

## **Sermon Draft**

**Text: Acts 5:12–20 (21–32)**

**Sermon: Easter Bunny (The Message)**

In this section of Acts, we hear how the crucifixion and resurrection become the message and the driving force of those Jewish disciples who said, *“We must obey God rather than men. . . . God exalted [Jesus] at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him”* (vv 29–32).

From the beginning of Acts through this fifth chapter the ranks of believers swell in numbers. From the 120 followers of Christ living in the upper room, the Holy Spirit gives birth to some three thousand believers in one day; by continual preaching and healing, that number rises to five thousand men, double that, counting women and children. *“The Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved”* (2:47).

Sadly, for many people, Easter is as satisfying as a hollow chocolate bunny. It tastes good and is satisfying for a moment, but a lot of it just falls apart in the hands. It's hollow; it's not full. Best to be done with the day and move on in life!

For some reason, the message of Easter has not had its full effect on that person's life. That person might even be a longtime member of a church but has never grasped the full message of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. He has always believed but not understood it fully.

When trouble comes in life, the message that "He lives! He lives, who once was dead!" rings hollow. Perhaps you know such a person. We all at one time or another identify with Thomas from our Gospel; wishing we could touch and see Jesus. We may hate to say it, but it appears we're filled with doubt a doubt that might be based on reason or experience or despair or a combination of these. "The resurrection isn't reasonable; and it isn't needed for me to believe in God, is it? If I could see and touch Jesus, perhaps I would believe. Then my Easter joy would be full."

Lots of us probably all of us at times feel that way. That's why an angel came along and told the apostles, Stand your ground and tell the people the full message of the Gospel.

The full message of the resurrection of Jesus is what gives us that comfort in trouble, that joy, confidence in doubt. It is the ground on which we, the Church, stand solid and certain.

As the name indicates, the Christian Church is based on Christ. The Gospels are brutally honest about the doubt that the disciples had on that first Easter morning. Only the women went out to the tomb and they went only to wash the dead body and wrap it with spices. Incredible doubt surrounded everyone. Who wouldn't doubt? If you had seen your dearest friend die tragically, would you bound out of bed hoping to see that friend alive? And any sighting would be ridiculed as impossible. Yet the joy of Easter was that many encounters were reported—and then substantiated by the presence of the living Christ. Thomas and some five hundred others would see Jesus, very much alive within the next forty days.

Notice that Jesus is patient with his followers. He chides them for their doubts, but he is patient. He knows our weakness, how we are more impressed with ourselves than with truth. Nevertheless, the power and grace of God is compelling. Jesus is there for his Church to grant forgiveness for the doubting and every sin. Jesus is also there to teach them, preparing them as witnesses to the power and grace of God, that this might be shared with others. When Jesus finally does ascend to heaven, the 120 disciples in Jerusalem are no longer fearful; they are ready for action.

Plenty of action did indeed follow. In our text, the disciples have been arrested for preaching Jesus. But then along comes that angel and tells them to get back at it. Likely to be arrested again? Sure. Killed? Maybe. But stand your ground. And they do because they're standing on the solid and certain ground of Jesus risen. He's alive! And that means he's with them and with us for every fear and trouble and danger and anxiety of guilt and tormenting sin we face. Really!

So, standing on the solid ground of Jesus risen, we, the Church today, are also ready for action to go and tell the same full message. Stand your ground and tell!

From the Day of Pentecost, the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and boldly taught about Jesus. Three thousand believed and were baptized that day! Every day they preached and taught about Jesus and healed in Jesus' name; soon, the number of believers in Jerusalem was five thousand men many more counting the women and children.

Soon, people swarmed into Jerusalem from neighboring cities, many hoping that their sick would be cured. There were so many that the sick were lined up in rows so that healing could occur as the shadow of the apostle passed over them. Just as Jesus had said, the disciples were doing greater things than he but, of course, all their healing was done in Jesus' name.

This was the message they taught: Jesus—the one who had been crucified but whom God had raised back to life. They preached that Jesus' blood poured down from the cross, but that this same blood is payment for all sins.

They preached that Jesus' life was given for the life of the world; they preached that it is his name that is honored above all others: ***“For there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved”*** (Acts 4:12).

The message was not honored by everyone, especially by those who had ordered Jesus' death. Their hearts were already filled with pride; seeing people passing them by to listen to the apostles filled them with jealousy and rage. The Sadducees were particularly distressed; they did not believe that God would want to raise anyone from the dead. They had always ridiculed that idea that and the idea of angels. Anything supernatural they despised. Now that Jesus was supposed to have risen, witnessed by angels and by men, and seeing people healed in Jesus' name, the chief priests and Sadducees were beside themselves as to what this meant! So, they rose up and went to stop the disciples from speaking about this Jesus, who rose from the dead.

Prison didn't stop the disciples; there they were out on the streets again, teaching the full message of Jesus. The high priest demanded to know:

***“Why are you filling Jerusalem with your preaching, making us guilty of this man’s blood? Didn’t we order you not to speak in this name?”***

(cf. v 28). But the disciples had been told by the angel to stand firm in their message and to speak steadfastly. When Peter said, ***“We must obey God rather than men,”*** he informed the chief priests they weren’t chief anymore—and neither was any one of them a priest in service to God anymore, because there is now one Chief and one Savior and one message for this Life.

The full message of the resurrection of Jesus is repentance to full forgiveness and life. That is our message. It is a living message based on the living Lord. The Sadducees thought that the battle with Jesus was over because they did not see him after he died; three days later, all they knew was an empty tomb. But they really did see Jesus, and it enraged them and frightened them at the same time; they saw Jesus in the disciples. They knew that these were unlearned men but remembered that they had been the followers of Jesus. Those who followed Jesus were immovable and steadfast.

The reason was they had seen their Lord alive, and Jesus was alive in them. They knew God had made Jesus Lord and Savior. There is no name that has higher honor; no other message that can be preached, no blood that has greater power than that which belongs to Jesus.

That is our message too. Never doubt its power, and never be ashamed to own that name: Jesus. It is the source of your salvation, the name on your brow. It is life eternal, given to you. As Paul wrote, ***“It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes”*** (Romans 1:16). And he commended fellow Christians to contend for the faith: ***“Beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain”*** (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Look at the last words: ***“in vain.”*** Paul says what our are believing and preaching and teaching is not useless; it’s not pointless. It’s anything but that! Rather, it is the essence of life: we have forgiveness of sins because we believe in the one who died for us and was raised again.



It's essential to know that when Paul was talking about being “steadfast, immovable”—“standing firm”—he was talking specifically about the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed. Alleluia! Make no mistake about that.

Solid teaching comes from the Gospel of Jesus. Preaching anything else is useless and hollow. Living our lives for anything else is also hollow and empty. When it comes to faith in Jesus, stand your ground and do not give an inch. The Sadducees and officials backed off from further prosecution, if just for a while, because they feared what the people would do.

How empty, how pointless. Fended off by disciples who owned nothing but a full belief in God, they let them go free. God brings his people through difficult trials, even those that truly test the faith. As the Scriptures promise, what God begins in us he will complete and bring to fullness and perfection, through Jesus Christ. As Jesus is the author and finisher of the faith, he will do this for you. That is no hollow or deceptive philosophy; it is the solid promise of God. In Jesus' name.

Amen