

Witnesses  
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**Acts 2:14a, 22-32**

<sup>14</sup> But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: <sup>22</sup> ‘You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know - <sup>23</sup>this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. <sup>24</sup>But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. <sup>25</sup>For David says concerning him, “I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken; <sup>26</sup>therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; moreover, my flesh will live in hope. <sup>27</sup>For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience corruption. <sup>28</sup>You have made known to me the ways of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence.” <sup>29</sup>‘Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. <sup>30</sup>Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. <sup>31</sup>Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying, “He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption.” <sup>32</sup>This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses.

**John 20:19-31**

<sup>19</sup> When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ <sup>20</sup>After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup>Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ <sup>22</sup>When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup>If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’ <sup>24</sup>But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup>So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord.’ But he said to them, ‘Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.’ <sup>26</sup>A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ <sup>27</sup>Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.’ <sup>28</sup>Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’ <sup>29</sup>Jesus said to him, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.’ <sup>30</sup>Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. <sup>31</sup>But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

You may have noticed on the front of your bulletin that it indicates today is the Second Sunday of Easter. In fact, there are seven named Sundays of what we call Eastertide; the one that follows is Pentecost, the eighth Sunday and last day of Eastertide. I bring this up because knowing today is a Sunday of Eastertide is important in understanding that we are still pointedly celebrating the resurrection. It's why the empty cross remains, still adorned with the white cloth signifying joy, triumph, glory.

Our readings today continue celebrating the resurrection. The resurrection is the crux of Peter's message in Acts. We read as he says, "This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses." As witnesses of the resurrection, these fellow Israelites have a responsibility to share this good news, that death is not the last word, that Christ has died so we might have new life, life eternal with God. Before Peter calls upon the Israelites to witness, though, he speaks to them, indicting them with "this man...you crucified and killed." For many years and from many pulpits, these words have been used to speak angrily of Jews, to further vitriol for generations, but such a condemnation was never Peter's message. He speaks to them as fellow Israelites **after** he speaks of how they were complicit in the death of Christ. Do not forget that we read just a couple of weeks ago how Peter denied Jesus three times. Given the opportunity to at least stand united with Christ in the death dealt him, Peter opts out, owning some culpability in his death.

Peter naming the part the Israelites played and the part they are now called to play, naming the ways in which they behave worse than hoped for and the ways in which they can rise above their usual actions, makes them human. That's all. Just like us. Sometimes we sin; sometimes we move closer to being the people God created us to be. I want to be clear here on something I misunderstood from my youth. My sinning, my actions which deny Christ, which separate me from God, are not what sent Christ to the cross. It's true that we believe that Jesus died for the forgiveness of our sins, but my mistakes didn't force Jesus to the cross. I just finished reading the book *Pastrix* by Nadia Bolz-Weber, an ELCA Lutheran pastor in Denver who is doing church in radical ways, most notably for me with great honesty about the struggles of being faithful and embracing the gospel message in the midst of the difficulties of humanity. She explains Christ's saving death this way: "Grace isn't about God creating humans as flawed beings and then acting all hurt when we inevitably fail and then stepping in like the hero to grant us grace – like saying 'Oh, it's OK, I'll be a good guy and forgive you.' It's God saying, 'I love the world too much to let your sin define you and be the final word. I am a God who makes all things new.'"<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Pastrix* (New York: Jericho Books, 2013) p. 50.

“I love the world too much to let your sin define you and be the final word.” The complicity of the Israelites, Peter included, was not to be the final word. Our complicity as broken and sinful people is not the final word. God is making things new. God is giving us new life and new opportunities to go out as witnesses to God’s goodness, God’s redemption, God’s grace. Jesus stands among his friends, risen from the dead, the worst they, and we, could imagine and says, “Peace be with you.” Things can be as terrible as you can possibly imagine and even in those moments God brings peace. Once the risen Jesus patiently and gently shows that he is the same Jesus who was crucified and buried, he proclaims that these witnesses to the risen Christ have a mission. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” God took on human life in Jesus so that he might share the message of hope in God’s love. Jesus gave the disciples new life as God did in creation. We read in Genesis “then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus “breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” With this new life, assured by the resurrection to which they have witnessed, they are to go out and share the message of hope in God’s love through the resurrection. For God so loved the world that not only did he give his only son but he redeemed the world by defeating the death which we as people brought to Christ. “I love the world too much to let your sin define you and be the final word.”

Of course, as we read this gospel, this good news, we understand that this new life through the Holy Spirit and this witness to the resurrection is not only for those disciples present in that house that day. Jesus said to them, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” We hear hints of the Beatitudes here. Blessed does not mean “happy.” James Howell explains of the Beatitudes that “‘blessed’ isn’t catchy advice on how to go and be happy; rather ‘blessed’ is being swept up in God’s decisive movement in the world.”<sup>3</sup> “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Swept up in God’s decisive movement in the world are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe. And so we are swept up in God’s decisive movement in the world and our role to play, just like the disciples, is to be sent out to share the good news of the resurrection.

I talk a lot about sharing the good news, telling others of God’s goodness in our lives. I know that’s not easy for most of us. For so many the big fear is that others will see us as proselytizing, as trying to win them over to “our” faith. I fully admit that such sharing and telling is not easy for me either. I come from a tradition, or, at the very least a household, where being outwardly faithful was “showing off.” When given the opportunities to talk about my faith because someone learns my profession, I tend to shy away – not because I am embarrassed by the gospel message but more so

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 2:7.

<sup>3</sup> James C. Howell, *The Beatitudes for Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006).

because, at that point, the people who will talk faith are usually trying 1) to explain why they don't believe or 2) to find a way to tell me how their pastor does things so maybe I could learn something from them. I get that there is passion around faith and being clergy opens the door for people to express their passions but, if the circumstances were reversed, I don't think I would tell someone why I don't believe PVC plumbing is the right choice over galvanized or to tell someone that the garbage collectors where I used to live have a special way of picking up the cans that my current garbage collector might find helpful. If you want to engage your handyperson in discussions of faith, please go right ahead but I don't yet have any helpful suggestions as to how.

When given the opportunity to talk about my faith with someone I know, though, this is how I do it: I suggest books I've read that have given me insight into my own faith; I share my questions and doubts and wonderings; I talk about my misgivings and approval of the way a biblical story is told in modern media – for example, I prefer *Evan Almighty* over *Noah* as a movie retelling of the story of Noah and the ark and I'd be glad to tell you why if you're interested. Life and faith are not separate. Where does your life dovetail with your faith? For me I make the greatest connections in the books I read, the movies I see, and the songs I hear. For you it might be in the sunrise you see or the meal you serve at The Hope Center or the meal you share around this table. We cannot shirk our call as witnesses to the resurrection. Telling the story doesn't have to mean discomfort, though. What do you think of the viewpoint of a political candidate? How does it fit with or rub up against your understanding of being faithful? That's a conversation you could have. How do you understand the tragedy of the ferry in South Korea or the trouble in Ukraine or the earthquake in Haiti or the flood in New Orleans? What questions does your faith raise? What answers does your faith provide? That's a conversation you could have. When we stop thinking of our faith as something above our daily lives, something separate, and remember that it is woven into even the dirtiest, grittiest part of our days, it is easier to talk about. There is so much to be shared. As the Father sent Jesus, so he sends us.

Let us pray: Risen Lord, again our prayer is that you give us eyes and ears and mouths to be your faithful and faith-filled witnesses. Amen.