

## We Are Witnesses

April 24, 2022

### Acts 5:27-32

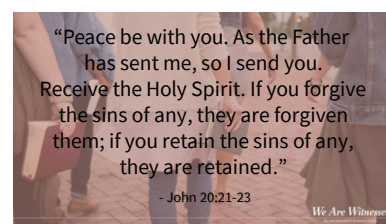
*<sup>27</sup> When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, <sup>28</sup> saying, “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you are determined to bring this man’s blood on us.” <sup>29</sup> But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than any human authority. <sup>30</sup> The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. <sup>31</sup> God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. <sup>32</sup> And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.”*



Last Sunday we came together to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Easter was an event that changed the world and changed the lives of all who

encountered the risen Christ. Last week we began to look at how the risen Lord changed Peter’s life forever. We continue to explore how these changes manifested themselves this week as Peter finds himself before the religious authorities. Before we turn to this scene in Acts 5, though, we begin in John 20, where Jesus first appears to the disciples. These encounters would shape Peter as well. As we prepare to do so this morning, let us begin with a word of prayer...

Please turn with me to John 20, our gospel readings from this week's lectionary. As we do so, let's connect to last week's message. On Easter Sunday we looked into Peter's story, beginning to discover why he knew he was called to witness to the vastness of God's love. In this week's gospel lesson the risen Christ first appears to most of disciples on that first Sunday. Hiding behind closed doors for fear of the religious leaders, Jesus appears to those gathered, saying to them, *"Peace be with you."* Offering the evidence found in his hands and in his side, Jesus reassures the disciples that it is indeed the Lord. Continuing, Jesus says, *"Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you. Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."* Jesus is empowering the disciples to continue the ministry of healing and reconciliation that he began. The commissioning, the giving of the Holy Spirit, the power to offer forgiveness of sins – Jesus is preparing the disciples for the sharing of the good news.



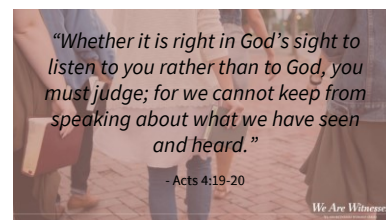
Continuing in verse 21, we see that Thomas was missing. When he rejoins the group, they witness to their faith, telling him all about Jesus' appearance and the words that he shared. Thomas questions all this, saying, *"Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."* Thomas wants proof – the same proof that Jesus in fact offered to the others when he first appeared, showing his hands and side. A week later, Jesus appears again, and he invites Thomas to put his finger in nail holes and into his side, saying, *"Do not doubt but believe."* Thomas responds in faith: *"My Lord and my God!"*

Speaking to Thomas, to all the disciples, and to us, Jesus says, *“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”* You and me, my friends, we are blessed because of our belief. Amen?

There are times when we experience something that also equips us to witness to our faith in Jesus Christ. In my life, one of those times happened in May of 1986. I had been involved in a terrible car accident. As I lay in the bed in the emergency room of a small, rural hospital, the news came from doctor that my girlfriend, Audrey, did not survive the accident. She had been life flighted to Hartford, but they could not save her. As that devastating news just began to settle in, suddenly David, my brother, was right there. As soon as the doctor finished speaking those words, David was there. He had come from college at UConn, which was close by. Held me. He simply bent over the bed and hugged me tight. In that moment I felt the presence of God fill the room. A peace and comfort washed over me that was so tangible, so real, so powerful. That was one of my Thomas moments – a time when Jesus became real to me.

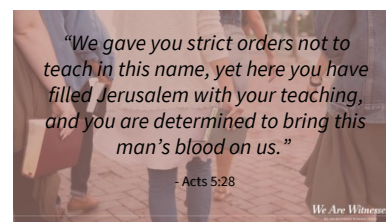
As we delve into our passage from Acts, please turn with me to the book of Acts. As we begin, a quick review of all that has happened since Jesus appeared to the disciples. In Acts 1 Jesus is taken up into heaven and the disciples choose Matthias to replace Judas Iscariot. In Acts 2 the Holy Spirit comes at Pentecost and in response to Peter’s preaching 3,000 were *“added to their number”* that day. In Acts 3 and 4 Peter heals and preaches, along with John. They finally end up before the Sanhedrin for preaching and teaching about the resurrection from the dead. The religious leaders want to know by what power or in whose name Peter and John are teaching and healing.

Peter and John reply in chapter 4, verses 19 and 20,  
*“Whether it is right in God’s sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.”*



Not satisfied with their response but afraid to punish them because the people were praising God for all that Peter and John were doing, the religious leaders threaten them and then let them go. Returning to those who followed Jesus, Peter offers a great prayer that ends with the place where they were gathered being shaken, a sign that God was with them. In Acts 5 the teaching and healing and signs of God’s power being with them continues. Jealousy on the part of the religious leaders brings on persecution. The apostles are once again arrested. During the night an angel appears and frees the apostles, instructing them to go once again to preach in the temple courts. Following these instructions, at daybreak they enter the temple and begin to preach. Astounded that those they put in jail the night before are standing in the temple courts teaching the people, the captain and temple guard once again bring the apostles before the Sanhedrin. Here, in verse 27, is where our passage for today begins.

In the first two verses Peter, John, and the other apostles receive this rebuke: *“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.”* Once again, Peter states that they must obey God rather than men. Continuing, Peter states, *“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.”* Peter is a witness to the resurrected Christ. He has seen and heard Jesus speak. Peter has received forgiveness himself, repenting of his denial of knowing Christ. He has experienced what he speaks of and preaches firsthand. These encounters with Jesus have changed Peter’s life. What signs, what moments have you had that have led you to believe, to have life in his name?

We can see here that the powers that be do not like what the apostles are doing. They do not like the change that continues to be afoot. On Good Friday they silenced the voice that was calling them out, that was challenging the way that things were being done. And now they have a whole group on their hands, continuing the teachings and healings, stirring the people up, bringing life to their faith.

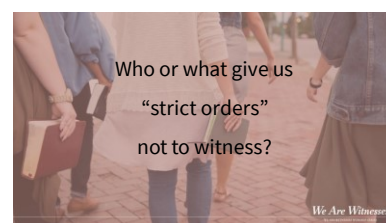
Told again and again to stop, to quit teaching in the name of Jesus, Peter’s defense is this: “*We are witnesses.*” We have seen the risen Lord and we have to talk about it. We have



been freed from jail and have been instructed to teach in his name – we have to witness to what the Spirit is doing. We have been changed, made into new creations in and through the power of Jesus’ name and we have to witness to this power so that Jesus can change other people’s lives too. With every word, with every action, in every encounter, they are witnessing to that which defines their lives in new and profound ways – Jesus resurrected and alive. They are living out their Easter faith. And the religious leaders, the status quo – they do not like it one bit.

But in Peter's mind, he cannot stop. He can't stop sharing the good news of Jesus Christ any more than he can stop breathing. He is not angry that the religious leaders are trying to stop him. This witness, this Christ-follower, that is just who Peter is now. It has become his life's purpose, his meaning. It is what Peter and the other apostles will do no matter what – no matter what the Sanhedrin says, no matter what trials or persecution comes their way, no matter what anyone says or threatens. They have become witnesses to the power of Jesus Christ. Even though the powers that be demand they stop, giving strict orders to do so, Peter and the others will continue to proclaim the name of Jesus to all who will listen.

To apply these ideas to our own lives, let us begin with a question: Who or what give us "strict orders" not to witness? If I'm honest I must begin with self. I don't know about you, but when I can see that there's a cost for living out or sharing my faith, then I think at least twice before stepping forward in faith. There can be many costs associated with living out or sharing. One cost might be popularity or status. Some people may not want to be around me if I get too pushy or if I want to talk about my faith too much. Self likes being included and thought well of. One cost might be giving up something the earthly me likes or enjoys. Sometimes I might have to change my behavior – walk away from some activity or interest – because it puts me in a place where it is hard to remain faithful. Self enjoys those me-first activities. One cost might be giving up position or place within a system or hierarchy. If I were to question a district superintendent's or bishop's decision or lack of a decision, the cost might be finding myself in a different location or being denied a request to go to a certain location.



Self wants to look out for its own future. Self can try and give me orders to be quiet, to just not get involved, to look the other way.

The cost can also come in relation to family and friends. If I speak the truth in love, my words are not always received well. When my words or actions bring conviction or are implying that someone needs to make a correction, then relationships can be lost. This hurts self too as I feel less loved and am not looked upon as well by that person. The cost can also come from the world. If I were to see and then challenge an injustice, if I were to call out racism or any other “-ism,” if I were to seek change for the common good, then the powers that be can grow angry or can seek to quiet me. This was Peter and the other apostles’ experience with the religious authorities.

Isn't there likely to be some persecution or other hardship when we, like Peter, speak in ways that draw negative attention to those in power or when our words or actions raise up a sense of guilt or make one aware of selfishness or jealousy or greed in others? With words spoken in anger, like those of the religious leaders, we too can be told to be quiet, to quit preaching, to quit witnessing to our faith.

When that happens or when there is a cost to be paid, we face the same choice that Peter and the other apostles faced. When or how do we obey God rather than giving in to self or to the government or the church or our family and friends? You and I, we too know that God raised Jesus from the dead. You and I have been changed. We have been transformed by Jesus. We are new creations in Christ, committed to our belief in resurrection.

And, yet, are we as committed to witnessing to our faith as Peter and apostles were? Are we the same kind of witnesses?



It was not always easy for the apostles to witness to their faith and to live out their trust in Jesus Christ. We are much like them in these ways. It is not easy to live by faith all the time, always representing well the one we claim to follow. It is not easy to always practice hospitality and welcome. It is not easy to always be inviting and to seek to make space for all people to feel like they belong. It is not easy to always be people of grace and forgiveness and reconciliation. For Peter and John and James and Philip and the rest of the apostles, it was not easy to always witness to their faith. And sometimes it even felt near impossible. But there was one thing that made it possible, that allowed them to continue to witness to their faith in Jesus Christ no matter what. They had the Holy Spirit.

My friends, we have the same Holy Spirit in us that was in Peter and the others. It is in us. The Holy Spirit is with us. But do we allow the Spirit to have power in our lives? Peter and the apostles trusted fully in the power of the Spirit. Working in and through them, the Holy Spirit joined with them, witnessing to the things that God had done. Their voices became the voice of the Spirit. The Spirit spoke through them. It was able to do so because they were open to and welcomed in the work of the Spirit. In the ways that we witness to Jesus, do we allow the voice of Holy Spirit to lead us? Do we follow the nudges of the Spirit, allowing them to guide us? Do you and I seek to be filled by and led by the Holy Spirit?



There is one more thing that Peter and the other apostles had that I think we need to claim too. They had a genuine passion, an unfiltered desire, to witness to the good news of Jesus Christ. They knew it a privilege to be one who pointed always towards the kingdom of God. With the support and strengthening of the Spirit, with the equipping that comes when one is open to and welcoming the Holy Spirit, the apostles engaged in witnessing to their faith. For Peter and the others, to say “we are witnesses” was an identity statement. It was who and what they were. It was also an action statement, an active state of being. The apostles looked at the world around them and decided that it was falling short of the vision that Jesus had cast, far short of the kind of kingdom that Jesus had begun to build.

We too have Jesus’ example and his teachings about what the kingdom should and could be. When we look at the world around us, is it still a far cry from what Jesus spoke of and was working towards? Is our world a place where all are welcome, where all belong, where all feel loved and value? In the world I see, it falls short of Jesus’ vision.

God’s kingdom of love and service that we as followers of Jesus are called to live is the starting place for making this world more into what God intends it to be. As we make the intentional choice to model this kind of kingdom living, as we make a committed choice to witness to the love and grace of Jesus Christ, we begin to build a kingdom that is radically different than the kingdoms of this world. We begin to bring the world closer to the kingdom and community that God desires. Living into our place in the family of God, into our role as a witness to our Lord and Savior, we not only claim our place, but we also invite others to join us in God’s family.

Just last Sunday we welcomed some wonderful people into this family of God. Doing so we pledged to give ourselves to this community and to our neighbors around us. We committed our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness to join Jesus Christ in healing a broken world as we seek to build God's kingdom in this time and place. This day and in the days ahead, may we be witnesses to God's love and grace, to God's healing and forgiveness. May we be witnesses. May it be so for you and may it be so for me. Amen and amen.

**GPS – Grow, Pray, Study**

- 1) *Grow*. As you think about how you witness to your faith, where is one area or practice that you could develop or use more this week?
- 2) *Pray*. Where is the Holy Spirit calling or leading you in your faith journey? Is it to a neighbor? A friend? A cause? An organization? Pray for God to use you!
- 3) *Study*. Read Acts 5:12-16. Why do you think no one else dared to join the apostles for worship? Yet why did they bring the sick and tormented to them?