



Sunday, May 3, 2020  
*Easter Sermon Series: We're All in This Together*

Believers Pray for Boldness in Their Daily Work  
Pastor Vern Christopherson

**Acts 4:13-31 NRSV**

<sup>13</sup>Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus. <sup>14</sup>When they saw the man who had been cured standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. <sup>15</sup>So they ordered them to leave the council while they discussed the matter with one another. <sup>16</sup>They said, "What will we do with them? For it is obvious to all who live in Jerusalem that a notable sign has been done through them; we cannot deny it. <sup>17</sup>But to keep it from spreading further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name." <sup>18</sup>So they called them and ordered them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. <sup>19</sup>But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; <sup>20</sup>for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard." <sup>21</sup>After threatening them again, they let them go, finding no way to punish them because of the people, for all of them praised God for what had happened. <sup>22</sup>For the man on whom this sign of healing had been performed was more than forty years old.

<sup>23</sup> After they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. <sup>24</sup>When they heard it, they raised their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and everything in them, <sup>25</sup>it is you who said by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant: 'Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples imagine vain things? <sup>26</sup>The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers have gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah.' <sup>27</sup>For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, <sup>28</sup>to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. <sup>29</sup>And now, Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, <sup>30</sup>while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus." <sup>31</sup>When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.

We've experienced an enormous amount of change over the last couple months. Perhaps no change has been as significant as in our daily work. Any number of employees have been laid off or let go—restaurant staff, schoolteachers, bus drivers, relators...the list goes on and on. For those who

still have jobs, a good number are working from home. And others, including many at Mayo, have been furloughed or taken a reduction in salary or both. Parents have it particularly tough—they're trying to juggle job responsibilities and parenting duties and homework, all under one roof. And now, as some stay-at-home restrictions are being lifted, a few businesses – such as meat-processing plants and childcare facilities – are starting up again. In many of these settings, employees have been told either to show up for work, risks and all, or find another job. Who could have predicted a couple of months ago that going to work would be so incredibly hard?

There have been some encouraging moments along the way. Day after day we hear stories about people on the frontlines who are putting their lives on the line for others: delivering mail to our homes; stocking grocery store shelves; responding to 9-1-1 calls; working in healthcare – doctors and nurses and support staff, especially in the ER and ICU. We're grateful for what they're doing. What amazes me is how often, when asked about it, they simply shrug and say, "Well, that's what I'm here to do." We hope and pray these workers have enough personal protective equipment. And beyond that, we hope and pray that all those in the work-a-day world have whatever boldness they need to do their jobs.

For most of us, this great upheaval feels unlike anything we've ever experienced. From the sounds of it, however, there have been afflictions like this before. In 1918, during the Spanish flu pandemic, 675,000 Americans died. People needed boldness just to get out of bed in the morning.

A few centuries earlier, in 1527, the Black Plague broke out across Europe. Martin Luther responded by writing a treatise entitled: "Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague." Doesn't that grab the headlines? Luther encouraged people in the town of Wittenberg, Germany to provide care for their neighbors. He urged that pastors, doctors and public servants should remain in the city during the outbreaks. Luther himself remained in Wittenberg to care for his people. He recommended that public hospitals be built to accommodate those with the plague. He encouraged people to use common sense and to refrain from taking unnecessary risks. As with the Spanish flu, people needed boldness to face up to this Black Death.

If there's a word to describe what we're experiencing these days, I would pick *disorientation*. So much of what we've come to depend upon has been disrupted: our daily work, our schools, our families, our eating establishments, our hospitals, our places of worship. Everything feels different.

We can reassure ourselves that this disruption is only temporary. The curve is flattening. A vaccine will be coming. Patients will return to Mayo. Our daily work will get back to normal. Summer vacations will happen. Schools will

reopen this fall. And last but not least, our renovation project at church will be done, and all of us will be back together again, all warm and cozy, right? I sure hope so. But to be honest, I don't know. I'm not sure anybody does. We're disoriented.

We had a graveside service for Lorraine Larson yesterday. It was at Oakwood Cemetery. Lorraine had died in early March. The family had picked a date, and then another date, and still another date for the committal, all the while thinking that a Celebration of Life would come later. But the more the family talked about it, and looked down the road toward this new normal we seem to be in, they decided that perhaps it was time to say goodbye to Mom now. So, with four children and their spouses in attendance, with video-recorders and facetimeing, they spoke their goodbyes and commended Lorraine to God's eternal safekeeping. Mindful of the uncertainty of our world today, this is the only service they are planning to hold.

In our Bible reading for today, the early Christians in Jerusalem were facing their own *disorientation*. Some of them, especially the twelve disciples and a small group of women, had been companions of Jesus ever since Galilee. They'd been fishermen and farmers and homemakers. Then Jesus came along and invited them to join his moment. He said he was bringing in the kingdom of God. Surprisingly, they left everything and followed him.

As they did, their daily work changed from being fishermen and farmers and homemakers, to doing some of the same work Jesus, their rabbi, was doing. Suddenly they were caring for people, laying hands on the sick, feeding the hungry. It was all new. They were learning on the job. I imagine them getting up in the morning and praying for fresh energy and inspiration, and maybe a little boldness too.

Then Jerusalem happened, and Passover. They needed all the boldness they could get. Before the week was over, their rabbi got nailed to a tree. They didn't see it coming, at least not like this. Three days later Mary Magdalene claimed to have seen him. But you know how it is, people are always imagining things, especially the things they really want to see.

The disorientation of the disciples went from bad to worse. So much of what they had come to depend upon had changed. They'd left home and family behind to follow this rabbi. Now he was gone. What were they supposed to do next?

You know what happened. Easter. The Risen Lord appeared to them, usually a few at a time, and often only a fleeting glimpse. A couple of disciples were walking on road to Emmaus when a stranger walked up beside them. Others were hiding behind locked doors when the Risen Christ mysteriously

appeared. Suddenly people were claiming to have recognized him. Their hearts skipped a beat. Could it be true? Oh, maybe the disruption had only been temporary after all. Maybe things would soon be back to normal again. Maybe, but much like our world today, it was hard to know for sure.

Jesus followers were in a liminal season, stuck between an ending and a new beginning. Jesus blew his Spirit upon them and sent them out, and they went. They felt compelled to share his story. They were preaching and teaching about Jesus in the temple. They healed a crippled man in Jesus' name. The crowds were amazed. The temple authorities were alarmed. They said, "If we allow this movement to continue, soon everyone will believe in him." So, the authorities did what authorities often do to get the crowds under control, they arrested Peter and John. Charges were filed. They dragged them before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high council. The council sternly ordered them not to speak or heal anymore in Jesus' name.

Let's not pretend this was easy for the early believers. No, it was *disorienting*. The disciples were stuck between an ending and a new beginning. Now what? So much of their old world was coming apart at the seams. So many of their priorities had shifted. So many of their legal proscriptions - what to eat, what to wear, who to hang out with, what to do on the Sabbath - no longer felt important to them. In fact, sometimes these rules seemed to get in the way.

Notice that, in the midst of their disorientation, they weren't looking to do any long-range planning, as helpful as such planning can sometimes be. Rather, they were looking for *one good next step*, something that mattered now, and something they could do together. And so, after Peter and John were released, they encouraged the believers to pray for boldness. They needed it. The threats were real, the pressure at times unbearable. They were going to have to figure out this new normal *one good next step at a time*.

Sure enough, boldness came. They felt it deep inside. And things they weren't expecting began to happen. A eunuch from Ethiopia had heard about Jesus. He was coming to Jerusalem. God used Philip to make room for him among God's people. Paul, a fierce persecutor of Christians, became a believer himself. God used Barnabas to vouch for Paul when others were understandably suspicious. Cornelius, a Roman Centurion and a Gentile, wanted to join the family of faith. God used Peter, and several dreams, to make that happen. The early Christians prayed for boldness in their daily work, and out of that boldness they kept taking one good next step. It wasn't long-term planning, but out of that step God was doing remarkable things.

At least one more thing was happening for the early believers. As we've been saying, disorientation was often leading to one good next step, and maybe a

second, and even a third. The question is: what was guiding them? A simple answer: the yearning they were feeling inside. Sometimes, especially in periods of great upheaval, rational decisions aren't enough to guide us, so we need to pay attention to our yearning, and we trust God's Spirit to be at work in it.

Yearning is the language of the soul. It connects us with others. It reminds us that we're all in this together. Indeed, our collective longing can lead us to the other side of chaos. Like those early Christians, that might mean letting go of what once was, and allowing God to draw us forward and into the future. At such times, the pivotal question we need to be asking is: what is God calling us to be or do next?

Friends, could you use some boldness in your daily work? I suspect so. I can too. The world in which we're living has been upended in so many ways. We're stuck between an ending and a new beginning. Many of us are having to do things we've never done before. We're making this up as we go. Who could have known that our daily work would become so hard?

I had a conversation with a group of senior pastors this past week. A comment came up that caught me completely off guard. One of them said, "I think we'll be opening for worship soon, and I think people will come out in large numbers." I found myself disagreeing. "Call me a pessimist," I said, "but I think it's going to take a long time for us to get back together again. And I'm not convinced Zumbro is ready for it. And even if they are, I'm not sure it would be safe."

So, what do think? Was I being cautious? Argumentative? Stubborn? Bold? The conversation went back and forth for quite a while, and we didn't really resolve it. That's the thing about the *disorientation* we're feeling. We don't have easy answers. But we do need to keep talking, and listening, and praying. And eventually, we will need to *pick one good next step* - something that matters now; something we can do together. All the while we need to *listening to the yearning* we feel deep inside.

We're in a liminal state, between an ending and a new beginning. We're not sure what's coming next. Like Lorraine Laron's family, like those early Christians in Acts, like that gathering of senior pastors, we're already in a new normal, and yet it's just beyond our reach. In these uncertain times, I encourage you to pray for boldness in your daily work. Who knows where it might lead? Amen.