

April 12, Easter 2A (Acts 2:14a, 22–32; Psalm 16; John 20:19–31)

Some resurrection stories carry wounds we must not ignore.

by [Lisa M. Wolfe](#) in the [April 2026](#) issue

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This week's gospel passage problematically refers to the disciples' "fear of the Jews." If you feel uncomfortable reading that in worship, good! The Gospel of John has long and rightly been identified as an antisemitic work, one that has stoked the hatred of Jews for centuries. Yes, this is dangerous material.

Writing in the December 1996 issue of *Semeia*, biblical scholar Tina Pippin offers the translation option to leave a "silent gap" in place of the phrase "the Jews"; she also suggests providing an apology to all Jews in the face of such readings. More recently, the Century published a thoroughgoing conversation on this subject with Jewish New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine. ("What should churches do about the treatment of 'the Jews' in John?" June 2023). This is a must-read before deciding to preach from this text.

While providing historical context is important, the fact is that the Gospel of John places "the Jews" into an enemy category. This, arguably, makes it impossible to do any historical distancing.

True, the followers of Jesus who wrote this were themselves Jews, villainizing other Jews. After all, Jesus repeatedly uses the distinctly Jewish greeting *Shalom* in this passage. But the way the text reads, particularly its use of "the Jews" as what seems like a slur in the first verse, can allow the reader to forget that Jesus and his followers were themselves Jews. In Jesus' time, and especially by the time John was written, there were large rifts between the Jews who followed Jesus and those who did not. The disciples' fear is likely that someone might report the Jesus-following Jews, which could result in more crucifixions. John makes this same point in 18:1–5, in which Judas facilitates Jesus' arrest.

It is the long-standing dilemma of oppressed people that some members of the group collude with the ruling authorities, perhaps hoping to keep the peace or to garner favor. Meanwhile, the majority suffer under the authoritarian power. Perhaps they also resist it; certainly they resent any colluders. And still, we know that this enemy mind-set creates more problems than it solves. That has certainly been the case throughout the history of this book being used for antisemitic purposes.

It is crucial to emphasize that the true villains throughout the New Testament period were the Roman authorities. Their reign of terror created a culture of fear in which everyone was afraid of everyone, out of concern that any misstep or report or collaborator would result in even more Jewish deaths. But in reading "fear of the Jews" in our own time—even with historical context, but especially without it—the phrase becomes a poison pill, spreading antisemitism, as key New Testament texts and their interpreters have done ever since Christianity reversed its role from oppressed Jesus-followers to post-Constantinian religious majority.

Interestingly, Acts 2:14b, adjacent to another of the readings for today, provides a different perspective. There, Peter instead addresses his "Fellow Jews." This may help us temper the animosity of "the Jews" in John, but it is still extremely problematic.

The ancient Jewish context of Acts 2:25–28 could hardly be more obvious, since it directly quotes Psalm 16:8–11, with 16:10 repeated in verse 31 to drive home the central theological belief of the Jesus followers:

resurrection. The author introduces the quote with the bold comment, “For David says concerning him,” in which “him” refers to Jesus. This gives us a glimpse into the logic of early Jesus-followers such as the author of Luke-Acts, who was making every effort to justify Jesus through Jewish scripture. Reading this now as contemporary Christians, we must take care to emphasize that the repurposed meaning of the psalm in Acts does not affect the original meaning of the Psalm, which of course predated Jesus and had its own historical and theological context. Mind the chronology.

The use of Psalm 16 in Acts illustrates the profound and lovely title of a James Sanders book from 1976: *Adaptable for Life*. It refers to the way the biblical texts were and still are molded and re-formed for a given community, culminating in life-giving meaning making through canon creation. Similarly, each semester I teach my students this phrase: “The text interprets itself.” In this case, the first-century community of Jewish Jesus-followers used their scripture to provide theological meaning to their experiences. That recontextualization of the psalm then itself became scripture for a new religious community. We do the same when we preach on it. Each new iteration need not strip the previous ones of their own meanings.

The original psalmist was not writing about Jesus or resurrection. An interpretation that says it was takes us back to the problem of antisemitism, this time in the guise of supersessionism. Instead, a respectful reading listens to and learns from those earlier expressions. After all, the original scriptures would not have been repurposed if they had not been meaningful from the start.