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“We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:30).

Acts 5:27-33; John 3:31-36

A proud ship captain demanded that another vessel approaching him in a thick fog change course to avoid a collision. Only at the last minute did he realize that his opponent was a lighthouse, and he quickly changed course to avoid going onto the rocks.

Obedying God instead of human authority only works if we understand the dilemma we are in and explore every reasonable compromise to avoid a confrontation that does not violate our conscience. Consider Abraham, who had to be rescued from his understanding of God's will in order to avert the killing of Isaac. People who insist on following their consciences have been called heroes, martyrs and fanatics. Conscientious objectors like Franz Jägerstätter have been executed, then later canonized. Thomas More refused to please his king and was beheaded

Official fear of the power of a single dissenter was summarized in the words of Caiaphas regarding Jesus “It is better for one man to die for the people than for the nation to fall” (John 11:50). Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was hanged by the Nazis, continues to confront Christians with the “Cost of Discipleship.”

Fortunate for us, obeying God is more daily than dramatic, but the duty to discern what is right and wrong remains part of Christian living. Conscience as our compass is a gift that guides us in small matters and in major dilemmas. Those who ignore or have dulled their consciences often end up on the rocks.

Today's reading from Acts touts the courage of disciples who just days before had been cowering in a locked upper room. Belief in resurrection emboldened them to proclaim Jesus. Fear of death or disapproval can paralyze us from doing even small acts of courage, like standing with others in trouble or showing compassion when controversy turns public opinion against targeted groups like undocumented immigrants, former prison inmates, or community newcomers.

Easter faith renews our spiritual compasses by reorienting them to the true north of God's love revealed in Jesus. Discipleship sharpens our awareness of the needs of others and urges us to be more generous and adventurous in serving them. By this, we obey God rather than social convention or cultural avoidance of those beyond our comfort zones and control parameters. Then, when we are asked to do bigger things, we will be ready.

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