

A Book Without an Ending
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
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Acts 28:17-31
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Can we agree that the book of Acts seems to have an abrupt ending? We human beings like a sense of an ending. We like songs that resolve in a major chord. We like stories that end in happily ever after. We like a resolution. And Acts doesn't seem to have that. If you feel like the book of Acts ends abruptly, you are not alone. In the early church the great preacher John Chrysostom said this: "The author brings his narrative to this point, and leaves the hearer thirsty for more."

What is the more that we're thirsty for? Why do we feel that the story shouldn't be done yet? I've been thinking about that and I think it's because of Paul. We want to know what's going to happen to Paul. As you read Luke's book you become really interested in his story. We've been walking with this man since chapter 13. We've followed him on his mission trips. Preaching to kings. Debating philosophers. Doing miracles. Back in chapter 21 we saw him arrested in Jerusalem and charged with inciting a riot—a capital crime. Paul has been in custody ever since, so for 7 chapters his case has been moving towards the trial. Now he's finally come to Rome—the place of the trial. Just when we are about to the verdict, Luke ends the book. It's like watching a murder mystery on TV, getting all the clues about who did it, getting right to the point when the murderer is about to be revealed, only to have the credits roll. And something in us says, "Wait a minute! Luke! Guilty or not guilty?! What happened to Paul!?"

Actually no one is really sure what happened to Paul. Luke leaves us hanging, and the story of what happens to Paul after this is disputed. There are two main suggestions—both suggestions agree on Paul's end. There are multiple sources in the early church that tell us Paul was martyred in Rome. More specifically, Paul was beheaded by the Romans. People seem to agree that happened around 65 AD. People also agree that Paul's arrival in Rome would have been about 60 AD. So there are 5 years between the arrival in our passage and the end of his life. What happened in the meantime? Luke tells us about the first two years. Paul lived in a rented house. He lived in relative comfort, under house arrest, chained to a Roman soldier. During that time, Paul received people and freely preached the gospel. That house arrest lasted two years, and after that it seems that Paul was probably set free. Perhaps the charges against him were dropped, perhaps he won his trial. Either way it seems that he went free.

After that some people think he went to Spain. Why Spain? Well, because we know Paul wanted to go there. In Romans 15 which was written about three years before our passage—57AD or so—Paul says he plans to go to Spain. In the first century, the usually reliable Clement, who was one of the first Bishops of Rome, said that Paul had taken the gospel to the 'farthest limits of the west.' In those days that would have been Spain. Others say no, he either stayed in Rome or went back East to visit old friends and old churches. Either way, Paul eventually came back to Rome. And sometime after the fire of Rome which Nero blamed on Christians, Paul was re-arrested. This time he wasn't under house arrest; this time it was in a dark cell. And this time his prospects were much more bleak. Read 2 Timothy. That's a letter written during this second, more serious imprisonment. In that letter, Paul clearly doesn't think he's going to make it. He doesn't think he will survive. And he turns out to be right. So you want to know what happens to Paul? Those are your options.

Luke however chooses to share none of this. Even though the book was almost certainly finished after Paul's death, even though Luke almost certainly knew the true story of Paul's end, he doesn't tell us. *Why?* It's not like he's afraid of martyr stories. He told about James' death and Stephen's death, he wouldn't have been afraid to tell Paul's story. Why doesn't Luke tell us what happened to Paul?

Luke doesn't tell us what happened to Paul because the story *is not about Paul*. Why do we want to know what happened to Paul? Because we want the story to be about people. We like stories about people whose heroic acts changed the world and saved the day, people who overcame their obstacles and brought about a happily ever after. We like those kind of stories because we want to believe that we can control the story of our lives. That we can be heroes who change the world, save the day and bring about a happily ever after. But Paul isn't the hero of this story. The Holy Spirit is the hero of this story. The promise of God the Father, fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Jesus the Son, and brought to the world through the power of the Holy Spirit—that's the true hero of this story. In a way, we are back to where we started this sermon series. I think the very first thing I did in the very first sermon of this series is challenge the name of this book. Tradition called it 'Acts of the Apostles,' but the real name of the book should be 'Acts of the Holy Spirit,' because the Spirit is the main character in this book. All the human characters in the book, Paul included, are just blown around by the Spirit's wind. Luke's "abrupt" end of his book is his way of pointing to the true hero of the story.

If you're not sure of my interpretation, go read Philippians this week. Paul almost certainly wrote Philippians during these two years of house arrest in Rome. If you want to have a sense of what was going on inside Paul during his house arrest, the book of Philippians shows you. It shows you that Paul is full of joy in Rome, because after all he's been through, after the trials and the shipwrecks and the beatings, he's overwhelmed with the knowledge that this is not his story; it's God's story. Chapter 1: I might live or I might die, I don't know which one, but either way I know Christ will be exalted. Because it's his story. Chapter 2: Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, because it is God who works in you to will and to do in order to fulfill his good purpose—this is God's story. Chapter 4: Don't be anxious about anything but in everything present your requests to God and the peace of God will guard and keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. It's God's story. Paul actually says at one point, "For me to live is Christ." It's not about me, and my will, it's about Jesus. God's got this. It's his story.

That doesn't mean he's passive. He still feels the call to work and serve. In chapter 2 he works out his salvation with fear and trembling. In chapter 3 he presses on towards the goal, but all of these efforts are not about him trying to change the world and fix all the things, they are about him trying to keep in step with the God who is changing the world and fixing all the things. Do we understand the difference between those two spiritual conditions? Do we understand the difference between those two states of mind? They sound similar but they are worlds apart. Paul lives his Christian life not as one who thinks it's his job to change the world and fix all the things; he lives his life as one trying to keep in step with the God who is changing the world and fixing all the things. A person who doesn't understand the difference between those two things, a person who doesn't feel the difference between those two things, is a person who hasn't fully understood the gospel. This is not our story. This is not Paul's story. This is God's story.

So, the more I studied the ending of Acts this week, the more sense it made. In fact, I fell in love with the last word of the book. The last word of Acts is *Akolutos*. That Greek word is translated by two English words in our Bibles. It means 'without hindrance.' That's the perfect

ending to this book. It sums up everything Luke is trying to say about the power of the Spirit. You couldn't find a better ending to this book than 'without hindrance,' because nothing can hinder the gospel of Jesus Christ. Lots of things try to hinder the gospel. On every page of Luke's book something or someone is trying to hinder the gospel. Some of these troubles are inside the church: The disciple's fear, the treachery of Ananias and Sapphira, the disagreements within the church over observing the law, the divisions within the church about leadership. There are forces outside the church that try to hinder the gospel: the persecution from the Jewish authorities, the persecution from the Roman authorities, the riots in Ephesus, the murder of James, the murder of Stephen, the prisons of Philippi and Caesarea and Rome. Do any of these things hinder the gospel? No. Because the gospel moves *akolutos*—without hindrance. Nothing can stop the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Three years after the end of this book, Paul would be beheaded by Nero. A terrible thing. I'm sure it shook the church when they heard about it. Would that hinder the message? No. Because *akolutos*. Because nothing can stop the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Through church history people have been killed, churches have been persecuted, heresies and scandals have arisen, church people have done and said embarrassing things, have those things stopped the message? No. Because *akolutos*. Because nothing can stop the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In your life there are many fights and fear, there are doubts and worries for yourself and your family, will any of these things hinder his purpose for you? No. Because *akolutos*. Nothing can stop the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I wanted to close with a story that sums all this up, and I thought of telling a big story about the church persisting through persecution and outlasting empires, but instead I found myself led to a small story.

It's a story I heard years ago when I was part of a ministers group. On the first day of the group we all told some stories of our lives as pastors and our lives as children of God. One of the pastors there told the story of his relationship with his wife. I don't know her name, let's call her Jane. Jane was never supposed to be born. She was the product of a teen pregnancy and, when the teens who conceived her found out that they had made a baby, they decided to abort her. But at the last minute the mother had a change of heart and she decided to have the baby. She left town to hide her condition and had the baby in International Falls Minnesota.

Jane was adopted and she grew up troubled. She struggled with the knowledge that she wasn't wanted by her birth parents. She struggled with the fact that they had planned to abort her. It made her angry and lost. At some point she met Shane, who'd been through his own struggle and found Jesus. The Holy Spirit had changed Shane's life and he shared his story with Jane, and pretty soon the two of them were sharing a life together. Jane became a Christian, the two of them got married and Shane went to seminary and became a pastor.

At some point after she got married, Jane became more curious about her biological parents. She decides to try and find them to find out who they are and to let them know that she was okay. She searches and searches and eventually she finds them in California. It turns out that the woman who gave birth to her ended up marrying her birth father. At the time of her birth, that seemed impossible, but somehow they were brought together and her birth mom married her birth dad. It turns out that her birth parents had become serious Christians. It turns out that they had been praying for Jane throughout their marriage, asking God to bless this child they'd given up. It turns out that they were specifically praying that God would help her meet a good Christian man.

I don't know about you, but when I hear a story like that, here's what I think. I think, this is not our story, this is God's story. And nothing can stop the gospel of Jesus Christ.

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