



Roanoke, Virginia

April 24, 2022

“Can I Get a Witness?”

Acts 5:27-32

Rev. Benjamin S. Brannan

²⁷ When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, ²⁸ saying, “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man’s blood on us.” ²⁹ But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than any human authority. ³⁰ The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. ³¹ God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. ³² And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.”

By the summer of 1963, Marvin Gaye was a top-ten recording artist. Once a freelance session drummer and a would be easy-listening legend, he was now firmly planted in the seats among the all-time greats in the R&B arena. At the same time, the Holland-Dozier-Holland trio was racking up hit after hit for nearly every Motown act they were assigned to. Both making noise in all the right ways, in all the right tunes, with all the right people... their paths were always going to cross eventually.

And inevitably they did. Motown had long been flirting with the notion of “secular gospel,” and now “the company’s hottest up-and-coming writers teamed up with the company’s hottest up-and-coming artist to deliver a knockout punch that, in only 2 minutes and 48 seconds, succinctly sums up the dichotomy of great Motown.” And who better to lay it down than a son of a preacher man?



But it hurts me so inside
To see her treat me so unkind
Somebody, somewhere tell her it's unfair

Can I get a witness?
Can I get a witness?
Can I get a witness?
Somebody (Can I get a witness?)

Is it right to be treated so bad
When you've given everything you had?

Marvin Gaye, being mistreated by the woman he loves, is asking for help. His plea is not directed just at you, and it's not to his friends who are named explicitly later in the song, but rather to the group of strangers who are listening—those listening then, those who have ever listened in the almost 60 years since its release, those listening now, and to those who will listen in the future. “Can I get a witness?” He is asking for a show of solidarity, for confirmation that the actions of his girlfriend that he deems hurtful are in fact a mistreatment of his love and loyalty.¹

This ain't the way love's supposed to be
Let me hear, let me hear you say, yeah

Up early in the morning, with her on my mind
Just to find out all night, that I've been cryin'
But I believe, a woman's a man's best friend
So I'm gonna stick by her 'til the very end

But she cause so much misery that
I forget how love is supposed to be
Somebody, somewhere, tell her it ain't fair

Can I get a witness?

Can I get a witness?

Following the resurrection, the apostles were commissioned to tell the world about the Easter events: Jesus is alive. But there were others who were commissioned by the state to keep that story from spreading. Both parties, loyal to their respective leader, were determined to have it their way, so their paths were always going to cross eventually.

¹ Drawn heavily from the work of Nixon, who runs *Motown Junkies*, an unofficial track by track review and analysis of both A- and B-sides of every Motown single ever released. This opening analysis is taken from entry #338. Marvin Gaye: “Can I Get A Witness”, published on May 12, 2011. You can find the full entry at <https://motownjunkies.co.uk/2011/03/12/338/>



And they inevitably did. Within the larger narrative of Acts, the apostles are continually detained, put on trial, and threatened because of their proclamations that Jesus of Nazareth is the Risen Lord and Savior. In chapter four, Peter and John are arrested by the priests, the captain of the Temple, and the Sadducees “because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead.” You see, the Sadducees were wealthy aristocrats, whose power and privilege were derived through allegiance with Rome, and any uprising or public protest and resulting disorder would be a threat to their status. To retain their vested interests, they would not listen to the resurrection truth themselves, or allow anyone else to have the chance to hear it. The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection from the dead at all... maybe that was why they were sad, you see.

The whole book of Acts is structured around the command of Jesus in Acts 1:8, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and to the ends of the earth.” But as a result of their public proclamation of Jesus’ resurrection, the apostles who preached this message were arrested and taken before the Sanhedrin to stand trial. The apostles were given strict orders to refrain from their public witness. But proclaim they must! And once they were released, they continued to preach and teach in the name of Jesus, and their numbers continued to grow.

Going against the orders of the authorities, Peter and the apostles are arrested and brought before the courts to be questioned again. “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name”—note that they cannot even say the name of Jesus even in their trial— “yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man’s blood on us.” The chief priests were aware that in the apostle’s public professions they were being labeled not as the ones who told everyone else how to behave, but now are being labeled as the ones who commissioned the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus. As one commentator puts it, “they are no longer the chief priests, but now the chief sinners.”² And Peter’s response only further enraged the council: shall we obey God, or shall we obey the authorities?

This is more than a rhetorical ploy. It does two things: it legitimizes their public witness, and it calls into question the actions of those in the courtroom. What Peter is saying to the members of the council is: Is the way you are living in obedience to God, or in obedience to the authorities?³

This question is for us, too. Shall we obey God, or shall we obey the authorities? Shall we obey God, or shall we obey the authorities of the world that work to keep the status quo at the expense of those less fortunate?

² Feasting

³ Kyle Fever, “Commentary on Acts 5:27-32” posted April 7, 2013. *Working Preacher*, an online commentary from Luther Seminary. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-easter-3/commentary-on-acts-527-32-3>



Shall we obey God, or shall we obey the authorities that seek retributive justice rather than restorative justice?

Shall we obey God, or shall we obey the authorities of our culture that say we must look and act a certain way to have value or worth?

Shall we obey God, or shall we obey the authorities that put profit above all else, even at the expense of earthly resources and human dignity?

Is the way we are living, individually and collectively, in obedience to God, or in obedience to the authorities?

We can learn a lot from Peter's response. Where does our obedience lie? That is the first. But what he says next is a lesson to be learned as well. Peter says, "The God of our ancestors"—your ancestors, my ancestors, the God of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob—"raised up Jesus, exalted him at his right hand as leader and savior." God has made a way for us, for all of us. God made a way through death, a way to life, by Jesus' ultimate kingship over the earth. Even though the events of Jesus' death were horrific, and blood is on our hands, God has overturned death through love and forgiveness. Peter is now directing his preaching to the council. God has made a way! Our God, the same God you worship, has made a way!

God made a way for restoration, not retribution. God made a way for forgiveness, not vengeance. God made a way for renewal, not revenge. "God exalted Jesus that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins." This forgiveness is extended to all.

Peter and the apostles were witnesses to these things and now follow Christ's call to be his witnesses in Jerusalem and to the ends of the earth.

Beloved, the Easter story is a story that must be shared, not only then, but now and to the end of time. Christ is alive! Can I get a witness!?!

If Christ is alive, then there has been a power that has been unleashed into our world that is greater than death, a source of love and energy and hope that cannot be destroyed! Can I get a witness!?!

If Christ is alive, then there is no suffering we can endure, no anguish or pain, no loss to be experienced that Christ does not suffer with us. Can I get a witness!?!

If Christ is alive, then we, each and every one of us, are cherished by God, loved beyond measure, and drawn into a new kind of society, that welcomes the stranger, that seeks to dismantle systems of injustice that separate us from each other and from the Earth. Can I get a witness!?!



If Christ is alive, then all of creation is being raised up with Christ and is now oriented toward the hope for “a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.” (2 Peter 3:13)

Can I get a witness!?!

On Friday, we celebrated Earth Day. Since 1970, April 22 has been set aside each year to celebrate the birth of the modern environmental movement. In the years leading up to the inaugural event, Senator Gaylord Nelson, along with others, were concerned about the deteriorating environment in the United States. And, having witnessed the massive oil spill in Santa Barbara, California, in January 1969, they infused the energy of student anti-war protests of the day with an emerging public consciousness about air and water pollution. Sparking national media attention and catching on across the country, Earth Day inspired 20 million people—10% of the total US population at the time—to demonstrate against the impacts of 150 years of industrial development which had left a growing legacy of serious human health impacts. And since then, Earth Day is widely recognized as the largest secular observance in the world, with more than a billion people taking action to change human behavior and create global, national and local policy changes, witnessing to the global climate challenges of our day.⁴

Today, the youth of our church team up with the Second Presbyterian Green Team to clean up trash and waste on the streets of our neighborhood. Witnessing to the resurrection hope for creation.

The Easter story is a story of resurrection, restoration, and renewal, a story of love, hope, and forgiveness, a story that must be shared and honored, witnessed to by our words and actions, here in our community and around the world! It is a story of for all the earth, a resurrection story for land, sea and sky, for birds and beasts, for fish and fowl, for you and for me.

“God raised Jesus up and exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.”

What have you witnessed?

Have you witnessed love conquering hate? Tell the story.

Have you witnessed the injustices by the systems of the state? Tell the story.

Have you witnessed the cries of creation, and the groans of the earth? Tell the story.

Have you witnessed the hope of resurrection? Tell the story.

⁴ According to the “History” page on <https://www.earthday.org/>



What is your story of Easter resurrection? Whatever it is, tell your story!

Can I get a witness!?!

Amen.

