

Brueggemann sermon starter

By [Walter Brueggemann](#)

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Editor's note: In a new Theolog endeavor we've asked Walter Brueggemann to share some talking points on the Sunday lectionary for the next six weeks. These are meant to be the sort of observation one member of a lectionary group might make to another, or fodder for thinking and reading in advance of Sunday. Please let us and Dr. Brueggemann know what you think by posting a comment.

Second Sunday of Easter: Acts 5:27-32

In the Book of Acts the church is a restless, transformative agent at work for emancipation and well-being in the world.

Given this restlessness, it is inevitable that the church would collide with settled authority, the authority of the state (the Roman empire) and the authority of "the church" (settled Judaism). Neither the state nor "the church," as given in the text, are eager for restless transformation: settled institutions have a deep interest in keeping things as they are in a condition of dysfunction and disability. In contrast the church, powered by passion for the risen Christ and led by the Spirit, is portrayed as bold and daring in its enactment of a healed world.

In the present text, we are at the end of a confrontation that begins in verse 12:

- The initial subversive act of the church is "that they were all cured" (v. 16). Such an act is sure to be noticed by the authorities.
- The authorities imprison the apostles. An established rule will do what it can for the sake of repression, silence and order.
- The angel frees them for preaching "in the temple."

These three moments in sequence indicate the irrepressible power of the church and the defensive posture of settled authority. Even before we arrive at the assigned

verses for the day, the preacher can articulate that an Easter church is a public church that refuses to be defined by the conventional dysfunctions of society.

In verse 16 we saw “the evangelical walk.” Now in verses 29-32 we get “the evangelical talk” that connects the specific “cures” to the truth of the risen Christ. The adversarial nature of the exchange between settled authority and impassioned church is unmistakable:

- high priest: “strict orders not to teach.”
- the apostles: “we are witnesses.”

Themes accented in this exchange might be public church, resurrection as public, irrepressible event, the link of “talk” and “walk,” the connection of cure and testimony, the emboldening present of the spirit.

There is no quibbling here about the “nature” of the resurrection: it is a given from which the church moves. I suspect that the task of gospel news in U.S. society now is to address the National Security State and a perpetual state of war that is in the service of a consumerism that robs society of its human capacity. The challenge, first of all, is for the church to hear its own good news and ponder its peculiar place in society as an “other.” After all, Easter may be, as Gamaliel observes, “of God” (v. 39).

Two references: I recommend Jon D. Levenson’s new book, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life* (Yale University Press). Levenson criticizes “liberal rational” Jews who have found the resurrection to be an embarrassment. All believing Jews, he says, affirm the resurrection. Christians depend on the general Jewish conviction as milieu for the specificity of Easter that powers dangerous, transformative missional energy in the world. Christians also must not explain away the wonder by being “liberal rational.”

In the final page of his *Institutes*, John Calvin quotes verse 29: “We must obey God rather than man.” In his final chapter, “On Civil Government,” he writes:

Let us console ourselves with this thought, that we truly perform the obedience which God requires of us, when we suffer any thing rather than deviate from piety...that we may not be submissive to the corrupt desires of men, much less be slaves to their piety. (*Institutes* Book IV, chapter XX, XXXII)

By “piety/impiety” Calvin understood the entire range of the practice of the gospel. No settled authority dare impede the church in its transformational mission. This the freedom of the apostles in public, and of the whole church that refuses to be “slaves to their impiety.”