

What's the True Story?

In the name of the Holy and Righteous One whom God has glorified, dear friends in Christ: People of my generation and older can likely remember a time when it was largely assumed that the news was the news. Journalists and newscasters were more or less objective. They presented their stories without a lot of bias or spin or editorial comment. They simply reported the facts and let their readers or hearers decide what to think about them. That sure ain't the way it is today. Indeed, one is hard pressed to find anything that even remotely resembles a pure news program or publication.

It's gotten so bad that in the last president's administration the standing joke went like this: on Fox News the lead story is "Trump Discovers the Cure for Cancer". This would be accompanied by images of cheering crowds and a series of heart-tugging personal stories about families with little children who narrowly escaped death from brain cancer or leukemia, and how grateful they are to the president. Flip over to CNN and the lead story covers the same issue from a *slightly different* perspective. There it's "Trump Puts Thousands of Health Care Providers out of Work". The images shown are of abandoned hospitals with broken windows and tumble weeds blowing through the parking lot and impoverished oncologists dressed in rags standing in long soup lines at seedy rescue missions. They are burning with disgust and filled rage for having been treated so badly.

It's meant as a joke. The trouble is that it's funny because it's just a few millimeters from the truth. These days when I try to keep up on the news I make a point of hearing it from a number of different sources. I'll get the left's spin on it and the right's spin on it, and figure that what really happened lays some place in between. But at the end of the day I'm still left wondering *what's the true story?* It's not a very Lutheran thing to do, but can I get an "Amen" here?

Upon further reflection, however, I think we have to admit that while standards of journalistic ethics have certainly slipped in recent times, those charged with keeping us informed have long been spinning different versions of the truth based on their personal biases, politics, and opinions. They were just more subtle about it in the past. But really, it goes all the way back to the beginning when Satan asked, "Did God really say?" And then a bit later, "Oh, no, no, no. That's not right. Let me give you the *true* story."

It's different versions of the truth that are clashing in today's first reading from the Book of Acts. There is, on one hand, the official, government sanctioned, and religiously approved story. It goes like this: there was this Galilean carpenter named Jesus who imagined himself a Rabbi. He attracted a lot of attention in his day. He was very charismatic; but his theology was totally messed up. Wild stories circulated about him performing a bunch of miracles. Many misguided and foolish people believed these stories: but none of these alleged "miracles" have been independently verified or confirmed by the authorities. Anyway, this Jesus got too big for his britches. Let his popularity go to his head. Started saying he was the Messiah. Even blasphemously called himself the Son of God. So, the Sanhedrin, our ruling council, had no choice but to condemn him as a dangerous heretic who deserved to die; but because of the Roman occupation, they couldn't carry out the sentence. So, they handed him over to Pilate and accused him of treason against Rome. He was condemned and crucified. A few days later, a handful of his former followers exhumed his body and stashed it away some place. They

started spreading the crazy, whacked-out story that he rose from the dead. They say that he really is the Messiah after all. At least they did. That's all old news now. It's been a couple months since all that happened. There's nothing to see here anymore. Let's move on.

That's the official story. It's the one that the vast majority of people living in Jerusalem believe. They think it's the truth. And it's not hard to understand why. Besides being the one pushed down from the top by our trusted leaders, it's what makes the most sense. Consider: it's common knowledge in Jerusalem that Jesus was a self-proclaimed prophet with grass roots appeal, that he ran afoul of our religious authorities, and that he was crucified and killed; but comparatively few saw him after his resurrection. Now, Paul does mention that he appeared to over 500 persons at one time, but that was most likely way up north in Galilee, not here in Jerusalem. Consider also that even his own followers who had seen his many amazing miracles first hand had a hard time coming to grips with the fact that he had risen from the dead. In today's Gospel lesson, the disciples are discussing his resurrection. There are four eyewitnesses of the risen Savior in the room testifying that it's true; but when Jesus actually appears, they think he must be a ghost. They know that dead people don't come back to life – especially people made dead through the horrifying process of crucifixion. If *they* had trouble believing that he'd risen from the dead even upon seeing him, it's small wonder that the general population of Jerusalem who didn't see him simply accepted the official story as true.

But that version of truth is now being challenged, as we heard. What happened was that Peter and John were going into the Temple. Near the gate, they passed by a crippled man who always sits there begging for coins. He's a common fixture there. Everyone has seen him – though most pretend not to. Some do pity him upon seeing the shriveled, useless legs he was born with. They toss him a coin now and then to allay their guilt. But the point is that he's well known. And now he's attracting a lot of attention because he's not crippled anymore. He is instead leaping up and down and dancing around and praising God at the top of his lungs while he clings to Peter and John. He had begged them for money. They healed him instead; healed him in the name of Jesus.

A large crowd gathers to witness this astonishing sight. They stand with their mouths agape in wonder, trying to figure out how this miracle might have occurred. So Peter tells them. "Why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we have made him walk? The God ... of our fathers glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate ... You denied the Holy and Righteous One ... and killed the Author of life, whom God has raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. And his name—by faith in his name—has made this man strong whom you see and know, and the faith that is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all."

You see what Peter is doing? He's giving all credit to Jesus to whom it belongs – and using that as verifiable proof that Jesus has indeed been raised to life and crowned with glory. These people didn't get to see the risen Lord Jesus; but they can now see the result of his glorification – which means he has to be alive and powerful. You want to know the true story? You're looking at it. The official story is fake news. It's a false narrative.

And it's not the only false narrative. Peter tells his hearers that they acted in ignorance. They all did – even the disciples themselves. The truth is that none of them understood the Scriptures – the whole biblical story-line and where it was heading. The Jews of that day had one story. And when they read the Scriptures, they interpreted what they read through the lens of that story. In that story, God had promised them a Savior, yes; but not Savior from sin and death. No, they understood that they were to be expecting an earthly savior who would restore

the throne of King David and the glory of his kingdom. They were looking for a political and military savior in the present age, someone who would raise their nation up and put it on top where it belonged, in domination over all the other nations.

And like I said, even the disciples of Jesus were steeped in this false narrative. That's why when Jesus spoke to them about having to go to Jerusalem to face condemnation, suffering, and death at the hands of sinful men, they just didn't get it. It didn't fit the story as they understood it.

In today's Gospel, we see Jesus opening the minds of his disciples to the true story that was there all along, but never rightly understood. "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things."

And so they are. That's what we see in the reading from Acts: the disciples bearing witness of the things they heard and saw concerning Jesus the Christ in Jerusalem. They are setting the record straight and declaring the true story. "What God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled. Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord." They are calling on their Jewish brethren to repent, and proclaiming to them forgiveness, life, and salvation in the name of Jesus Christ. That's the true story.

It still is today. It's the truest and best of all stories. But now, as back then, it's in conflict with any number of other stories that are not true but are nevertheless widely believed – like the one that still looks forward to a restoration of earthly Israel and a kingdom that lasts for a thousand years; or the one that says Christ's resurrection was not physical nor a defeat of sin and death, but rather a spiritual idea about how we ought to be living better lives now by accepting everyone just the way they are and holding hands with them while we sing about peace and love and joy; or the one that says yes, that story is true for you, but there are so many other true stories that also lead to salvation. Just pick one and go with the flow. It's all good.

No, it's not. There is only one name given under heaven by which people are saved. It's the name of Jesus the Christ. He is the true story in time and eternity. May we hold fast to him, repenting of our sins and receiving his true word of forgiveness. In the glorified Jesus' powerful name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!