



Roanoke, Virginia
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“Testimony”

Acts 4:32-37
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Our passage today picks up in the middle of things.

Jesus has ascended into heaven, the Holy Spirit descends, and the Apostles are preaching. They are preaching that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead.

Peter and John meet a man who has been unable to walk his whole life, and they pray for him, and suddenly the man can walk.

So the people start to believe them. They start to believe in the power of the resurrection.

Of course, all the leaders get nervous, and they arrest Peter and John, and tell them to quiet down, to not speak about Jesus anymore. They threaten them, but they are undeterred. Gone are the anxious, doubting disciples we knew so well before Jesus’ resurrection. Now, armed with a new confidence, Peter and John are bold. And the group of believers are inspired, so they all pray for the confidence to speak the word of God with boldness.

And that’s where we pick up. Hear these words from the book of Acts, chapter 4, verses 32-37.

32 Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. **33** With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. **34** There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. **35** They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. **36** There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”). **37** He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles’ feet.

This is the word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

The word testimony was a common one in the church tradition I grew up in. To have a testimony was to be aware of the ways that the power of God had been at work in your life. So at summer camp, at the age of sixteen, I stood up in front of the whole camp to give my testimony, to tell the story about my experience of faith, and about how the resurrection of Jesus had made a difference in my life. Most testimonies I had heard had involved some kind of big change or turning point, a moment when God saved someone from a dangerous lifestyle or an unhealthy relationship or a particularly sinful pattern of behavior. And those are important stories, but that was never my story. My story was about God's faithful presence in so many little moments along the way, and I knew I bore witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ every time I forgave someone who hurt me, or showed compassion to a friend in need. The power of Jesus' resurrection transformed the way I viewed relationships and the way I viewed myself, and for me, that was a testimony worth sharing.

Even before that moment, Easter had long been my favorite holiday. I always loved the hymns we sang, the shouts of Alleluia, the bright colors, and I especially loved the promise of the profound hope and transforming power that can be found in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But, alas, Easter Sunday is only one day of the year. By the next week, or sometimes even by that afternoon, it's back to business as usual, back to the messy, painful reality of life. The joy has faded, the hope is gone, and Christ's resurrection power is all but forgotten. Ok, so Christ is risen, Christ is risen, indeed. But what does it mean?

As last week's Easter celebration fades into our distant memory, we have to face the question: Now what? What does the resurrection mean?

There are some preachers who will tell you that the resurrection means that we get a shot at heaven that Jesus is the first fruits of the dead and we are next. And while I believe that is true, I also believe that focusing only on the future limits the scope of God's power, and we forget that the resurrection might mean something right here right now, too.

And then there are other preachers who will tell you that what the resurrection means is that right here right now we get to be victorious, that we get to have it all, that if God loves you, if you are faithful, if you have received God's favor, then you will be blessed: financially, with good health, you name it. As long as we are faithful, the resurrection means that we get to win in everything that we do.

The trouble is, this logic does not hold up to scripture. And this logic does not hold up to our experiences of life, either. We've seen enough of this world to know that bad things happen to good people all the time. And we believe that God is not vindictive, that our current situations are not a reflection of God's love or lack of love for us. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, no matter the circumstance.

The apostles knew firsthand that Jesus' resurrection didn't guarantee their immediate happiness and success. Half the stories in the book of Acts are about Jesus-followers getting beaten up, killed, or thrown in prison. But they still gave testimony to the resurrection of Jesus

with great power. There was no expectation that things would go well for them, but still: they were bold. And they gave their testimony.

And as they did, they discovered a common identity, a unity among their group of believers. It wasn't just that God used them to work miraculous healings; it wasn't just that they were willing to preach. Their whole life together became a sermon; their whole life together became a testimony to the power of the resurrection. They were of one heart and soul, everything they owned was held in common. Everyone among them had everything they needed, because they were committed to caring for one another, they sold their houses; they gave up everything they had.

As you've may have discovered, developing the ability to let go of your possessions is no small feat. To give up your own financial security and share with those who are in need, you might hope it would be an easy choice, but let's be honest, usually it's not, and those kinds of decisions are hard. They involve commitment and sacrifice and deep faith.

But for these early believers, this is what the resurrection meant: it meant that they were so united with one another, that it only made sense to share everything they had. In the wake of the resurrection, these believers discovered the power of being together. One heart, one soul. Their life together was a testimony to the power of God.

Christians weren't the first people to idealize this kind of community. In the passage we just read, there are actually several callbacks to Greek literature, and to the Hebrew Scriptures. To talk about being of "one soul" is a classic Hellenistic portrayal of friendship, and the dream of a community that had "everything in common" is discussed in those exact words by Plato, Philo, Aristotle, and Plutarch.

And turning to the Hebrew scriptures, it's back in Deuteronomy 15 that the community of God is defined by no one being in need. God, through Moses, says, "There will be no one in need among you, because the LORD is sure to bless you. And if there is among you anyone in need, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need."

The author of Acts is deliberately calling on these cultural references, so that whoever you are, Gentile or Jew, you will understand that the dream of a united community is brought into reality by the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is what the resurrection means that is what it does, it changes our relationships with one another, it melts our hard hearts and gives us love for each other, it releases us from captivity to fear and greed, and it binds us to one another as one heart, one soul.

That is a miracle. That is a testimony

For those who want to say, "That's an overly idealistic picture. There's no way this vision of community can play out in real life. We've all read Animal Farm." I hear you. And the book of Acts actually agrees with you. The story that immediately follows this passage is the story of Ananias and Sapphira, two people who desperately wanted to appear as though they were participating in the ideals of this community. They sell their property and they say that they've brought all the proceeds to lie at the apostles' feet. But they're too afraid, so they keep back part of the money for themselves and they end up dying.

So this is not a perfect community. This is a community led by people who actually knew the crucified and risen Christ, and even they are making plays for safety and security. So I can't believe that God has any kind of expectation that the church will become some sort of utopia, where no one is afraid and everyone has the wherewithal to completely deny themselves and contribute all their possessions to the needs of the group.

But what if we prayed for boldness? If we prayed for the confidence to respond to the word of God with boldness, what might we find that the resurrection means for us?

Maybe some of us would be more generous with our money, making sure that the needs of each member of this church were met. Maybe some of us would be more generous with our time, using a precious Saturday or an evening to volunteer with Family Promise, or to visit with people in our church who can't get out anymore, or to serve as an advisor and role model for our youth. Maybe some of us would be more generous with our love, maybe we would offer forgiveness to someone we'd rather not forgive, or make an extra effort to listen to a friend, or cry with someone we love who is grieving. Maybe we would find that our hearts might start to grow together, that our souls might start to grow together, so that on the worst imaginable day everyone in this community would know for certain that they have a hand to hold, that they have a whole community of people ready to step up and meet their needs, that they are not alone.

A teacher of mine from seminary, Dr. Kate Bowler, was recently diagnosed with incurable stage four colon cancer at the age of thirty five. She's written quite a bit about her experiences, and over and over again she's said that the things that mattered most, especially in the early days of her diagnosis, were not the recipes for antioxidant filled smoothies, or the lectures about keeping up a positive attitude, or the comments about God's plan (and they were many). Instead it was the friends and loved ones who sat with her, who held her hand, who were of one heart and soul with her, who made jokes with her and cried with her, and shared her questions and her grief.

She tells a story of another Duke professor, a pediatric oncologist, who in the days immediately following her diagnosis, showed up on her back patio with a bottle of wine, poured a glass for everyone in her family, sat down right by her side, and simply said, "I am so sorry that this is happening. This is awful."

And that's what Kate says has saved her – the people who shared her pain.

It's the not being alone – that's what the resurrection means.

So friends, hold onto each other, share with one another, share in joy, share in grief, and be of one heart, one soul. Be bold in the ways you express your love. And in so doing, give your testimony to the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is risen, he is risen indeed.

Amen.