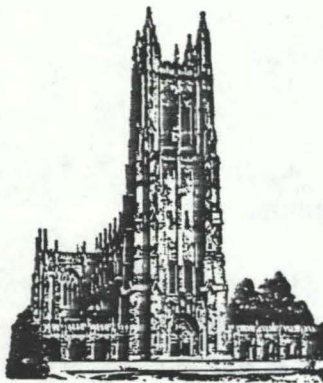


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DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

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EASTER POWER

Acts 14:8-18

"Why are you doing this? We are also men, of like nature with you, and bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God..."

We're now four Sundays beyond Easter. The Sunday crowd is smaller. We have no trumpets today and the music is not as stupendous as that we sang on Easter. Yet, if you put your ear to the ground, you can still hear it rumbling, even as the earth heaved on that first Easter morn. Beneath the somewhat sedate rhythms of today's service, you can still sense the throb of the Easter tempo when the stone was rolled away and the angels began to shout, when the power of God was unleashed, dead Jesus was unchained, let go, set loose, sprung up, threw off the grave clothes, and sallied forth as the Risen Christ. Easter power.

That unchecked power which so startled the fearful disciples on Easter is yet with us -- at least that's what Luke, the writer of Acts, says in today's story of Paul and the crippled man. Paul, the man whom the risen Christ knocked off his feet on the Damascus Road, knocks a crippled man to his feet at Lystra. Get Luke's point? The power that raised Jesus on Easter is no isolated phenomenon. What powerful God did through Jesus on Easter, God keeps on doing through Jesus' disciples after Easter. Jesus commanded dead Lazarus: "Arise!" He gave sight to blind Bartemaeus and made the lame to jump and shout. Now, Jesus' people -- Barnabas, Paul -- have that same Easter power.

And what power! Luke says this poor man was a "cripple from birth." He had never walked. He wasn't injured. This wasn't a recent or temporary infirmity. He had never known what it was to stand on his own two feet. Here is desperate, utterly helpless, painful, impotency. Paul looked at the unfortunate man "intently."

Luke wants us to do the same. Here, lying in front of us is the very essence of miserable, utter, helplessness. Look at this cripple. Let this poor man be, for us, the image of all those among us afflicted since birth -- people who have never seen a sunrise, never taken a step, never know a time without confusion of the mind, never had a full meal. He is there for them all. Oh, we want to turn away, look in the other direction because his infirmity is a threat to our pious claims that life is good, or God is just, or the world is beautiful. We ignore such people, not because we don't care about their condition, but because we know

that we cannot do one blessed thing to change their condition. We turn away, and hope that when we open our eyes again, they will be gone. Though we would change them for the better if we could, we can't. In an odd way, we are a lot like the crippled man. We are powerless.

Paul looks at the man who has had no power to walk since birth and, in a loud voice (the same volume as Jesus' voice which roused Lazarus?), he commands him to stand. The man not only stands, "he sprang up and walked."

With such a show of healing power, such a contrast between a man once utterly powerless now springing up, jogging about, is it any wonder the amazed Lycaonians scream, "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men." And they name Barnabas "Zeus" and call Paul, "Hermes" and prepare to sacrifice an ox in honor of these two "gods."

What would you have said? I doubt we would have called Paul and Barnabas "gods." Who worships Hermes or Zeus anymore? But we would have recognized their godlike power, because that is something you and I will bow before -- power. These first-century Greeks and Jews told so many miraculous stories of healings because, if you were sick or crippled in the first century, what power other than miracle was there to heal you? Unlike us, they didn't have the AMA.

We probably possess more power to overcome life's misfortunes than any generation before us. I'm not all that old, but I can remember when parents kept us inside in summer in a rather pitiful attempt to resist that great, crippling scourge of childhood -- polio. Now the word holds little threat. We conquered it.

At the same time, why do we feel so impotent? Today's "wonder drug" often brings tomorrow's disfiguring genetic defects. The computer, which was to be our potent friend, now makes you feel like a fool as you vainly correspond with it, trying to get straight your credit card bill. Did you vote in last November's election? Did you feel the power of democracy surging through your veins as you pulled the lever?

Perhaps our modern feelings of powerlessness account for our almost worshipful adoration of anything which promises us power. We adore anything which promises us power. There's a woman on TV who used to be a whiz at barbecuing steaks. Now she says she is eating bran flakes and "pumping iron." Don't you want to be like her? the ad says.

We go to universities and get advanced degrees. We long for the day when we will no longer be dependent, compliant students but will be done with sitting at professors' feet and will at last be doctors, lawyers, corporate executives, or even professors, and have others sitting at our feet. That glorious Commencement day will come when the President of the University will bestow upon us our BD, JD, MD or Ph.D. and cry, "Stand upright on your feet."

Why is it that the biggest, most overly built, most expensive buildings are no longer churches, but hospitals? We thank God that we have progressed to the point where we have something we can do for that crippled man from birth. Do we put so much into medicine because we feel that it offers us power? What Paul did for that poor man is done almost daily in Duke Hospital. We don't call the

physicians who heal "Zeus" or "Hermes," but we do offer them government grants, about the closest thing to worship that we can give.

Ponder this: Why are physicians so prominently featured on TV soap operas? Everyone, it seems, is romantically attracted to doctors. Many of the doctors I know are so dead tired after their fifteen hour work days that I can't believe they have enough energy left to be romantic! Nevertheless, there they are on TV. My theory: We believe that our doctors are powerful.

Not that doctors believe that themselves. As a doctor friend told me, "We doctors really don't do all that much healing. But the public believes that we can heal. That's the important thing. So we ask the patient to take off his clothes, we touch him in a few places, ask him what he thinks is wrong with him, tell him he's probably right, give him a pill, and he usually gets better." Still, that's power.

And that's also a possible reason for our national disillusionment with the medical profession. We have put much money, and an incredible amount of faith, in this venture. But it doesn't deliver. We still have AIDS, still we suffer, still we die. So we sue our physicians for not fulfilling our fantasies that they are omnipotent -- close relatives of Hermes and Zeus, if not gods themselves.

Beware, those of you who are headed toward the practice of law or medicine. You may benefit, professionally or financially, from our popular belief that science, medicine, law, or politics offers us power. But we will also hate you, blame you, when you fail to deliver.

Paul and Barnabas, having worked a powerful miracle for the poor crippled man, are not flattered by the idolatrous accolades of these Lycaonians. These are not gods come down to earth; they are disciples bearing good news. Gentiles, it seems, are incredible, virtually incurable, polytheists. A Gentile will bow down to anything if given half a chance to do so, says (Jewish?) Luke. When Peter healed another lame man (Acts 3:1-26), the grateful fellow clung to Peter as if he were an angel. When Peter met Cornelius (Acts 10:26-29), the first Gentile convert, Centurian Cornelius, who had spent most of his life bowing to Caesar, tried to bow to Peter. (A Gentile is somebody always out looking for some god or other to worship, to plug into the source, to harness divine power for his or her own purposes, to find a powerful religion that works.

Paul and Barnabas, good monotheistic Jews, set the idolatrous Lycaonians straight. "We bring not even something so wonderful as power. We bring good news." Turn from these "vain things." (They sure didn't think much of the Lycaonians classical, Greco-Roman education did they?) Turn from these vain things to the Living God.

Those who healed became those who taught. Lesson number one: The Christian faith is not chiefly about power, even the power to do good. It's about turning from ourselves and our idols to God. Wherever disciples preach good news, our stiffest opposition is not atheism but polytheism, idolatry. And we are all born polytheists. Idolatry is a hard habit to break.

Elsewhere in Acts (8:14-24), a Gentile miracle worker named Simon witnesses

the healing effects of the Holy Spirit. "Wow! Think of the good I could do with that kind of power at my disposal!" Simon offers the most powerful thing he has (money) to buy a little of this Holy Spirit for himself.

"To the Devil with you and your money," Peter told Simon. (8:20) Here is power that's not up for sale, not to be used at our beck and call, not to be controlled, corraled, captured for even our best purposes. This power blows where it wills. It's a gift. It is the power of the Living God, not the ersatz power of our little idols. Wherever the good news of Easter is present, disciples must also be teachers, teaching the world the difference between the ways of God and those of Zeus and Hermes.

"Well, I don't really agree with what these people believe, but they do a lot of good." What could be more utterly American than that? Who cares if they lift up some new counter-god, or else make demi-gods of themselves? They "do alot of good." What's religion about, if not about that? Their stuff works!

Friends, Easter Power is set loose in our troubled world. Watch and wonder as the downtrodden stand upright, the paralyzed and impotent begin to move. But take care. This isn't just any old power we celebrate today. It is the power of the risen Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and therefore of these good Jews who have been taught to say, "Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is One..." You will have no other gods before me."