

*The Powers*  
Second Sunday of Easter  
April 3, 2016  
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Text: Acts 5 & Revelation 1

So I ask you to stick with me here for a bit at the start to see where I am headed – and to trust that I am headed somewhere - as it may not be entirely clear at first. I heard a report this week about researchers working to study the simplest form of life, the simplest living cells. These cell biologists kept removing genes from cells until they found the fewest number of genes needed in order for that cell to be a living, sustainable, cell. Here's what the article said:<sup>1</sup>

This single-cell creation has a "minimal genome" - just 473 genes, the smallest known genome of any living organism. (*Human organism has 20-25,000*)

With fewer genes, the organism wouldn't be able to sustain itself. Their hope is that bringing a genome down to its minimum components will help scientists figure out the most basic building blocks of life.

What the article goes on to say is that even pared down to these minimal 473 genes in a cell, that about a 1/3 of those genes the researchers don't know why they are needed or what they do – they just know that if they take them away, life is not possible. OK, so I find this kind of stuff fascinating – partly just the science itself, the ability to do this incredibly complex research; partly the existential dynamics of it, human beings with this unique capacity to wonder about life itself and to probe into the mysteries of what life is – and partly the practicalities of it, as researchers are also interested in applications for medicine and business, and some people are worried about the danger of creating mutant cells that will wreak havoc on humanity – that sort of thing. Great stuff, right?!

But what is also the case is that when I heard about this research exploring the basics of life, that what I immediately thought of was: “Acts 5!” – right?– that story we heard of the apostles speaking to the high priest council?! - you too?! Well, perhaps you did not immediately make that connection, but that is where I am headed, believing there is a word for us about resurrection in the destination. Because what I want to do is to share with you a different sort of research about life – in fact a different sort of understanding about the building blocks of life to bring to and take from this story in Acts. I want to propose to you, and have you try on believing for at least a while, that life is not just something that exists in the physical realm, but that there is also a life to things on a spiritual level – and that such spiritual life is

very real and substantial even if it does not have a physical substance. And in this case what I mean by spiritual life is mostly about the spirit created when people are together – much like cells grouped together into an organism – that when people are grouped together, into relationships, families, organizations, churches, communities, governments – or grouped together by race or politics or gender or faith – that such connections create a spirit, a life that emerges from that group; not metaphorically – but really.

Theologian Walter Wink terms these spiritual realities the “Powers”<sup>ii</sup> – which is scriptural language that speaks of the spiritual realities present among and around us – and Wink sees an understanding of these Powers as essential to how we express our spirituality, our spiritual power, as Christians.

Which, as I said, clearly brings us to Acts 5! – and particularly to this moment as Peter and the apostles respond to the attempt to ban them from witnessing to the Risen Jesus – they say: “we must obey God rather than any human authority.” What does that mean? – ‘obey God rather than human authority’? It’s a crucial statement – the apostles take a stand here that has been emulated by many Christians since, in all sorts of situations – sometimes even on opposite sides of the same situation. So I want us to try to understand something about “authority”, about human authority – not as just a concept or definition, but as a POWER – as a spiritual reality that is being spoken about and to in this moment. When Peter says they will obey God above human authority, Peter is speaking to the spiritual realities that are present in authority: the power of purpose, direction, loyalty that authority possesses and expresses. What I mean is that when the contrast is posed between obeying God or human authority, it is not just a contrast of whose rules are going to be followed, it is a matter of the spiritual power that will have priority for these apostles – what will hold their purpose, direction, loyalty.

Here’s another way to see what is happening here. The author of Acts is Luke, who is also the author of the Gospel of Luke – and one of the themes present in Luke’s gospel is that Jesus is regularly described as teaching and preaching with ‘authority’. That description is not so much meant to say that Jesus was in charge or that he was placed in an official position – he was in fact very much outside the official authority structure – but what it expresses is that there was a certain POWER about who Jesus was and what he said – there was a certain spirit about and created through the presence of Jesus, a spirit that people felt and that they became a part of – that was the authority Jesus had, and the purpose, direction and loyalty that people became a part of.

When Peter says: ‘we must obey God rather than human authority’ – Luke is echoing the thread of authority that has been present throughout for those who have followed Jesus. And such authority is not just a nebulous concept from Jesus, it is the Holy Spirit – look how this Acts passage concludes: ‘the Holy Spirit is given by God to those who obey God’ - So, obeying God is not at its core a set of rules to follow, it is a matter of what spirit has authority in your life – what spirit has authority in the purpose, direction, loyalties of your life; even more than authority over, it is about authority within. That is what is at stake in this Acts encounter: ‘we must obey God rather than human authority’ – naming the Power that forms and directs life individually and corporately.

So I just want to let that settle for a bit – hopefully percolate a bit in you – and turn for a moment to the passage we heard from Revelation. There at the opening of John’s vision, we hear of ‘Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth’ – it is beautiful, worshipful language, but what about that ‘ruler over the kings’ part? – when we look at the world then and now, it does not appear accurate that Jesus is ruling the rulers. In our Easter celebration, Pastor Jill explored some of those questions about power – wondering as we put together the resurrection with the broken circumstances of our lives and our world, what does God’s power look like among and around us? Jill preached of the themes of power expressed in renewal, freedom, forgiveness, comfort – and today we can see those themes through the lens of authority. Because as Revelation speaks of Jesus as the ‘ruler of the kings of earth’, what is happening is a claim of authority on OUR lives – that as followers of the Risen Christ, any and every human authority we view as subject to the Spirit of the Risen Christ; it is the Holy Spirit of Life that directs our lives – which Revelation names as the power of grace, peace, love, forgiveness, freedom.

Acts & Revelation speak of authority as a power to form our lives – not so much the rules we obey as the spirit that sustains and directs us. But here’s a final twist: the way I’ve been speaking, you could easily hear this as pitting human authority and divine authority against one another – obeying God in opposition to human authority; and there are circumstances in which that is clearly the case. But what is so compelling to see in the biblical witness is that there is no such kind of dualism going on at all of everything from God as good and human as bad; rather it is that everything is from God, a part of God’s creation, and so God is Sovereign, God claims all things as held in and answerable to God’s power – the Spirit of Life. In the language of that theologian Walter Wink, this means that all the Powers found in our

shared human life are good – and that they are all broken – and that they are all in need of redemption to serve God’s Spirit of life.

Let me make clear just how radical and challenging that is. This means that we must see every person and institution, every power and nation, every group and gathering – even if it is the most insidious terrorist group or the most infamous purveyor of injustice - first as good! – because it is a part of God’s creation, of people God has made. And doing that then makes even more clear the crisis and evil and waste of brokenness: when what God has created is turned to a power used for violence, division, diminishment, death. And it makes even more urgent and welcomed the good news of Eastertide - that God in the Risen Christ proclaims the ultimate authority that life is stronger than death. And it makes even more clear what we are a part of as followers of the Risen Christ: a witness to what is the authority in our lives and world. We are not in some dualistic battle of good versus bad people, good versus bad nations or religions or politicians or businesses or families or schools or...however we live together as human beings. No, as Peter says: ‘we are witnesses’ that the Power, the authority, that we obey is the Spirit of life – of grace, freedom, justice, forgiveness, love, peace –that such a spirit is alive in us and created through us as part of the body of Christ; and that such a spirit claims all of the ways we live together as human beings.

In this Eastertide, be aware of the Powers – of the spiritual life within and among and around us, in the places and peoples you gather with and that we see gathered together – be aware of what authority directs and drives such life. And as we do so, we might ask: what is the smallest possible cell in which such spiritual life can be expressed? – research shows it is you, and me – a human being has the minimum number of genes needed to obey the authority of God over human authority. And such cells as us can be brought together in ever more complex ways to have the authority of God’s grace direct our lives - in our relationships, our families, our church, our community, our politics, our economics, our schools, our nations, our religions...places created by God to be witnesses to the authority of God, of life, of resurrection; and each of us created to have such Power, the Spirit of the Risen Christ, fill and direct our lives together. Thanks be to God. AMEN.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/speaking-of-science/wp/2016/03/24/the-creators-of-the-first-synthetic-life-made-a-cell-with-just-enough-genes-to-survive/>

<sup>ii</sup> Walter Wink “The Powers That Be”