

# Sermon Transcript

## Enjoy the Ride!

Luke 24:48-49 and Acts 28:23-31 | Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost | September 1, 2024  
| John Klawiter, preaching

Grace and peace to you my friends in Christ,

All summer, we've heard the last words of Jesus to his disciples as our gospel.

"Stay here in the city until you've been clothed with power from on high."

It's a cliffhanger. There's clearly more to the story.

What happens next? They do stay in the city. They WILL be clothed with power from on high. And after that, they're unleashed into the world.

It was the book of Acts. The Acts of the Apostles, or more accurately, the Acts of the Holy Spirit.

But even the Holy Spirit isn't exactly moving people around like chess pieces on a board. Often, when the apostles believe they are acting on the Holy Spirit, things go differently than expected.

I can relate.

Life never quite goes as planned, does it? The Holy Spirit is a fiery one (**SLIDE of Holy Spirit meme**). What trusting the Holy Spirit actually looks like is a bit of a rollercoaster ride.

So how does the story end?

Certainly it doesn't end, as the Book of Acts suggests, "without hindrance." We have a hunch that Paul didn't live "happily ever after." Right???

What Paul has done is to overplay his cards, so to speak. He's played too many "Draw 4's" that there's nothing left to save him.

Paul was imprisoned by Felix the Governor and after his term ends, a new Governor named Festus takes over.

When given a chance to plead his case, Paul states that he wants to appeal to the Emperor.

So, to the emperor he will go.

But first, King Agrippa and his sister Bernice, who he was in a relationship with, are in town to celebrate Governor Festus' new position.

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Agrippa is the last of the Herod dynasty. You know how well the Herods are regarded in the story of Jesus.

In this case, King Agrippa listens to the story of Paul—who actually tries to CONVERT him. Agrippa of course won't be persuaded to believe in Jesus, but he does make a fascinating observation:

**“This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment.”<sup>32</sup> Agrippa said to Festus, “This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to the emperor.”**

The way it reads in Acts sounds like we've finally found a Herod with heart and reason.

Yet, I'm suspicious. Herods aren't known for bunnies and rainbows.

Perhaps the last words of Herod are tongue and cheek. He knows that Paul's trip to see the emperor is a death sentence.

But it won't be blood on his hands. He knows that the ruthless emperor Nero will be waiting for him.

But the story in Acts doesn't tell us that.

We fill in the gaps with a bit of the tradition and through details that we do know.

Nero, short for **Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus**, was not to be messed with. He killed his family members and was a known oppressor of Christians.

Nero's reputation is so bad that as Rome was burning, it's said that he was playing his fiddle.

Nero is oft attributed as the arsonist behind this catastrophe—he really DID start the fire. Why would the emperor want his own city to burn down? Likely to clear out the space to build his Golden House palace. He wants to rebuild Rome in his own taste.

But Nero can't say that. He can't take the credit for burning down his own city.

So he blames someone. He blames the Christians.

It's likely in the aftermath of the fire that Paul and Peter will be killed, along with many others. Nero doesn't do it out of a sense of justice—he was cruel and enjoyed torturing others.

This feels like an important part of the story. It feels like something that Luke, the writer of Acts, would know. Why doesn't he tell it?

Because the story isn't about Paul. The story doesn't depend on resolution to his story to give us hope for our story.

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Maybe another thing for us to consider is that Acts doesn't dwell on the bad guys. It doesn't remind us who the people are that we should be hating. If we are expending a lot of energy on hating others, we might be missing the point of our faith. Paul certainly isn't doing that.

Paul doesn't wear a sticker that says, "Love Jesus, hate Nero." He doesn't pray for the death and demise of those who've imprisoned him or kept him there.

Matthew Skinner keenly makes this observation.

**I'm not interested in encouraging even more people to treat the Bible as a tool for drawing thicker lines between groups, as if scripture somehow urges us to assign everyone in the world to a particular category. Nor do I want to equate all "opposition" with "enemies."**

Instead, Skinner suggests this:

**I believe a more appropriate question than "who is the enemy?" is "How should believers respond faithfully and responsibly to whatever impedes their ability to live out the generosity and hospitality of the good news?"**

That's tough, isn't it?

It might not even be the enemy... it could be the "other"—that person that's different, new, unknown. We are suspicious of motives, we are quick to stereotype and blame.

We want to be seen as the people who help, but we might have a set of criteria that needs to be met before we do it.

We are messy. How does it feel when anger, fury, and hatred is spewed towards someone else? Do we feel better about ourselves? Do we feel closer to God when we react that way?

Faith, we are a welcoming church. We love to celebrate that, but it also acknowledges that we live in a messy world where people who feel welcome here DON'T feel welcome somewhere else.

It also means that we aren't perfect at actually doing the right thing, saying the right thing, or living into that welcome all the time.

We make mistakes. We don't love our neighbors as ourselves.

We must be graceful with ourselves. But we must continue to love unconditionally. And most importantly, be aware of when we come up short and do better the next time.

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We, collectively, can't dwell on whose against us—we are called to live out the hospitality and generosity of the good news.

The book of Acts doesn't edit out all the times where relationships soured. It doesn't edit out the times where leaders made decisions that didn't work out. The book of Acts doesn't sugarcoat the challenges that followers faced to actually be all in with the new movement.

Skinner has this word to remind us what really matters.

**Acts implores us: don't look back on memories about the ancient church with nostalgia. Instead, look back into Acts to reassure you about the future, for God remains as faithful as ever.**

We can romanticize the past, but what really matters is the future. Look at what gifts for ministry we have in our midst!

We can tell the story—through the art show coming up in September. Through music—like special guests JD and Fred Steele, but also the choir, band, and special musicians that praise Jesus through their voices.

We can reach out to provide resources for our community—like a new Screenagers video with a panel of educators who will come in October.

We can continue to feed our neighbors—like the amazing response to Faith Feeds Our Neighbors throughout this harvest season.

We can continue to mentor and train the youth of our church to practice leadership—not just in our church, but on the football field, the classroom, and as they take those first steps onto campuses or into jobs this fall.

Trusting the Holy Spirit is a crazy ride. But it's worth it. It's worth it to know that putting love and grace first, ahead of fear, hate, or doubt—that it doesn't just make the lives of others better, it changes our outlook at life too.

It certainly does for Paul. He wanted the emperor—knowing it meant death also meant he could share the good news in Rome.

What gets the last word in our lives? The Spirit is at work. We don't know where we'll be lead, but we prepare for what's next. Our story isn't finished. (**SLIDE of roller coaster**). Enjoy the ride! Amen.