



# Pastor Ken Nelson's Sermon

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SERMON – 5TH EASTER

ACTS 11:19-26

MAY 15, 2022

## “WHAT IF THEY CAME TO OUR TOWN?”

In the third century BC, after the death of Alexander the Great, two of his generals divided up the land Alexander conquered from Asia to Egypt. Seleucus controlled the northern territories, and in time-honored Greek fashion, began building cities and naming them after family members. 16 of those cities he named after his dear old dad, Antiochus. One of those “Antioch’s” became a major city, and by the first century AD the Romans made it into their eastern capital.

Greeks, Syrians, Romans and Jews all lived there in decent number and rather amicably given their differences. But around 40 AD some Jewish converts to a new religion fleeing persecution in Jerusalem arrived. These newcomers claimed they followed a Jewish rabbi who had called himself “*The Way, The Truth, and The Life*” and not surprisingly they began mingling in Antioch’s Jewish synagogues.

Things went ok until they started correcting a popular conception of their faith. They informed people they weren’t simply following the teachings of Rabbi Jesus but worshipped him as their resurrected Lord and Savior – and that to them Jesus was the fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures. Pretty soon their invites to visit synagogues dried up, as no doubt did dinner invitations. So, these followers of Jesus, who were called members of “the way” adapted, and via street conversations, meals in their own homes, but mainly by how unselfishly they lived, loving and caring even for those they differed with, they gained a hearing for Jesus.

Most in Antioch shrugged them off, certain their beliefs would have little staying power. The Roman historian Tacitus referred to Christians as purveyors of a “mischievous superstition”, and he was one of the kinder critics. They were of course...dead wrong! Acts says, “*the Lord’s hand was with them*”, meaning the Holy Spirit did things through the preaching of Jesus many doubt was possible.

In John 16:24, it says “*until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.*” In Antioch followers of Jesus asked that their witnessing simply be given opportunity – and to that the Lord added success. That’s why when all this reached the ears of the leaders of the church in Jerusalem, according to our lesson, they sent a fellow named Barnabas to have a look. Antioch, the “eastern capital of the Roman empire” was on its way to becoming the capital of early Christianity.

Antioch is mentioned again in Acts 13:3 where it says that among the early leaders of the church was “*Manaen, a member of the court of Herod*”. We don’t know anything else about Manaen, but Acts 12:1-2 again says persecution of Christians was what sent them scampering to Antioch in the first place, much of it by King Herod, who “*had James the brother of John put to death with the sword*”.

The point is kings in those days issued death sentences but were never around to see them carried out – that they left to the members of their “court.” Which suggests two things about Manaen. The most important is how he now served another King – brought to Him through people he once hated. The second is that Christians in Antioch not only witnessed to him but made him one of their leaders.

Liz Curtis Higgs is probably someone you’ve never heard of. Liz is a Christian speaker and author who came to Minot, ND where I once served. I recall Liz’s personal testimony featured the words indulgence and emptiness a lot, which is strange because they tend to mean opposite things. To indulge is to have, or take, to pamper yourself – to deny yourself nothing. To be empty is to be unfilled, hollow, lacking what you want. Mostly what Liz thought she was pampering but was in fact mostly being taken from her through bad relationships was her body. Then she met Jesus Christ - not long after meeting a man who became her husband had.

She told the story of how nine months into her marriage she was concerned enough at not having conceived that she visited a doctor. Her doctor was a bit surprised that after a relatively short time she and her husband would have such a concern - until she told him of all the men she’d “had” without ever becoming pregnant. That a pretty big admission to make to a doctor you’ve never met before, but there was a method to Liz’s madness - it gave her the opportunity to tell her doctor what Jesus had done for her. You and I both know doctors these days tend not to waste time on small talk, but he asked her what evidence she could give him for the resurrection.

She could have said things like *“the eyewitness accounts of the apostles, or the mention of the resurrection among secular historians of the time, or the boldness of the church in the face of persecution, like ancient Antioch”*, but Liz simply said; *“my life... I’m evidence of the resurrection.”* Indulgent but empty, living the modern life but spiritually dead – she was a compromising and compromised person who nevertheless spoke of the cleansing and forgiveness of Jesus as though she hadn’t committed a single sin in her life.

Then, and I’ll never forget this part of her story...she said she marveled at what an indelible mark the congregation she and her husband joined had on her. The kind of people she once laughed off when she wasn’t blowing them off received her. Liz said she knew all there was to know about lust – but nothing about love until a forgiver and Savior, through the witness of a husband and the confirmation of a congregation showed her what it was.

You are, we are evidence of the resurrection which is what we were created in Christ to be. In Antioch it was some “Manaen”, some persecutor turned prophet to whom the church proved the resurrection. In some church in a place I no longer recall, it was for Liz Curtis Higgs. Let there be no doubt Jesus is “the” way, truth and life, but dear people never doubt that the way you live and love expresses the truth that offers the life that once changed an entire city called Antioch. The hand of the Lord is with us...the only question is who is it through us He going to change next? AMEN