

#21 15-16
Psalm 118:14-29
Revelation 1:4-8
John 20:19-31
Acts 5:27-32

We and the Holy Spirit Are Witnesses

When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, saying, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us." But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him."

What we have in the book of Acts is an account of what happened to the followers of Jesus after the apparent loss of their leader and the failure of their movement. It really is an amazing story. Because of the conviction of the few who had witnessed the resurrected Christ, this movement did not die - it did not fail! It grew - to eventually become a great world religion!

Now, at this point in Acts, they do not have any physical proof that Jesus resurrected! Jesus is not there to say, "Look all you who had doubted as Thomas did, see my wounds? It really is me!" No, they did not have his physical body there, but they had known him, and been known by him, and they had his Spirit inside of them. They knew Jesus so well by now! They had followed him and learned from him, and trusted him, and believed in him so much - that no amount of external force was going to stop them from sharing what they knew to be fact!

And the fact that he resurrected was not the primary lesson for them to teach - it was the convictions of what he taught about which they spoke! It was the certainty of the power of Christ's loving presence and his desire to heal and be with each other in pureness of heart and soul, which they learned and then taught others! Because people can doubt a resurrection when there is no more evidence . . . but the fruits of his spirit are proven truths which cannot be denied. Love does conquer hate, hope does conquer fear, God is good and we are all empowered by the Holy Spirit to proclaim that Christ is risen indeed! And when we know *that* ~ then we can be the proof of Christ on earth - then we can stand up to powers which try to tell us otherwise and say, "We must obey God rather than any human authority."

So, in those days, Peter and the others were finding themselves emboldened to speak what they knew about Jesus, and the powers that be told them to stop. And this pattern happened often. They were told to stop, and they kept going. Regardless of the consequences, they were going to speak the truth about what they knew. They equated God with a greater truth that could not be denied! And they felt that if they did not speak what they knew, teach and live what they knew, the world would be in danger. It was that sense of urgency!

They lived and witnessed the pain and the injustice of the world and knew that in Christ, there was a cure to all this! They believed they would see the end in their lifetimes! That was the urgency! Hey! Everybody Love one another - stop fighting - be kind to the poor and the sick, the imprisoned, well - everyone! Stop the power struggles - what really matters is that you be kind to one another! Do it now, because the end is near!

The urgency of the early leaders because they thought Jesus was coming back soon in an even more impressive and powerful way than he had before is quite a motivating factor! But Jesus didn't come back as the movement expected, did he? Years later there would be a lot of confusion about this. People getting all riled up and waiting and waiting and nothing happens . . . you would think the movement would just die, right?

But it doesn't. Because the lessons of Christ are eternal, and the hope is what gives us life. When Jesus didn't take over the ruling class after his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, that sent some of his followers into a tailspin. Then he died! And then he resurrected . . . perhaps that power play enthused others for another power push! But then he left. And then the Holy Spirit was given! This back and forth of our small human understanding of the spiritual power of our sacred Creator and brother can be so difficult! Now they are awaiting his return, so the zeal to teach and preach is still very active!

You know that school of thought, "Give someone a fish, they eat for today, teach someone to fish they eat for a lifetime"? Well that is what happens not only in the political/social realm, but also in the psychological/religious/ spiritual realm.

We have witnessed great changes in the world's understanding of religion in our lifetimes! People who were once ostracized and shamed are now welcomed and embraced, and leading our faiths. Where there were once social mores saying we can't have people of different ethnic groups worshipping together, we are making tremendous progress on having sacred experiences together! We are witnesses to the changes that Peter was calling forth! Because Jesus was calling us to compassion and borderless unity in the living God.

So the question comes, "What does it mean to 'obey God rather than any human authority' in today's world?" Where does this boldness find a voice today?

Now-a-days it seems like what we are passionate about really is not that important on a grand scale, like some of the arguments on-line, over which actor played the best Batman . . . or which diet is best . . . there is a lot of passion out there - but for what causes? What we witness in the political fields these days of the primary season, is it equivalent to what Peter's boldness in Christ's name? Are their causes holy?

If we were called to preach Christ, which, if you think about it, we all are, would we have the gumption to stand up to someone and preach Christ, in spite of the consequences, trusting in the Spirit of God to help us when we needed it? This is what we are being asked to contemplate on this second Sunday in the Season of Easter. Thanks be to the ancient Fathers who designed our church calendars, we have 6 weeks of Easter to contemplate how vital this resurrection is to our faith. Because we are asked anew, every year, to think about how we stand in the light of Christ's teachings and if we can continued to muster the zeal of the early Disciples in our desire to know and live Christ.

In closing, I'd like to point out something special about the last sentence in our sermon scripture, "And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him." This sentence speaks of the Holy Spirit as if it is similar to a human perception. Like, "I saw the accident and so did the Holy Spirit." Like the Holy Spirit and "We" are neighboring buddies. It makes the Holy Spirit seem so REAL. A concrete thing that can be measured!

Not only that, but because "WE" knew and know the Holy Spirit - when I witness something, and know it to be so true and so real that I KNOW the sacred truth of God is there - THAT is when I have the courage of my lifetime! That is when we can perform miracles of faith - be courageous and teach Christ! The KNOWING the sacred truth as clearly as we know this building we are in! We and the Holy Spirit and this CHURCH are witnesses to the love of God which knows no ending! AMEN!