

They Had Been with Jesus

Acts 4:5-13

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There is a curious phrase in our passage this morning, one I have pondered many times. Peter and John have been at the center of quite a bit of action in these early days of the church. Going to the temple at the time of prayer—three in the afternoon, they encounter a man who has not walked since birth. A dramatic miracle occurs which leads to the man leaping and praising God right there in the temple courts. When a crowd gathers in astonishment at this amazing miracle, Peter takes advantage of the opportunity to preach a powerful sermon inviting everyone present to put their faith and trust in Jesus. While Peter was still speaking to the crowd, along with John, the priests and the captain of the temple guard came up and seized them, throwing them in jail. The next day Peter and John are brought before the elders and teachers of the law, and in answer to the question, “By what power or what name did you do this?” (the healing of the man who could not walk), Peter clearly says it was all done in the name of Jesus Christ.

It is at this point we come upon the curious phrase I have so often pondered. After hearing Peter preach, the religious leaders “took note that these men (Peter and John) had been with Jesus.” Something about this statement, especially at this particular time, and at this particular place leads me to believe that what the religious leaders are noticing about Peter and John, about these two disciples, was astonishing to them. What is curious to me is that it should not have been astonishing to anyone that Peter and John had been with Jesus. That just doesn’t seem noteworthy. Disciples, by definition are devoted followers of a leader. The disciples of Jesus followed Jesus. They were with Jesus. In the Gospel of Mark, when the twelve are called they were called to “be with Jesus.” (Mark 3:13)

I am not saying that being with Jesus was not noteworthy, that it did not merit attention. To be with Jesus, can you even imagine?

- Can you imagine being with Jesus in the chaos of a wedding reception gone bad, when the wine had run out and the crowd was about to run wild, can you imagine being with Jesus when he turned water into wine?
- Can you imagine sitting in a crowded home, surrounded by religious leaders as Jesus was teaching? The words of Jesus are mesmerizing, but you notice a strange scratching sound. It gets louder and louder. It is coming from overhead. When you look up you get dusted with some broken pieces of the ceiling. People are up on the roof tearing a whole in the ceiling. They don't stop until they have made a whole large enough for a man on a mat to get lowered into the house. Can you imagine being with Jesus that day when not only did the man get up off that mat, but Jesus also gave him the gift of the forgiveness of his sins. Everyone there was amazed and filled with awe. And you were there...with Jesus.
- Can you imagine being with Jesus again in a home, this time the home of a Pharisee, a righteous leader who faithfully followed the laws that set him apart from people who were sinners. On that day a woman who was a notorious sinner came into his house, into the home of the Pharisee. In front of everyone the woman knelt at the feet of Jesus. She was weeping. With her tears she began to wet his feet. Then she wiped his feet with her hair, kissed his feet and poured perfume on them. Instead of pushing the woman away, instead of being embarrassed by her actions, instead of shaming her, Jesus affirmed her. Jesus affirmed the woman and held her up as an example of one who loved much. And you were there...with Jesus.
- Can you imagine being on a boat, on a stormy sea, with the wind blowing and the waves crashing, your heart filled with fear. Can you imagine looking out on that teeming mass of water and seeing Jesus walking on the water. Can you imagine the sense of comfort you had as he climbed into the boat with you? Can you imagine the wonder and awe you felt when Jesus spoke to the wind and the waves and made them settle down, so that the waters became completely calm? And you were there...right there...in the boat with Jesus.

- Can you imagine, can you imagine, can you imagine...a few loaves and fishes feeding 5,000, lepers being cleansed, the eyes of the blind opening with the gift of sight, ears that could hear after such a long time of silence?

It must have been astonishing to be with Jesus. There is no question it must have been astonishing and amazing to have been with Jesus. Still, when the religious leaders take note that Peter and John had been with Jesus, I think there is something more to their astonishment than that they had been with Jesus as he did his miracles and gave his teachings that were so full of meaning.

Maybe they took note that Peter and John had been with Jesus because these two, along with the brother of John named James, held a special place among the twelve disciples. When Jesus went to the home of Jairus, the synagogue ruler whose daughter was ill, Jesus only took three disciples with him into the home. Jesus took James. Jesus took John. And Jesus took Peter to be with him. When Jesus went up on the mountain where he was transfigured, the mountain where the appearance of the face of Jesus changed and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning, when Jesus went up on the Mount of Transfiguration, he took James, he took John, and took Peter to be with him. And when Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane to say his final prayers, both Matthew and Mark's gospels tell us Jesus took just three that night to be with him. In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus took James, Jesus took John, and Jesus took Peter to be with him.

Maybe that is why the religious leaders took note that these men, Peter and John, had been with Jesus. Maybe they took note that these two had been with Jesus at some of the most intimate and unique times, when only the inner circle had been with him. This all makes perfect sense, the fact that the disciples had been with Jesus and that Peter and John had been with him even more. Why would I say it is a curious phrase when the religious leaders take note that these men, Peter and John, had been with Jesus?

The reason I find this phrase so curious, that these two had been with Jesus, is because along with all the times they had been with Jesus, there had also been that time they were not with Jesus.

On the last night of his life Jesus had a meal with his twelve disciples. All twelve were with him. And then they were not with him. And then Jesus was all alone. And then there was no one with him. Judas Iscariot was not with him. Judas slipped away from that Last Supper and betrayed Jesus to the religious authorities. But Judas was not alone in leaving Jesus. We do not have an exact timetable of how it happened, when each one left his side. We do know that eventually all twelve left Jesus. All twelve left Jesus alone. We already know Judas Iscariot left. So did Judas son of James. As did Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Simon who was called the Zealot. Andrew, Simon Peter's brother left. James the brother of John left. John left. Eleven disciples left Jesus all alone. And there was Peter. Peter had made a promise to Jesus. Peter had made a vow. Peter told Jesus he would be with him. Peter told Jesus if you go to prison, I will go with you. Peter told Jesus I will die with you. Peter told Jesus he would be with him. Eleven disciples left Jesus all alone. And then there were twelve. Peter left Jesus.

Peter's part in leaving Jesus all alone warrants its own place in the gospel. Peter had told Jesus he would always be with him. And there was Jesus, betrayed, abandoned, arrested, being readied for trial. Peter was watching all this from a distance. A servant girl saw him. She looked closely at him. She said, "This man was with him." She said it, as clearly as it could be said. This man was with him. Peter denied it. "I don't know him." Someone else saw him. You are one of his followers. You were with him. Peter denied it. Recognizing that Peter was a Galilean, for a third time someone said, "Certainly this fellow was with him." There it is again. This fellow was with him. Peter denied it. Again. "I don't know what you are talking about." On the last night of his life Jesus was alone. Not a one of the twelve were with him. Not even Peter.

Those religious leaders knew when Jesus died, he died all alone. There was not one single disciple with him when he died. And yet now, after Jesus died, after Jesus suffered and died, after Jesus was put to a humiliating and painful death on a cross, this guy Peter is back. Peter is back with John. And Peter and John are preaching about Jesus. This astonished the religious leaders.

I think those religious leaders understood perfectly why Jesus was all alone when he died. I think they understood perfectly why not one single disciple was with Jesus when he died. The disciples were afraid. The disciples were bewildered. The disciples were shocked. The disciples were dismayed. The disciples panicked. The disciples ran. The disciples hid. In the case of Peter, he denied, he denied, he denied ever even knowing Jesus. The fact that they all left Jesus alone made perfect sense to the religious leaders. Their threats and their violence did exactly what they intended it to do. All the disciples fled, leaving Jesus all alone.

But now the disciples were back. Now Peter was back. And what the religious leaders noticed about Peter, and about John, and we can safely say about all the other disciples, is they were filled with courage. Once fear had caused them to run away, to leave Jesus all alone. Now they had courage.

I wonder if we might all learn something from this passage. For a disciple to truly be with Jesus, it isn't enough to be with him when he heals, when he multiplies loaves and fishes, when he walks on water, when he teaches, and when the crowds respond with amazement. Those are all good things. It is good to be with Jesus the healer, Jesus the teacher, Jesus the compassionate comforter. But a disciple has not truly been with Jesus until they have been with Jesus at the cross. And to be with Jesus at the cross is to recognize he is at the cross all alone. We all left him alone at the cross. We did not go to the cross with him. He had to walk that road all by himself.

Although the disciples left Jesus all alone, after Jesus suffered and died and rose again from the dead, they all came back. Not Judas Iscariot, although if we believe in the unconditional love God shows for his children Judas would have been welcome too. All the disciples who were alive, all the disciples who remained, all the disciples who were left, slowly made their way back to the upper room. The upper room is where they celebrated the Last Supper. They had all abandoned Jesus. Now, after he suffered and died and rose again, they came back to this table. Gone was any pride they had. They had all failed completely. But Jesus had not failed. Gone was their pride. Gone was their fighting over who got to sit on the right and left hand. Gone was Peter's false bravado. "I'll stay with you no matter what." Gone was any sense or feeling that they had they answers or the abilities within themselves. Gone was any sense of self-righteousness or self-importance. All they had when they came back to that upper room was the rock-solid assurance and faith and hope and conviction that Jesus was the Lord of heaven and earth. They could not trust themselves. No, that didn't work out at all. They could not trust themselves. But they could trust Jesus. They could trust Jesus with anything. They could trust Jesus with everything. And because they could trust Jesus with anything and with everything, God filled their hearts with courage.

I hope you have been with Jesus. I hope you have been with Jesus when water turned to wine, when stormy waves became calm and still, when the lame man walked and when the leper was cleansed. I hope you have been with Jesus when the loaves and fishes just kept on multiplying until every hungry mouth was filled. I hope you have been with Jesus in every good and glorious gift of his grace. Most of all I hope you have been with Jesus at the cross. Unless we have been with Jesus at the cross, we have not really been with Jesus. At the cross we find out we can trust him with anything. At the cross we find out we can trust him with everything. The old spiritual asks us this crucial question. "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" The heart that can answer yes to that question is the heart that knows you can trust Jesus with anything. The heart that can answer yes to that question is the heart that knows you can trust Jesus with everything. The heart that can answer yes to that question is the heart that God will fill with courage.