

WE ARE WITNESSES TO THESE THINGS

ACTS 5:27-42

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

BY: RYAN DUECK

APRIL 3, 2016/2ND SUNDAY OF EASTER

Some of you know that I have a blog that I write regularly on about matters of faith and culture and the church, among other things.

One of the interesting things about blogging is that you get to have some really interesting conversations with all kinds of very interesting people coming from different experiences and perspectives.

This week, I posted an edited version of last Sunday's Easter sermon on my blog. One commenter was appreciative of the message.

(Which was nice—believe it or not, *occasionally*, there are people out there who *don't* appreciate everything I write!)

This commenter shared a bit of their own experience from Easter Sunday:

The sermon at my church on Easter was basically that there was no resurrection, that the idea was adapted from myths associated with other Gods. While I don't believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible, I also don't feel the need to rationalize everything that is written there. I agree that without the resurrection... why are we following Jesus?

I was disappointed by the sermon and this does seem to be the direction my church is heading. While I have been questioning whether this is the church for me, it seems this one sermon has confirmed it is not. So, I guess I will be looking for a new church now.

I've had many conversations like this one over the years, whether in person or via email or on my blog. It is not uncommon, in our Canadian, Western context, to encounter either a lament like this one that the church is drifting from its historical and theological foundation *or* a celebration that we've moved beyond all that superstitious, primitive stuff and are enlightened, "progressive" Christians.

(Aside: I don't like the terms that are so often used in contemporary discourse... "traditional" vs. "progressive." These words seem to have judgments built into them. "Traditional" = old-fashioned and bad; "progressive" = modern and good.)

In truth, I think both will always characterize the church. Or, at least both *should*. Some traditions are worth preserving; sometimes progress must be made. Similarly, not all traditions are worth preserving and not all progress is good.)

At any rate, this is where we live.

Two thousand years or so after the first Easter that shot the first disciples as if out of a cannon into the Roman world proclaiming news of a crucified Jesus raised from the dead and vindicated by God, of the hope of repentance and the forgiveness of sins, the church often looks and sounds little like those fearless first witnesses to resurrection.

Many, in twenty-first century Canada are hanging on to faith, or the church, or faith *in* the church by a thread. Some are secretly embarrassed by some of Christianity's historical teachings (virgin birth, miracles of Jesus, bodily resurrection, ascension, etc.).

Some stay connected to the church for the social aspect and not much more.

Many others find personal meaning and purpose and identity within the church and within the narrative it embodies, but think that our faith (and our doubts) are our own private business.

We're happy with a quiet, simple Christian faith that inspires our values and gives us hope. But we keep it to ourselves. We don't want to run the risk of offending others or presuming that we should tell them what to think (God knows, our history is full of examples of Christians imposing their views on others, right?).

And, increasingly, our churches reflect the spiritual temperature of people in the pews.

Sometimes they proclaim the good news of Easter with great joy and conviction. But often, churches can't muster much joy or clarity or conviction, as the commenter on my blog made plain.

Over the next six weeks—the time between Easter and Pentecost—we're going to be looking at the weekly readings from the book of Acts.

The book of Acts narrates the birth of the church. And so each of the next six weeks we'll look at a different snapshot of the early believers and the early church in action.

I have called this series "Resurrection on the Move." Often, we find ourselves asking what Easter means after it has come and gone.

The book of Acts gives us a window into what the first Easter *meant* for those first disciples. It shows us what resurrection meant when it exploded out into the world.

Today, we have this story about the apostles before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, not long after the tomb was found to be empty.

The main character in today's story is Peter, confidently proclaiming the gospel in hostile circumstances and under great threat.

It's worth reminding ourselves who this Peter is.

- Sinks in the water after stepping out of the boat (Mat. 14:25-31).
- Rebukes Jesus for saying he would die—and is called "Satan" for his troubles (Mat. 16:21-23).
- Is desperate to put up a shelter for Jesus and Moses and Elijah on the mountaintop (Mat. 17:3-5)
- Tells Jesus he will never let him wash his feet (John 13:8).
- Asks Jesus how many times he has to forgive his brother (Mat. 18:20-22)
- Falls asleep when he was supposed to be praying on the night Jesus would be betrayed and executed (Mat. 26:39-41).
- Hacks off the ear of the high priest's servant in a rash attempt to defend Jesus by force (John 18:10)

- Confidently declares that he, of all people, will never deny Jesus—and then goes out and denies even knowing Jesus three times on the night of his crucifixion (Luke 22:54-62).

Peter has better moments than these, of course, but *this* is the guy on center stage in our text today.

Except now, he looks and sounds a bit different. A bit less self-preoccupied. A little less obtuse and judgmental. A bit more humility, perhaps. And lot bolder.

He's finally got the message about Jesus. All it took was an empty tomb.

Now, he stands fearlessly before the religious elites in Jerusalem courageously speaking the truth to power (*you crucified him!*), refusing to be silenced despite threats and imprisonment and physical abuse (see preceding chapters in Acts), and confidently declaring the message of Jesus and his gospel of repentance and forgiveness of sins.

Peter, the very disciple who denied even knowing Jesus to a harmless servant girl, now responds to the high priest and the Sanhedrin (Jewish ecclesial court):

We must obey God rather than human beings.

We are witnesses to these things, Peter says.

We cannot be silent and we won't. Everything has been turned upside down. The world will never be the same.

The most powerful apologetic for the truth of Jesus' resurrection is the existence of the church.

There are all kinds of good historical, theological, anthropological, and sociological, and plain *logical* reasons for believing that Jesus really did say and do the things that the New Testament says that he said and did.

But more impressive than any argument, is the community of faith that came into being out with those first disciples who were smacked upside the head by something they *never* expected: an empty tomb and a risen saviour.

What else could turn a collection of self-centred, power-hungry, cowardly, vengeful, sleepy, self-righteous disciples into confident orators that stood before the most powerful in Jerusalem?

What else could set these ordinary people loose to turn Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth upside down with this incredible news, but the Holy Spirit of God who bore witness with them to the meaning of what they had experienced?

So, this is the part of the sermon where I wag my finger and say, “we need to be more like Peter and John and those first disciples! We need to be bolder and have more conviction in our beliefs.”

I’m not going to do that. At least not *just* that ☺. It’s not because I don’t think that the church *should* be more like those early believers.

It’s because I know that we are some distance removed from those first days of the church, and that the task of the church in twenty-first century Canada isn’t identical to the task of the church in first-century Jerusalem.

And I know that bearing witness isn’t always a simple thing. It’s not as though we can just manufacture things like joy, conviction, and confidence.

We are not witnesses in the same way as those first disciples were. We weren’t *there*. We didn’t see what they saw or hear what they heard.

And I think we do well to at least *pause* before jumping on phrases like, “We must obey God rather than human beings.”

Each of us probably has stories about people—often people in positions of authority and influence—who claimed to be “obeying God instead of human beings” (just like Peter!) even while doing things that turned out to be rather ungodly.

Is there a way that we can fuse together the apostle’s conviction and willingness to suffer and die for their faith in the risen Lord with the necessary humility that says, “we don’t know or see everything... we see through a glass darkly, this side of eternity?”

I think there is.

And it comes, interestingly, from another character in our story today. Gamaliel was an honoured and esteemed teacher of the Jewish law (he taught Saul, before he became Paul, as we will later learn in Acts).

His counsel to his colleagues in the Sanhedrin is worth paying attention to.

He says, essentially, “listen, you remember that there have been a bunch of people who have claimed all kinds of wild things in our past, people convinced they were speaking and acting in God’s name and drawing all kinds of people to their cause. In each case, it came to nothing. So let’s just leave these Jesus-people alone and see what happens. If it’s of human origin, it will fail. But if it’s not, you’ll be powerless to stop them; and you’ll find yourselves in the very uncomfortable position of fighting against God.”

I wonder if we could learn from *both* Peter *and* Gamaliel’s response to the Sanhedrin.

We could obviously learn from Peter and other the disciples about bravery and conviction. We could be instructed by their joy in suffering for Jesus’ sake (as so many of our sisters and brothers around the world do each day, including those I saw in Palestine a few weeks ago!).

But we could also learn from Gamaliel’s measured, humble response.

He knows that ultimately the will of God cannot be thwarted. He also knows that he might not know everything or be seeing everything in its entirety.

Built into the statement, “Let’s wait and see what comes of this” is the basic recognition that *I might be wrong!* Or, at the very least, *I’m open to being surprised by God!*

This is important.

Gamaliel is among the wisest and most respected men in Jerusalem. He knows his Torah well. He knows how God works.

And yet, he is open to newness. He is open the possibility that God is doing something unexpected.

And he knows better than to fight against the God who has always been in the habit of surprising his people.

So, if we put the two together, we have a witness that is bold and brave **and** that is humble honest about its limitations, and is open to being shaped and guided and reoriented by God's purposes.

Peter himself will put the two together in a letter he later wrote to one of the early churches:

But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15).

Conviction and humility. Both crucial components of what it means to bear witness well.

There may be a word here for the church in the West, perhaps even for our own Mennonite Church. A few weeks ago, six of us attended our Mennonite Church Alberta Assembly in Calgary.

As some of you may know, MC Canada has put together a committee called the Future Directions Task Force to examine present trends in Mennonite churches across Canada and to come up with recommendations for how to address what appear to be unsustainable institutional national structures.

The recommendation that the FDTF has been bringing to area churches across Canada is to move toward no national structure and only regional bodies.

There is some anxiety and unease about this, here in Alberta and across the country. What will the future will look like? Which structures will remain? How will things get done? What will unify us as Mennonites across all this distance and theological diversity?

I don't have the answers for the structural and institutional questions, but when it comes to questions of unity and anxiety about the state of the church more generally, I wonder if we could perhaps use this simple reminder from the early church to remember who we are, as Christians.

We must never apologize for the deep convictions that have always characterized the church of Jesus Christ.

The incarnation, the miracles, the cross, the empty tomb, the ascension and future return. The openness to surprise!

We can have discussion and disagreement about the specifics or the implications of these central Christian teachings.

But as soon as we start apologizing for these or being embarrassed by them or turning them into hollow shells of what has nourished and sustained the church for thousands of years, we run the risk of cutting ourselves off from the very trunk that sustains us.

Easter reminds us that, above all else—above any cause that we think the church should support, above any issues we think we ought to be advocates for—we are people with a message about what God has done for us in and through Jesus Christ.

As soon as the church forgets this or downplays it or seeks to subsume it under other narratives, whether political or ethical or social, we walk away from our very reason for being, our very identity as followers of Jesus.

Peter and the apostles stand bravely before the Sanhedrin declaring that they are witnesses.

So are we. We are witnesses.

What does a witness do? They speak about what they have experienced. What they have seen. What they have heard. What they have felt. What has moved and guided them.

This is our task, as a church. To bear witness. Not to convert or compel. Not to overwhelm the doubters with our superior evidence. Not to manipulate or manufacture spiritual experiences. Not even to eradicate injustice or to fix social problems.

Each of these may have their place, but more often than not they are God's tasks, not ours (i.e., conversion and spiritual experiences).

Fundamentally, our task is simply to bear witness—to say, “The empty tomb has made all the difference in the world for me, in the present and for the future.”

May God help us, the church, to bear witness always in good and healing and life-giving ways.

Amen.

