

And We Are All Witnesses
Acts 2:14a, 22-32
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The Second Sunday of Easter
Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, VA

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say.

“You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know— this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. For David says concerning him, ‘I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken; therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; moreover my flesh will live in hope. For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience corruption. You have made known to me the ways of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence.’ “Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying, ‘He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption.’ This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses.”

Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen, Indeed!

It seemed without fail that when I would walk into my junior year yearbook class that the voice of Mr. McDonald from his desk to the left of the chalkboard, wearing his signature black framed glasses would yell “Can I Get a WHITness?”

Years later a former seminary classmate and now colleague in ministry, Edwin Estevez would yell the same question: “Can I Get A WHITness?” as we’d pass each other on campus and now when we speak on the phone or run into each other in professional circles. Of course there is wordplay with the first syllable of my name and the word: witness.

The times in my life that I have been blessed to be greeted with such energetic salutation, the 1963 record by Marvin Gaye “Can I Get A Witness?” would play in my head. If you’ve heard that song it sounds like church. It sounds like a piano riff you might have heard in the sanctuaries of black churches in the 50’s, 60’s and 70’s. Even in the remake by The Rolling Stones that same gospel beat backs the British rockers. It sounds like what some might call shouting music. Now shouting music is not only the soundtrack to elevated audible responses but also to the stomping and dancing that may also accompany the Spirit’s work in the worship moment

It is that shouting music that had me tapping my foot as I listened to both songs as I wrote this sermon. I just couldn’t help myself. The phrase “Can I Get A Witness” is also common in churches that engage in dialogue and call and response. The preacher might be in the middle of a sermon and proclaim some attribute of God and ask the congregation, “Can I Get A Witness?” I remember hearing at a conference that one of the characteristics of church growth is *martaria*, the Greek word for witness.

There is something that lingers in me as I think about how, when I hear that song my feet start to uncontrollably tap then, my shoulders can't help but shake. It is a response to the power of the music. It is the spirit of the melody, harmony, and beat all working together that takes over me and causes a response that I could not plan and cannot stop. Maybe it is not 60's R&B or rock music that does it to you? Maybe you are like Pastor Larry who, after Yeri played that beautiful organ solo for our Easter Sunday postlude said, "That was great" forgetting he was mic'd and cameras were still on. The Spirit moves, and we respond. All of us are witnesses!

This passage in the Book of Acts is the church's first sermon, the church's first confession of faith. The verses that precede this passage tell the story of the Holy Spirit descending on people. Now that the gift of the Spirit is bestowed on the diverse gathering of people comes a sermon that transcends language, region, ethnicity, and economics. It is a sermon about Jesus Christ!

The Jesus who walked the streets of Nazareth and fished in the Sea of Galilee, the one who cast out demons, and made the blind to see, the lame to walk, and fed the multitudes... that Jesus is Jesus the risen One. Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen Indeed! And all of us are witnesses!

Jesus Lord, Jesus Christ raised from the dead not as an achievement of his own, but in the foreknowledge and in the sovereignty of God. Death as gruesome and heartbreaking as it was and is, was part of the story of Jesus Christ and our faith in Jesus. But it is part of the story, it is not the end or the whole but a part. For God in her divine wisdom knew that the hold of death was futile against her will to raise, her will to save Jesus so that Jesus might be for us Lord and Savior. Death O Death, where is your victory? is the rhetorical question of a risen Lord, and a people on fire with the Holy Spirit. And we all are witnesses...

What does it mean as we go into the sixth week of social distancing, sheltering in place as a response to the global health crisis and pandemic for us be witnesses to the Risen Lord? What does it mean to be face to face with economic and financial uncertainty and be witnesses to the Risen Lord? How do we proclaim the Easter proclamation that Christ is Risen, Christ is Risen indeed! with no idea what it will mean to return and fearful that what we once thought of as "normal" has become a curse? Perhaps you thought it was easier a week ago, when it was still the season of Lent?

It was easier when the liturgical calendar called us to think about trials, temptations, and the Suffering servant. The work of Jesus Christ is not easy work and the work of proclaiming Jesus Christ Lord and Savior is not either. It is indeed foolish. Foolish to proclaim that in the midst of chaos, there is hope. Foolish to not let the ways of the worlds, the gods of this present time deter you from the God who raised her very son from the Dead, and raises us to eternal life. And we all are witnesses...

We are witnesses to the cheers of neighborhoods at 7pm who show their support for medical and health care professionals. We are witnesses to the people who put on masks and serve the most vulnerable in our community offering them food. We are witnesses to teachers providing comfort to scared and nervous children through online learning and education. We are witnesses to grassroots efforts to ensure that our local businesses and establishments might be able to survive this. We are witnesses to the way that God's creation will not be scorched out by pandemics, as flowers bloom and birds chirp. We are witnesses to chalk art on our daily walks, that remind us to smile and to take it one day at a time. Christ is Risen, Christ is Risen Indeed! And we all are witnesses.

There are signs of resurrection everywhere, open your eyes witness the risen Lord.

So on this the 2nd Sunday of Easter, let us remember that resurrection is not about a certain day of the year but about an orientation to life, death, and life after death. This day, I invite you to remember that we all are witnesses, to remember...

Remember when the name of God, the name of Jesus became more than a mere word to you?

When did the name of Jesus become more than a word to you?

Who will be a witness for my Lord?

When did the name of Jesus become more than a word to you?

When I realized I couldn't save myself. When I realized I was worthy of love because I am not because of any condition. For me it was in high school when Jesus went from something out there, to something in here. I was blown away by the love of a God who loved me unconditionally.

Not on the condition of my grades, not on the condition of how comfortable I felt in my body, or whether or not I came to love my darker skin, or whether I made the basketball team, or my family was perfect, not on the condition of church attendance or where or if I'd go to college or not. Jesus saved me from myself-from my own feelings of inadequacy and not enough-ness, and Jesus saves me from that every day. Christ is Risen, Christ is Risen Indeed!

Who'll be a witness for my Lord?

When did the name of Jesus become more than a word to you? Who'll be a witness for my Lord? For my Lord?

Friends, you saw it proclaimed as we began this live stream. May you find the courage in the midst of fear to proclaim it too.... Christ is Risen. Christ is Risen Indeed!

And we all are witnesses....

Amen.