

On May 27, 2001, Martin and Gracia Burnham were having a wonderful time at a luxury resort in the Philippines celebrating their 18th wedding anniversary. This was an extravagant change of pace from their everyday lives as Christian missionaries working in the jungle regions of the Philippine islands.

Martin was no stranger to the area—his parents had also served as missionaries in the Philippines, and he had grown up there. He came to the United States as a young man, and met the woman who would become his wife at a Bible College in Kansas City. Martin and Gracia were married in 1983, and two years later, they became missionaries to the Philippines themselves. For Martin, it was a homecoming of sorts; for Gracia, it was a whole new world.

Martin became a missionary pilot flying passengers and supplies for a Christian missionary organization. They were blessed with children: Jeff, Mindy, and Zach. They worked to make Jesus known to the people they served. And in late May of 2001, they decided to take a rare vacation to celebrate the 18 years God had given them as husband and wife. So on May 27, 2001, the two of them happened to be at a resort in the Philippines when gunmen stormed the place and abducted them along with 18 others. A day later, the Abu Sayyaf group claimed responsibility for the kidnappings. Abu Sayyaf means "One Who Holds a Sword," and the group's stated objective was to carve a Muslim state out of the southern Philippines. Thus began a year-long nightmare that would test the Burnham's faith again and again.

In the beginning, the members of Abu Sayyaf laughed in disbelief at Martin, who would offer to carry things for his captors and the other hostages. Every night, when he would be chained to a post in the jungle, he would thank the guard and wish God's blessings upon him. And as the weeks dragged into months, his abductors became quietly awed by his faith in Jesus. In fact, Martin had lengthy discussions about Jesus with the group's leader and others, and at times it seemed as if their hearts

were softening, just a little. But all was not well with the Burnhams. The mental and emotional pressure was enormous. Gracia said that every time she heard a twig snap, she thought it was a gunshot. When the couple appeared on video after many months of captivity, they appeared gaunt and ill. Martin was rumored to be suffering from malaria. But even with all that, Martin still sang to his wife every night to calm her fears. They prayed with other hostages. They endured this day after day, until one day Martin looked over at his wife and said, "We might not leave this jungle alive, but at least we can leave this world serving the Lord with gladness."

On June 7th, 2002, Martin and Gracia prayed together and then laid down for a nap. They were awakened by the sharp sound of gunfire and shouting. U.S.-trained Philippine soldiers were raiding the jungle hideout in which they were being held. Bullets were flying everywhere. One of them passed through Gracia Burnham's thigh, but she was rescued and underwent surgery for her wounds. The members of Abu Sayyaf were under orders to execute Martin Burnham if ever such a raid occurred, orders which they carried out. Martin Burnham did not leave the jungle alive, but he did leave this world gladly serving the Lord to the very end. How could he do that? And how could Gracia go on, continuing, to this day, to share her story across the country?

Here's a hint: It has to do with the empty tomb of Jesus.

Our readings for this Sunday morning seem to offer us a resurrection reality check. It is almost as if they say, "All right, everyone was singing and happy and triumphant last weekend, but now it's back to the real world." Acts 5 shows the apostles paying the price for their public profession of faith in Jesus. They are threatened with death and whipped in the same manner as Jesus had been. In the Epistle lesson, one of those apostles, Peter, acknowledges that his readers are suffering grief in all kinds of trials—admitting that the Christian faith is not a vaccine against bad things happening in life. And then in the gospel lesson, we learn that immediately following Jesus' resurrection, one of Jesus' closest followers was skeptical and said, "I'll believe it when I see it." It's like, "Easter was majestic; Easter was uplifting; Easter was powerful, but that was then. Look at what you're up against now."

The temptation for the people involved in each situation was that they would give in to that very line of thinking—that their troubles would

loom so large in their vision that they would lose sight of their risen Lord Jesus. They would doubt that it could make any difference. They would doubt that it happened at all. I think it is safe to say that we are tempted in precisely these same ways. When we're not being fed doubts about a resurrected Christ, we nurse doubts about a God who would allow bad things to happen to us, and in practical terms, I start to feel far removed from a 33-year-old Jewish man getting up out of his grave. I just don't feel a connection between me and that event, and so hope drains out of my life. We are tempted to live as if the resurrection of Jesus—if it happened at all—doesn't matter.

And what a heartless temptation that is. What a cruel trap that the enemy has set. Because the resurrection doesn't just "matter." It is everything! To paraphrase St. Paul: If the resurrection of Jesus did not really happen, then this thing we call Christianity is an awful waste of our time. If Jesus did not really come back to life, we are nothing more than a group of pious fools following empty rituals. But...the proclamation of the Holy Christian Church, based on eyewitness accounts, has always been and always will be that Jesus Christ came out of his grave alive—three days after being crucified. It is true, and it changes everything.

Because Jesus lives, we can serve Him with confidence—and gladness. The apostles of Acts 5 endured the punishment they received for preaching about Jesus—and more than that—they were full of joy because they were given the honor of suffering disgrace for Jesus.

Just stop for a moment to think about that. As Pastor Ken alluded to last week, this behavior on the part of the apostles is one of the strongest proofs for Jesus' resurrection there is. Here's why. In the immediate wake of Jesus' death on the cross, where do you find Jesus' followers? For the most part, you don't find them, because they were in hiding! The doors were locked! They were hunkered down in fear. Until, as today's Gospel reports, Jesus appeared, right there in the room, alive, flesh-and-blood, bringing them peace, giving them things to do. For forty days they got to spend time with and eat with and be taught by someone who had died and had been buried and had come back to life. And it utterly changed these people, so much so that they left their hiding place. They faced their fears. They started speaking publicly about this Jesus who had been executed on a cross only to leave the tomb living and breathing again. More than that, they defied the order to stop talking about Jesus because they couldn't help themselves! How could they?

Jesus had come back to life! Some council had told them to knock it off—so what? We serve Christ, who defeated death! That was the mindset of the apostles. Is that your mindset? Is that our church's mindset? It can be, because we serve the same living Lord the apostles did. Christian author, pastor and radio preacher Dr. Warren Wiersbe once said, "[The resurrection of Jesus] is the Truth that turns a church from a museum into a ministry." People who take the resurrection of Jesus seriously are unstoppable.

Because Jesus lives, we have perspective on life's problems. The apostle Peter writes in today's epistle: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In God's great mercy he has caused us to be born again into a living hope, because Jesus Christ rose from the dead. Now we hope for the blessings God has for his children. These blessings, which cannot be destroyed or be spoiled or lose their beauty, are kept in heaven for you. God's power protects you through your faith until salvation is shown to you at the end of time. This makes you very happy, even though now for a short time different kinds of troubles may make you sad. These troubles come to prove that your faith is pure. This purity of faith is worth more than gold, which can be proved to be pure by fire but will ruin. But the purity of your faith will bring you praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is shown to you." What you know your future to be changes your present; and your future has been secured by the resurrection of Jesus.

And, because Jesus lives, he can come to us. He comes to us here, in spoken and sung words; in words that raise believers to new life; He comes to us here in the washing of baptismal water; He comes to us here, hidden in bread and wine. He comes to you to say, "Peace be with you." Jesus is alive in his Church to feed and nurture us! We connect with a living God here! He comes right down to our level to forgive and strengthen and teach us, and in return we praise Him, we pray to Him, we give back to Him, we serve Him. This activity only makes sense if Jesus is alive! Let me repeat: The activity of the Church only makes sense if Jesus is alive! Again and again he enters the locked doors of our hearts to give us the gift of His peace.

Why risk anything for the cause of Jesus Christ? Why serve Jesus when there seems to be no immediate reward? Why remain faithful to God in the middle of tough situations? Because He lives. He lives, He wins, He gives undeserving people His victory.