

“Remembering the Risen”

Memorial Day is a day where we remember the fallen, those who gave their full measure sacrificing themselves in service to our Country. Back in 2005 I attended a Memorial Day service held outside at the War Memorial in Charlestown. Many soldiers were dressed in their uniforms and many just wore their hats all decorated with various pins and awards. It was your typical service; a keynote speaker, prayer, raising the flag, an honor guard, and the playing of Taps.

I remember it so vividly because of how embarrassed and horrified I felt by the rude surroundings that kept trying to interrupt the solemn service. First, it seemed that anyone with a large, roaring diesel truck decided to drive through during the service. When they accelerated, I could hardly hear the uniformed MC speaking at the microphone. Then it got bad. A young man on a professional lawn mower decided he was going to cut grass right across the street from where we had gathered for the keynote speech. Thankfully, he was shooed away by several citizens. Just when we thought things were under control another pickup pulling a trailer full of lawn mowing equipment raced by. It was dragging the trailer's tailgate that someone forgot to put up, sparks flying about accompanied by loud grinding metal sounds. Once again, the voice and message of the keynote speaker was drowned out. Shortly thereafter, an ambulance raced by sirens blaring. To his credit the keynote speaker didn't miss a beat. Along with those standing next to me I would occasionally catch a sentence or a word. The whole thing was like a National Lampoon movie. As we were trying to remember the fallen the community seemed to forget.

This whole scene reminded me our faith in Jesus Christ. Acts 3-9 are wonderful chapters that describe the early church. The disciples go to the Temple and preach Jesus' resurrection. Crowds gather to listen but with great regularity and with great hostility the religious leaders and the Captain of the Temple try to stop the message. The disciples are saying, “Remember the risen” while the Religious leaders are saying, “Remember who you are dealing with. This is our turf.”

Acts 3-9 are incredible chapters and in these chapters, we can see how the Lord grows His church even as the Religious Leaders keep trying to stop it. Acts 3 kicks things off with the healing of a Lame man who used to sit at the Beautiful Gate at the Temple. As he is dancing about praising God people notice him. Peter and John are quick to tell people that the man is healed by the Risen Jesus. Acts 4 the disciples are hauled off to jail and brought before the Sanhedrin who threaten the disciples, beat them, and release them with the command to stop preaching Jesus. Upon their release the church praises God and is emboldened. Acts 3-4 are really a unit.

In Acts 5 the disciples heal many more and once again are arrested. Somewhere in the night an angel frees them without anyone realizing it. When the guards are told to bring them before the Sanhedrin they discover their cells empty. Looking for them they eventually find them preaching at the temple again. “Pesky Disciples!” This time, because of their popularity with the crowds the guards are careful to *politely* but firmly ask for the disciples to go with them to stand before the Religious Leaders who desperately want to kill them. They were beaten and let go, grateful to have been counted worthy to suffer for the Gospel.

Chapter 6 there is more distraction when the non-Hebrew speaking widows were being left out of the food distribution. The disciples are quick to correct the oversight and assign seven men (all with Greek names by the way) including Stephen to care for the widows. Amazingly Stephen, who was full of the Holy Spirit did many signs and wonders like the disciples. Some didn't like this so once again another follower, this time Stephen, is hauled before the Religious Leaders for another trial. In Acts 7 Stephen gives a very different speech than Peter does on Pentecost and Acts 4. This time Stephen presents an indictment of the Israelite nation. His listeners as being as guilty as their forefathers. He speaks of God's gracious acts and Israel's continued rebellion which culminates in the sinful rejection of Jesus and now Stephen. Instead of many coming to faith in repentance this time the speaker is stoned to death thus proving the guilt Stephen refers to. Stephen's martyrdom emboldens a young Saul of Tarsus to turn on the church with great zeal. In turn persecution causes the church to spread out from Jerusalem with one example being the Ethiopian Eunuch that met with Philip.

Finally, we meet Saul who became the Apostle Paul. Once a man who rejoiced in Stephen's death he Himself in Acts 9 became a champion for the Christian faith. And guess what? He too was constantly interrupted, beaten, threatened, and was even stoned like Stephen twice and survived. These first 9 chapters of Acts have one message, "Remember the Risen."

The true irony is that these were the same disciples who had forgotten the rest of the plan in their sorrow over Good Friday. Several times Jesus told his disciples that He would suffer, die on a cross and then rise on the third day. Yet, they didn't remember on the third day. In Luke 24 the angel had to remind them. "Remember how he told you when He was still with you..." Then in verse 8 we hear, "Then they remembered Jesus' words." These same followers of Jesus never waiver in Acts no matter how many times the world tried to interrupt their message.

The world is a loud place, full of distractions that sound and feel more comfortable. The world's distractions have done a good job of making us believe that sacrifice is for someone else; that commitment is only necessary if our lifestyle is not interrupted. This is especially true when we make a deliberate effort to remember Jesus' words and put them into practice. Yet when we do, rude distractions and interruptions of our faith are not far away. Just reading the Bible is challenged by getting the kids up, getting to work on time, spending time on the tread mill, preparing for upcoming deadlines, making bills, planning for the week ahead, by staying busy with sports events, or just taking a nap with the rare spare time that pops up. And that's just in trying to read a Psalm once a day.

Memorial Day is a great illustration of how important things are being crowded out with distractions. Memorial Day is all but drowned out by deafening sounds of appliance sales, boating trips, baseball games, the Indi 500, bar-b-ques, and so on. Now none of these things are bad in and of themselves, but together they have effectively crowded out a day meant for remembering the fallen soldiers that have defended the very things that we enjoy.

I know that life is loud. I know that remembering doesn't come naturally. But like the keynote speaker at that Memorial Day service years ago, Jesus' message is still offered. We might have to work to hear it. We might have to sacrifice our pride, a desire, a thought, time, money, or something harder, in order to keep the faith. Yet, when our battles rage, we will not fall. So, remember the Risen. Let us honor Jesus with our faith and let us honor our fallen soldiers with our patriotism. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Pastor Matt Woods
John 3:30