

By: Rev. Wendy Depew Partelow

Rev. Wendy Depew Partelow is President of the American Baptist Churches of New York State Board of Missions.

(This is an edited version of a longer reflection found at HopeForNiagara.org)

Uneducated and Ordinary Men: Acts 4:1-22

Having recently worked through Lent and Easter with a study guide based on the wisdom of Thomas Merton*, I am struck by Merton's statement that Lent "plays the role of The Law."

So Lent provides us with a discipline to follow *for a time* to get us back on track. Now with the power of Easter in the resurrection of the Christ we feel a duty that is above The Law, above the limits of our own rudimentary following of the rules. "We no longer strive to be good because we have to, because it is our duty, but because our joy is to please [Christ] who has given all His love to us! Now our life is full of meaning." (p. 104) Merton says "Easter is the hour of our own deliverance...from The Law...we are no longer under The Law. We are delivered from the harsh judgment!" (p. 104)

The season of Lent is past, but here is where it stays with me: I still assess my sins, the way I think about myself and others. My assessment of my own faults does not go away just because *Christ is Risen!* I know that I am forgiven, yes, and I rejoice in the resurrection; we need no longer fear death. But in terms of the life I live, I am still called to assess the error of my ways, repent, and correct. In order to please God I must continually conform my ways to the way of Christ. I am not perfect in my ways, or in my understanding of God, just because Christ is risen. I still make mistakes, I still sin. But, knowing how much God loves me, and seeing all that the Christ did in love, makes me want to do better. Even when I fail and fall, I can pick myself back up knowing that I have another day to do better. God forgives and Jesus lets me know it is so, and the resurrection proves God's love for humankind. God does not leave us or forsake us. God is always with us, loving us and forgiving us; and pricking our conscience so we may do better.

Acts 4:13

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.

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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.

So as I was reading this passage in Acts, I was drawn to reflect on the Pharisee in me. Peter and John have been *teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead*. And people are believing them following! So they were arrested and asked who gave them the authority to teach and preach, and they say it was Jesus of Nazareth, “whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. 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.”



St. Peter Preaching in Jerusalem
Charles Poërsen, 1642

Here are these *ordinary fishermen*, common blue collar folk, healing and preaching and proclaiming to have witnessed resurrection...*resurrection!* And even in our own society today, some kind of formal education beyond high school is valued more highly than simply a high school diploma. I went to seminary at 55 years of age because I wanted the education that I thought would give me that level of ability and training. But here’s the thing, do I judge those who have not had - or taken - the opportunity to get this formal education and still are very competent, and diligently lead churches and congregations in faithful witness to Jesus? Yes, I confess that sometimes I do, and I have.

But here is what I realize through the words of Merton, and through pondering this text: it doesn’t matter how much formal education you have studying scripture, or church polity, or Old Testament Prophets, or even Jesus himself, because it is the power of the Holy Spirit of God in Christ Jesus that informs us of God’s power, conforms us to God’s will, and transforms us through God’s grace!

When we spend time in prayer and reflection, when we make time for God in our lives it does make a difference in how we see others, how we get along with others, and how we live out the call of God in our lives. Yes, the resurrection of Christ *does* free us from the power of sin and death. But in hearing God speak to us, and in wanting to *please Him who has given all His love to us*, we must continually listen to the Holy Spirit within us, and confess and repent to the end of our days. *They were uneducated and ordinary*, only in the eyes of those who had not turned their *hearts* toward God in Christ Jesus. Amen

(See the full length reflection at <https://www.hopeformiagara.org/uneducated-and-ordinary-men/>)

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