

## **Acts 5**

### **The Apostles Are Persecuted**

<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,<sup>[c]</sup> 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>[c]</sup> <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."

## **John 20**

### **Jesus Appears to the Disciples**

<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."

### **Jesus and Thomas**

<sup>24</sup> But Thomas (who was called the Twin<sup>[c]</sup>), 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."

### **The Purpose of This Book**

<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<sup>[d]</sup> that Jesus is the Messiah,<sup>[e]</sup> the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

The Sunday after Easter is sometimes called Canon Sunday. The reason being that the sanctuary is so empty that one could fire a canon and no one would be hurt. It's hard to match the enthusiasm of Easter the next Sunday. Some seem to almost think the story ends with the Resurrection. After all, it's the last big holiday of the Christian year, as Pentecost never seems to get as much love.

But the story doesn't end with the Resurrection. God did not stop working in the world with the ascension of Jesus. The story was only just getting started.

Jesus' disciples fled during the trial and crucifixion of Jesus. They were very much afraid their own lives were in danger, and their fear was very well founded. The Romans were notoriously vicious in putting down rebellions. It was completely reasonable that the disciples could be executed for their association with Jesus. It's also important to remember that it wasn't just the Romans, but their own people, the Jewish leadership, who could be after them. Each disciple, with the exception of John, abandoned Jesus in his greatest hour of need. Peter denied Jesus' very name in a direct conversation, but the other disciples did no better. Their silence was a

denial. Their hiding away was a denial. Their abandonment was a denial. In a single long night, all the words of their teacher had been forgotten and buried away. The disciples were back to where they had started.

The story could have ended there, with the disciples hiding, maybe eventually moving far away, laying low and starting a new life. And if Jesus had not been raised, it's very likely that is what would have happened. But something changes.

These men are transformed into the bold apostles who would travel the ends of the earth, evangelizing and creating the church where ever they went. They became the greatest witnesses for Christ the world has ever seen, and these men were no longer afraid.

Scripture only recounts the fate of James, who was martyred by the sword, but church tradition has preserved stories of the fate of the others. Peter and Paul carried the Gospel to Rome. Paul was martyred in Rome, and likely beheaded. Peter was crucified upside down because he felt unworthy to die in the same manner of his lord. Andrew carried the Gospel to Asia Minor and eastern Europe and was crucified in Greece. Thomas, who would not believe until he touched the wounds of Jesus, preached in Syria and possibly India, and was killed by spears. Philip is likely to have taken the Gospel to North Africa where many of the great early church fathers would be nurtured, and was possibly crucified upside down with Bartholomew, but was said to preach from the cross until the crowd released Bartholomew and would have released Philip, but he refused, perhaps for fear of the damage it would do to his witness. Matthew the tax collector and author of the Gospel was likely stabbed to death in Ethiopia. The story of Bartholomew is less clear, but accounts generally put his death in Armenia, either by crucifixion or by a manner so unpleasant that I won't repeat it here. Simon the Zealot was possibly crucified or sawed in half, which is why he is often depicted in artwork with a saw. Finally, Matthias was likely burned to death.

These men went from hiding in fear to sharing the Gospel in the face of certain death. They were not unaware of the risks, and yet still they preached. What could cause such a transformation? In fact, the transformation of the apostles, which is well documented in historical documents from around the world, even by people who were clearly enemies of Christianity, is widely considered by many to be the greatest evidence for the truth of the resurrection of Jesus. Something changed in these men. No one, not even the staunchest atheist can argue that. But what?

Scripture gives us the answer, of course. None other than an encounter with the risen Lord. Jesus appears to the disciples. Put your finger here, and see my hands. Place your hand in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.

Even doubting Thomas could not hold out any longer and became a fearless witness to the risen Lord in the face of certain death.

But the apostles were never to be the only witnesses. That tradition was to be carried on from that very moment on. Jesus says blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. We may not be able to put our hands on the wounds of Jesus, but we are no less his witnesses. We are no less filled by the Holy Spirit and we are no less called to be fearless and to fill the world with the gospel than Peter and the apostles.

The work is not over. The story is not over. Each and every one of us here today has a place in the story of the Gospel and of the church. Each one of us is no less a witness than the apostles.

Of course, much has changed in the two thousand years between the apostles and us. For one thing, we face relatively little danger for our faith in America, at least. We aren't likely to be crucified. In fact, the worst thing we typically face is awkward looks when we say grace or invite them to church. And in modern America, most people have at least some idea of the Gospel story, so we're not exactly starting from scratch like Peter and Paul. Bibles are freely and widely available, including the Gospels, which Peter and Paul lacked. We are more connected than ever before, more free

to live our faith, and have two thousand years of faith ancestors and theologians to support us.

So what's stopping us?

I don't mean to imply that there aren't amazing witnesses for Christ in the modern church, and some even in this room. I've loved hearing your stories of how you've used the invite coasters to invite people to Trinity and to share God's love in our community. But many in the modern church would be mortified to preach the Gospel to strangers, to give their testimony, or to, when necessary, speak up for right and wrong. And I can understand the pressure.

We live in a society where there is little sympathy for competing world views. We are taught that the only way to love one another to affirm the beliefs of others, even when they contradict our own. We are afraid, often, that if we share our views we will be labeled as hateful, or even worse, intolerant. Many in the modern church seem to be constantly apologizing for Scripture and for God, and the hard parts of our faith that can be offensive to some. We are taught that the only way to witness the resurrection of Jesus Christ is to silently love people.

That is not how the apostles witnessed, however. The apostles struggled with the mysteries of our faith just as much as we do, maybe more. They did not have all the answers, or always even understand the "why's." They knew that their message would not be received by everyone. But they witnessed to one true God, to Jesus Christ resurrected, and made no apologies for their faith. I think they would have appreciated the words of Charles Spurgeon who said "Defend the Bible? I'd sooner defend a lion. You don't defend the Bible; you open its cage and let it roar."

Friends, we too are called to witness to our faith, to the things we have seen, and the things we have not seen. And witnessing does look different in our time. We need not travel by foot, face roman soldiers, or summarize

all of Jewish history. Witnessing these days may look like inviting a neighbor to church, asking to pray for a friend, hosting an easter egg hunt, having bible study at a coffee shop, or maybe even just listening. I've found in my personal experience that no one rejects the Gospel in a vacuum. There is usually a story behind it, often a painful one, and listening in those times does far more good than chucking Bible's at the person's head.

And just like the apostles, our witness may not always be accepted, and that's okay. Jesus never chased after people, begging them to follow, and neither did the Apostles. In my work as a hospice Chaplain I'm often asked, usually by a baptist, how I handle people who have rejected the Gospel. For me, the answer is simple. I do my part and witness to the resurrection in whatever ways is appropriate. I love that person. I pray for that person, and at the end of the day, I trust God's work in that person. I trust that God loves that person more than I ever could, and will do what is right and good, even if I can't understand it. My job is to witness to the risen Christ, and God's job is to be God, and things work best when I don't try to take over God's job.

Though witnessing now may look different than it did for the Apostles, it still requires us to be bold, to be fearless, to be unafraid to say "I don't know all the answers, but I trust in the one who does, and this is what God has done for me." It requires us to be unashamed of the Gospel, and to remember that the Gospel is the greatest story ever told, and requires no defense or apology, only our loving witness to that which we have believed, the risen Christ.

Easter Sunday has come and gone, but the work remains. The story is not over, it's still unfolding. We are still an Easter people, meant to witness to the wonders we believe. May the work of all those who have come before us challenge and inspire us to boldly witness to the risen Christ and to carry the Gospel to where ever God would have us go.