're ready for me. Now, after this road of personal resources and self-power just led you into a dead end—or dangling off a cliff—you just might be willing to try a different way."

Why not just let go of the rope? If you just let go, the Spirit will flow. God is already there, and God's Spirit stands ready and eager, as with Peter and John, to do miraculously more than we could ever ask or imagine. Amen.