

Easter 2010
Witnesses
Acts 10
Revelation 21

Easter morning began with the dawn. A couple of women who had loved a teacher as much as he could be loved went to a newly hewn tomb to offer their service. It was their lot to go and care for the body of Jesus. One can easily imagine their somber attitude. They had watched their friend die on Friday, and the custom demanded that they attend to him. Step by step they would have gone, probably in nothing resembling a hurry. Duty and custom sent them walking to the tomb that morning. A morning stroll with dutiful purpose. You might think their pulse was slow. That they ambled. There was nothing urgent about it – Jesus wasn't going anywhere, after all. You can see them walking – can't you – just making the rounds, saying to each other, when we get there, let's just get in and get out. They had a Friday attitude about the task and about the day.

And then the unexplainable and unexpected happens. A festival breaks out – let's call it a resurrection festival – it breaks out and God breaks in. And everything changes! . They run to tell the disciples and their lament turns into urgent reporting. Friday is over! Sunday is about to begin!

Friday is about death. Sunday is about life.
Friday is about despair. Sunday is about hope.
Friday is about grief. Sunday is about joyful relief.
Friday is about fatality and finality. Sunday is about possibility and potential.
Friday is the end of chances. Sunday is the ultimate second chance.
On Friday man tries to kill God. On Sunday, God asserts power and says – My Son Will Live.

All this talk about Friday reminds me of Good Friday when we gathered here and testified to death of Christ. I said that preaching Good Friday was a little like trying to speak at the funeral of God. It is the most difficult service of the year – I almost cry each and every year.

I am reminded of the funerals that I have been asked to officiate when I have cried -- and you, as the minister are not supposed to cry during your funerals as you are speaking -- a 7 month old girl who suffered so much in her short life. A teenage boy whose life ended in a senseless accident. A young man who left behind a young wife, less than 30 years old when in desperate agony hurled himself off the top of Crowder's Mountain in Cleveland County – the voices and the demons had just become too much for him to bear. I cried – even though you are not supposed to cry when you are the minister at a funeral. I did it anyway.

Tears are for Friday. Tears are very real.

But Sunday comes and Sunday came and Eater dawned I don't cry for them anymore. My tears are replaced with confidence and joy because I believe in the God of the living who raised Christ and who grants the eternity of light perpetual to all those whom God calls his own. That is what Easter does! That is what God gives on Easter Sunday!

That is our witness. That is what we are called to believe. It is what we are called to tell. That is what witnesses do, they believe and tell. They give testimony. Though I will tell you today that testimony in our world today is more and more difficult. In the larger world out there the faith of the church and our faith in the resurrection are under a form of assault. It is nothing new – every time has its Bertrand Russell, its paragon of intellectual and academic doubt. The Easter story always has had its logical holes – it would not make academic proof.

One of my old teachers David Barlett, professor of New Testament and Preaching, recently has written, “Easter is after all more a matter of testimony than of proof, and the good news is that you and I are not the first to testify and that we will not be the last.”¹

This is precisely what Peter is doing in Acts 10. He is making his witness, making his testimony. This is how our faith works – based not so much on ‘proof’ as on the testimony that has been passed on from those first witnesses to us.² We have something to tell because they told – our witness is based upon their witness.

“We are witnesses,” Peter says, “we are witnesses to what Jesus did, and to how he died, and to the fact that he was raised.” Then Peter kept preaching it, and those listeners told someone, and those folks told someone. And here we are.

Our Friday tears are dried by the blinding light of resurrection. What will our witness be?

On Thursday night, Maundy Thursday, I preached about the interplay of giving and receiving in the sacrament of communion. God gives, we receive and in receiving we give God back the only things God really wants from us – our gratitude and our devotion. I did ask a hard question: if your heart is not ready to receive Christ in this supper, then I doubt there is much more God can give us? If you only come forward expecting a little piece of bread and a small cup of juice – then all you get is empty calories.

This makes me wonder: what will you leave with this morning if you aren't concerned with this witness? This leads me to a bigger set of questions:

If not for witness sake, why are we here today?

Because we have to be?

Because it's what the family expects?

¹ JP, Easter 2010, page 12

² Ibid, 13.

Are you here because you need a word a hope?

Is this the first Easter without the friend or the child or the job or the parent?

No matter your reason I am glad we are here and I am glad you are here to lend ear to the witness all around you. The window that depicts Jesus comforting the hurting and the miserable. The anthems of the choir which uplift the heart with songs of hope. The testimony of Peter and John of Patmos, the writer of Revelation, the story of Easter itself, the faith that calls us to believe in the resurrected Lord and join ourselves once again to the confidence that in Christ our sins are forgiven and we are given an overture of the great banquet of heaven.³

That is our witness. It is more testimony than proof. It is more faith than factoid.

As I preach today I know the faith has its detractors— Hitchens, Dawkins, Ehrman — just as just to name a few. It is competitive sport to beat up on the church today on the late night shows. To be sure many of my fellow religious figures have given them the material. The headlines are full of the folly of the church and the sins which vex our best institutions.

But the sins of the present do nothing to erode the witness of the faith as it carried on from the past and into the future. This witness is tried, and it is true, it is lovely and elegant and contains within itself the power to break sin, shatter death, and remake the despair of the world. Political movements barely last a generation. Governments come and go with the vicissitudes of history. Currencies rise and fall. And yet the witness endures and remains.

How could it not be the will of God that we are here, joining our testimony to Peter and the John? No matter why you came through the doors today to hear the hope of hopes and worship the king of kings or because tradition demanded the appointment on your calendar, we must each take notice of what we do know to be true: that Jesus of Nazareth taught and preached 2 millennia ago and he was seized by his people and crucified by Rome, the most powerful government and empire in the history of the world, and the 11 people who followed him most closely ran away to hide because they were off to the cross next. And those 11, who never profited a dime from the enterprise believed that the crucified One returned to them and commissioned them to preach, and teach, and witness. They had no army. No money. No chance of success. Yet here we are.

Our faith is full of stories about "long-shots, can't be's, and didn't have a chances." Jesus, by the arithmetic of the world has no hope of rising from that tomb. But rise he does, that is our testimony. And in his rising, Jesus makes the hopeless hopeful and Christ gives us our Easter home no matter how lost we might have gotten along the way.

³ Ibid, 14 – this is a paraphrase.

My friend and your friend George Dudley recently sent me an email. We had been discussing the nature of Jesus and his role in our lives and in the uncertain and difficult times in which we live and George wrote to me – Jesus has called me to follow him, and “even if that means I must go through hell, so be it -- for I know that, because of Easter, my redeemer lives, and so shall I.”

That is George’s witness – what should ours be?

I want to thank you before I conclude today for listening to our sermons throughout Lent. We spent a long time in Revelation, and I asked you to listen to a little more today. At the point we arrive in Revelation 21, John’s witness is powerful and profound.

It never gets old – “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more.”

This is the end of Revelation and the end is resounding, as resounding as Easter itself. No more death. No more crying. No matter what fears you have our testimony is that God wins. This is the big secret of Revelation – it is the key to decoding the book itself – God wins!

In spite of our problems as a denomination and as a church, we Presbyterians have always gotten this much right – God is sovereign. Even on your worst days, God is sovereign. It is the final test of faith – do we trust God even when the road is hard and the answers are elusive and near non-existent. I don’t have to describe this for many of you, I know. It is difficult to believe in God when we feel abandoned.

No matter how the text, how strange the imagery, how terrible the prophecy, in Revelation, God wins. The Holy City will reign. And the tears of Friday will be wiped away and our most painful sufferings will be renewed by God.

Why do we believe this? This is our testimony, it is our Easter faith.

I had been preaching about two years when I realized that every sermon was finally about Easter. The concluding act of God’s drama of love and redemption for the earth really is what our faith is all about: on Easter the kingdom descends that we might ascend. It is the work of God for the redemption of earth and humankind; it the transaction of grace and receipt of life. And it says something we dare not ever say enough -- there is no dark, not even death itself, that the light of God and the heat of grace cannot penetrate.

I recently ran across a story about Rabbi Hugo Gyrn, one of Brittain’s most noted Rabbi’s. Rabbi Gyrn and his family were imprisoned at Auschwitz and they were Orthodox Jews, and because of their Orthodoxy, pragmatism was out the window and Hugo’s father insisted on holding every Seder, every festival, even though it meant huge danger to them all. Hugo remembered a time when his father took a bit of string and the last butter bits they had and fashioned them into a candle – the shabat candle – to be

burned during the Seder. Hugo was furious and protested, “Father that is all the butter we have!” His father said, “Yes it is. Without food we can live for weeks. But we cannot live for a minute without hope.”ⁱ

What is our witness? Because of Jesus and his resurrection we hope even in the face of the grave and we count on God to win even in the presence of death itself. This is our testimony. This is Easter.

Amen.

ⁱ This is the conclusion of Tom Long's book "Preaching from Memory into Hope."