



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Owning Up or Doubling Down?”

Acts 4:5-22

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“How does it feel when you are wrong?” Not long ago in a sermon, I referred to Katherine Shultz, the author of *Being Wrong*, asking that question in a Ted Talk. If you were here that Sunday, you’ll remember that she heard answers like, “Bad,” “Embarrassed,” “Ashamed.” She then said, “No, that’s how you feel when you realize you are wrong. Until that moment, you feel great because you think you are right. Because we don’t like to feel bad, embarrassed or ashamed, we’ll go to great lengths not to see that we are wrong, not to be proven wrong, and not to admit we were wrong.” It is why sometimes when we could *own up*, we instead *double down*.

We see some doubling down in our passage this morning. Jewish leaders cooperated with Roman authorities in having Jesus arrested and killed. Hoping they put the Jesus-problem behind them, they are ready to move on. They certainly do not want to find out that they made a terrible mistake, that they committed a great wrong. “Did they just kill one of God’s prophets?” To their growing dismay, they find that the Jesus-narrative is becoming like the narrative of many of Israel’s most storied prophets. He is becoming more popular and influential after his death than he was when he was alive. It is getting harder to control the narrative. The Priestly elite want to be seen as the servants of God, but the growing narrative is that they are only servants of themselves—of their own place and authority in people’s lives.

Reports are coming to them from everywhere in Jerusalem. Peter and other followers of Jesus have boldly emerged from hiding and are telling anyone who will listen that Jesus has risen. In itself, this is disturbing but then this happened. Peter heals a crippled beggar, and the streets of Jerusalem are congested again by the crowds wanting to know what this is about.



This is “a moment” for the Jewish leaders. Do they own up? Do they see the good that is being done and the hope that is being inspired, but in doing so admit they were wrong when they opposed Jesus and had a hand in his death? Or do they double down and try to stop this. The captain of the Jerusalem Temple arrests Peter and his companions to get them out of the public eye so that the High Priests and their crew can have this moment and think this through and decide what needs to happen next.

Here's what happens the next morning.

The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, ⁶ with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. ⁷ When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, “By what power or by what name did you do this?” ⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders, ⁹ if we are being questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are being asked how this man has been healed, ¹⁰ let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. ¹¹ This Jesus is

‘the stone that was rejected by you, the builders;
it has become the cornerstone.’

¹² “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.”

¹³ Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus. ¹⁴ When they saw the man who had been cured standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. ¹⁵ So they ordered them to leave the council while they discussed the matter with one another. ¹⁶ They said, “What will we do with them? For it is obvious to all who live in Jerusalem that a notable sign has been done through them; we cannot deny it. ¹⁷ But to keep it from spreading further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name.” ¹⁸ So they called them and ordered them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. ¹⁹ But Peter and John answered them, “Whether it is right in God’s sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; ²⁰ for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.” ²¹ After threatening them again, they let them go, finding no way to punish them because of the people, for all of them praised God for what had happened. ²² For the man on whom this sign of healing had been performed was more than forty years old.

One of my better ideas as a parent of teenagers was to introduce my girls to wonderful old movies that no one talks about anymore. We watched *The Sting*, *Lawrence of Arabia*, *The Great Race*, *What’s Up Doc*, *Citizen Kane*.... We also watched *The Bridge On the River Kwai*. Do you remember that movie? It was one of David Lean’s great epics.



Now, put aside all your spoiler alert objections if you haven't seen it. The movie is older than I am¹ so the stature of limitations on that is up. The movie leads to "a moment," a moment in which a British colonel can either *own up* or *double down*.

I'll set it up. A group of British POWs under Colonel Nicholson's command are tasked to build a railroad bridge in Thailand that will be critical for the Japanese war effort. Nicholson is tortured because of his stubborn insistence that the British prisoners answer to his orders rather than those of their cruel Japanese task masters. Nicholson will not relent, and he is placed in an iron box until he bends to their will. He does not and the other POWs do shoddy work. Eventually, the Japanese commandant, who will have to commit Hari-kari if the bridge is not built, sees the bridge will not be built without Nicholson's cooperation, releases him from the box and put back in charge of his troops.

Nicholson then leads the POWs in building a sturdy bridge with an elegant design telling them it is to show the Japanese superior British engineering and to boost morale. But as time goes on, it begins to become apparent that Nicholson means for the bridge to be a *monument to himself*.

Meanwhile, just as the bridge is finished, a few American troops tasked with destroying the bridge and the first train to cross it are parachuted into the area. Commander Shears is among them. He is their guide because he himself was a POW in that camp and knew Nicholson. He somehow escaped and now has returned. The Americans set explosives the night before the train is to cross.

The next day, the water level drops leaving the explosives and wire exposed. In inspecting the bridge, Nicholson sees the wires and realizes that the bridge of which he is so proud is about to be destroyed. He alerts Japanese soldiers who then open fire on the Americans. When one of the men dies at Nicholson's feet, he sees that it is Commander Shears. Seeing him die because of his sounding the alarm, Nicholson has his moment and asks himself "[What have I done?](#)"

In that moment, Nicholson owns up instead of doubling down. Unable to undo the harm he has done, he at least gets up after being mortally wounded and falls on the detonator destroying the bridge and the train.

In a way, *The Bridge on the River Kwai* is a parable of our passage. Colonel Nicholson was supposed to serve the Allied cause but in his hubris he served his pride and reputation and unwittingly became a collaborator of the enemy. The High Priests are supposed to serve Israel and Israel's God, but in killing Jesus they served their place and position. Will they now own up or double down?

There is good reason to own up. If their charge is to serve the people of Israel, why did they oppose Jesus. He was a brilliant teacher of scripture. He brought hope and healing to thousands. Thinking him to be a threat to their own place and position in Israel, they did what they thought was right and helped have Jesus killed. But killing him didn't kill his movement. His followers are preaching about the same Kingdom of God that Jesus preached about. It is a message of hope, dignity and of grace that the people need. A cripple has been healed, a sign that this movement is again about the hurting, the forgotten, the prisoners and the oppressed, the lost and the

¹ The film was released in 1957.



abandoned, will have find in the movement good news and compassion. Isn't this what God is about? Isn't this what Israel is to be about?

Seeing the hope inspired and the acts of compassion now happening in Jesus' name, is it possible for these leaders to see that they were wrong then and do what is right now?

That is asking a lot because it is so hard to do. It is hard for public leaders to admit publicly they were wrong. To admit the harm they did... to accept it and then support a movement in the name of the one they opposed. Think of the consequences.

By having Peter and the other Jesus-followers arrested, they are given a moment to think. They can own up and ask themselves, "[What have we done?](#)" or they can = double down."

The Temple leaders don't rise to the occasion. They do try to soften what they did before and change the narrative so they do not look so bad. They do not keep Peter and his followers jailed and don't decide to have them killed. There's some facing reality here. You can turn a crowd and enlist the help of Romans once... but just weeks later, can they do it again? And there is some recognition of some good being done. The man who was healed is standing with the followers, and one of their number says out loud what they all are thinking. "[We can't deny this man was healed. We can't deny the good that is being done.](#)"

Nevertheless, they try to protect their own reputations and control the narrative. They let the followers go, but demand that they quit preaching in Jesus' name.

Doesn't work, of course. Peter and the other followers are only energized by this experience. The rest of the book of Acts tells how the Jesus' movement grows larger than it ever was even when Jesus was alive. In fact, in the span of just one generation, the movement breaks beyond Israel's boundaries and spreads throughout the world.

With the movie and the passage, I've told some pretty dramatic stories. I could stay big, I guess, and tell some more dramatic stories

- like that of Christian Picciolini, a neo-Nazi skinhead who attacked people of color, having his own moment. He owns up to what he did with his hatred and now works to reach other skinheads to convince them to own up to what they're doing and get out.
- or leaders like Hitler who refused to back down from insisting on the righteousness of their prideful causes and destroyed nations, including their own, with their obsession.

But I'd like to dial down the drama. For the rest of this sermon, I am more concerned in our moments. There come moments for all of us when we can have those awful feelings of remorse and guilt- perhaps embarrassment-and either own up to where we were wrong or double down and compound the problem.

The owning up moment often comes with the kind of horrible question Nicholson asked of himself.

- "What have I done?"
- "How could I have believed that? Said that? Done that? Posted that?"



The imagination can go wild with what those moments can be about and why we did harm.

- Maybe I was gullible and acted like a know-it-all.
- Maybe I was duped or played?
- Maybe I was a willing believer of lies,
 - or a willing cow in a stampede.
- Maybe I was too proud, maybe too weak.
 - Too certain of my being right, or someone else being wrong.

If you've never had those moments, I think you might be a problem. But, I think all of us have had them and we know how unpleasant are the feelings that can come with them.

Which, as Katherine Shultz said and the Temple leaders showed, makes it easier to double down.

- Refuse to see what is uncomfortable and see and believe only what justifies what I said, or did, or posted.
- Refuse to admit being wrong even to myself.

Denial in the moment can be easier, but pain delayed often makes things worse. Those of you who study business can tell me stories of those businesses and non-profits that stubbornly refused to believe business plans that weren't working and doubled down on what used to work well. I can think of a few myself:

- Kodak developed the digital camera, but then ignored the technology to focus on traditional photography.
- Xerox was the first to invent the PC, but stayed steadfast in its conviction that its future was in copy machines.
- Blockbuster struggled to keep its stores open convinced that people even after having dinner would rather drive to a store than have films delivered to their homes.
- And American car companies that had to be bailed out after they went too long refusing to see that quality matters. (Gladly that was corrected)

Some of us have served on boards of non-profits and faith communities that found it difficult to own up to what wasn't working anymore.

Scientists know that we have to re-examine what we think is true. Many are saying that disturbing evidence of climate change is giving us a moment when we have to decide whether to own up or double down.

Or, to bring the point home- that is, into homes- friendships and marriages have certainly been hurt when one or more doubles down on dysfunction thinking that more of it will win the day.

In her Ted Talk, Katherine Shultz urges her audience to understand how unrealistic it is not to realize that we are inevitably wrong. To be human is to be wrong. If we are going to grow up,



mature, learn, adapt and be a positive force in the world, it means discovering what needs to change.

- Every mind at some point needs to be changed,
- every friendship needs a reset,
- every stand one takes needs to be reconsidered.

Learning and maturity comes from this basic acceptance of being human, and thus being to some degree wrong about things. Then, when growth and maturity comes- when wrongs have been righted, when harms have been healed, when relationships have been reconciled, when stands have been abandoned- there is a tremendous amount of self-respect that can come.

Of course, many of you know that. If you have longstanding, healthy, relationships in your lives, you probably have developed some self-awareness skills that help you accept the discomfort of admitting being wrong. As the Temple Priests showed, however, it gets harder, perhaps, when one is wrong in the public eye, and being wrong comes with a greater degree of embarrassment, a harder bruise to the ego, and maybe real consequences.

I think that's why people who "go there" with their social media posts often double down and "go there even more." If you are loud about something when you are wrong, maybe being louder will make you right. (By the way, if you want a good reason not to be reckless with your posting, just remember, stuff on the internet is hard to erase, and then consider how Anna and Caiaphas would have felt if they had been told that for centuries everyone would remember what they did to stop a man healing the sick and preaching grace).

After having had the experience of serving a church for over a quarter of a century, I know that this church would not stay healthy if it didn't have its "owning up moments" along the way when we had to consider that maybe the world is not best served if don't evolve what we believe and how we do ministry.

We've heard Hollingsworth, Klein and other preachers in this pulpit remind us that humility is the greatest of human virtues.

- Theologically, humility reminds one that she or he is not God.
- Relationally, humility inspires empathy because one already knows that there is more to be learned and different perspectives matter.
- Practically, humility pays the healthy price now to avoid a greater price later in order to learn what needs to be learned.
- Socially, humility as a shared virtue can keep a community from tearing apart in bad times, and build a community in good.

I'll close by reminding you of the Owning-Up-Role-Models in the Book of Acts.

- Peter who had to accept that not everyone needed to be a Jew to follow Jesus,
- Saul, who later goes by Paul, comes to see that those he is persecuting as the enemy of God are actually the people of God and he needs to join their cause.



- And Cornelious, who came to see that salvations and healing would not come from Rome and its emperor, but from Jesus Christ.

How fortunate they all were to move from “What have I done?” moment to the answer to the question, “What has God done for me, a sinner?” and then change direction. That’s the good news of Owning Up to who God is and who by God’s grace we can become despite the errors and mistakes we have made.

