

Vulnerability and the Power of Love
Second Sunday of Eastertide
Acts 2:22-32
Brentwood First Presbyterian
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Pre- reading Introduction

Today we hear one of the first messages to the original church, delivered by Jesus' closest associate, Peter. Today we join Peter in Jerusalem for the first part of his sermon on the day of Pentecost.

We actually know quite a lot about the Galilean fisherman Simon Peter, who Paul calls Cephas. His brother Andrew brought him to Jesus, and both became among Jesus' first disciples. Peter was in Jesus inner circle of three, along with the brothers John and James the elder. Peter owned the fishing boat Jesus taught from and in which he almost drowned. He lived with his wife and mother in law near Capernaum. When Jesus asked his disciples who they say that he is, Peter told Jesus he is the anointed one, the son of the living God. Peter's confession is the rock upon which Jesus built his church. Not Peter himself, but his confession that he is the Christ. The Book of Acts implies he was illiterate, as were most people in his day, and his accent gives him away as being a Galilean. But he knew his Hebrew Bible, he knows Jesus, and he can preach! It was Peter who denied Jesus three times. But it was Peter who we find preaching the first message ever given in the Christian church.

Movement 1

Today's NT lesson is from a message given by Peter in the book of Acts. The book of Acts is placed after the four Gospels, and before the letters. This is good, because it is hard to understand Acts without understanding the Gospels. And it is hard to understand the letters without understanding Acts.

Can we summarize the book of Acts in one sentence? It is the account of the Spirit of God guiding the spread of the good news from Jerusalem to Rome itself. To Rome, which declared it the state religion in the 4th century. Although called the "Acts of the Apostles," the words, "of the Apostles" is an addition present only in later manuscripts. The earliest manuscripts just called this book, "Acts." So some feel it might better be called "The Acts of God's Spirit." From beginning to end, the Spirit of God acts in the hearts and bodies of the first Christians. The church does not lead and guide itself: God's Spirit does. The church, which Paul calls the very body of the risen Christ. In Acts, God's Spirit joins God's Messiah as agents of salvation and redemption.

The same word in Hebrew and Greek is used for Spirit, Breath, and Wind. Wind is powerful, and it can be beneficial. We use the wind to power sailboats and windmills, to dry our clothes, and to keep ourselves cool. Our lives would be pretty dull without wind. Without the heavenly wind, God's Holy Spirit, blowing through our lives, we can be dull and lifeless, also.

Sometimes God blows through our lives like a gentle breeze, so light we hardly notice it. Sometimes God's Spirit pushes us like a sailboat before the wind. Sometimes God's Spirit blows through us with the force of a tornado, turning everything upside down, sweeping us clean so that we have to start fresh -- like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, picking us up and setting us down in an entirely new place.

But do not ask yourself today, "Do I have God's Spirit within me?" because the answer is always yes.

The English word "Christ" comes from the Greek word, "Christos." It means literally, "anointed." We Christians are anointed by God's Spirit in our Baptism. We do not anoint ourselves. Even Jesus, the son of God, did not anoint himself. It is John the Baptizer who Baptizes him. We are chosen by God. We are anointed to trust in God's promises, and to continue the ministries Jesus inaugurated 2000 years ago.

So do not ask yourself today, "Do I have God's Spirit within me?" because the answer is always yes. Instead, ask yourself, "Am I willing to receive God's power?" "Am I willing to open myself up to the rush of a mighty wind?" "Am I willing to unfurl my sail?" Because faith is more caught than taught.

But there are things that suck the wind out of our sail.

Movement 2

The H word. You know which one I am talking about. We say that we have been through it and back when we encounter a real ordeal. We say our day is like it when we have a bad day. Whenever we experience the down side of life, we invoke that word. The words Sheol and Pit are like that. Peter quotes Psalm 16. When it refers to Sheol and the Pit, Psalm 16 seems to refer to other kinds of isolation besides physical death. Sheol and the Pit traditionally mean more than just somewhere the unrepentant go upon death. Traditionally they symbolize anything that hinders the abundant life. Scholars say the word death in the Psalm also is a metaphor for every threat that diminishes our capacity for full humanness. Because all forms of death cause our hearts to fear.

Harry Emerson Fosdick writes: "Fear imprisons, faith liberates; fear paralyzes, faith empowers; fear disheartens, faith encourages; fear sickens, faith heals; fear makes useless, faith makes serviceable -- and, most of all, fear puts hopelessness at the heart of life, while faith rejoices in its God."

Everybody dies. Except for Jesus. No, even Jesus dies. Look at today's reading, from the Pentecost sermon of Peter in Acts 2: "This Jesus ... you crucified and killed."

People don't like to hear me say this, but to me it's part of the joy of salvation: Jesus really died. Like everybody else. He didn't just pretend to die. He didn't somehow go into a coma and wake up later to escape the tomb. There was no switch in that tomb he could pull to turn himself on again. He was dead.

But some folks stop here. But some folks stop at the crucifixion. They emphasize the crucifixion and do not say much about the resurrection other than give it passing lip service. But you and I are not a crucifixion people. Yes, we have to travel through the crucifixion to get here, but we are a resurrection people. Not a crucifixion people. A resurrection people.

Peter refers to Psalm 16. The Psalm writer gives thanks not just that he has been spared from the "Pit," but also that he has been shown "the path of life." The Psalm writer refers here to other kinds of redemption besides resuscitation. The promise of God's presence that overcomes intimidation and paralysis. God's power for life that overrides every threat to our humanness. Overrides hunger, poverty, and homelessness, yes. But also overrides despair, greed, and anxiety. Overrides brokenness, isolation, and fear. So when Peter refers to this Psalm, it suggests that for Peter the resurrection was rich in meaning, and like the Psalm, the resurrection means more than just resuscitation of the dead.

We say Jesus rose again on the third day. But we have the voice of the verb wrong. God did it. Not Jesus. He was raised. Peter says it right in this sermon at Pentecost. Verse 24 says, God raised him up. And if you didn't hear it right the first time, he says it again in verse 32, "This Jesus God raised up, and of that we are witnesses." The joy is that God raises Jesus for us to see.

He begins by assuming they all know Jesus and what signs and wonders he did. He further appeals to their knowledge of God's plan and the prophecy of David. He quotes Psalm 16. But he lands squarely on the problem of death. Jesus was crucified and killed at the hands of men outside the law. David both died and was buried, Peter says, we know with some confidence, because everybody dies.

But his point is: Jesus was delivered to those outside the law, and God raised him up.

The creativity of Easter morning shows us that there is no brokenness from which we cannot be healed, and no fear from which we cannot be freed. And no isolation that cannot be reconciled. Just as Jesus was freed from the pangs of death. From the ropes of death. So we are freed from brokenness into wholeness. Freed from fear into confidence and generosity. Reconciled from isolation into relationship with God and each other. Death is the ultimate isolation. But Jesus' resurrection by God shows us there is no isolation that cannot be reconciled back to relationship. God's resurrection of Jesus from the grave frees us from brokenness, isolation, and fear.

Our life experiences include brokenness, isolation, and fear. But Jesus brings us his life experiences, to add to ours.

Movement 3

The Easter event is so huge that it has lasted twenty centuries. And we cannot celebrate its greatness in only one Sunday. Easter is seven Sundays: a week of Sundays.

Easter is a celebration of the vulnerability of God who becomes open to the needs of the sinful, and of the power of God in meeting those needs. God's vulnerability is recognized

in Jesus being placed within the reach of those outside the law. And God's power is evident in the resurrection. God feels our pain. God's vulnerability correlates with our own weakness and mortality, and God's strength is our salvation. Without vulnerability, God is distant and unreachable. And without power, God is irrelevant. But through God's vulnerability and power, our weakness is made strength. Because of the creativity of Easter, all of life is transformed.

Our experiences shape us. We hope the good memories, the healing and building memories, outweigh the bitter, scarring ones. But there's no guarantee; the flaws are scratched into you forever.

Then comes Jesus. His invitation is to expand our memories to include his experiences, to expand our life stories to include his life. "Jesus never asks to share our lives. He invites us to share his." Jesus is the archetype of our lives Paul promised the Corinthians when speaking of the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:20 ff) The story of Jesus becomes the heart of the story of each of his followers. Paul writes the Colossians: "As you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so live in him. . . In him you were also circumcized. . . and you were buried with him in baptism. . . also raised with him through faith. . . (and) made alive together with him." (Colossians 2:6-13)

You know what it means to "live in another." We do it when we watch a movie and identify with the hero. We do it when we go to a ball game and root for "our team" as if somehow we possessed them. We have a sense of vicarious experience - that these people on the screen or on the field are living on our behalf and their fate is ours. It's the same with adopting Jesus' experiences as our story, except for this - Jesus isn't pretending and neither are we. His agonies we've all shared to some degree; his triumph will be ours, too, and is already.

The atonement - the at-one-ment with God -- means Jesus lived, died, and rose again on our behalf, not simply as a substitute to spare us the ordeal, but as a representative to teach us what living, sacrificing, and triumphing really mean.

And this is why we share the Lord's Supper. In the bread and cup, Jesus enters us. He gave himself for us not only on the cross; he gives himself to us each time we commune. In communion we are "in common" with him. Our identities blend.

Our lives are not destined for disappointment because of the frustrations, failures, and sins which haunt us daily. We are more than our personal histories. Jesus' history is ours, too. His life teaches us how to live. His victory of Easter offers hope that we, too, will find eternal life beyond the grave. Your life is not the sum of your story - his story has to be added.

There is a church in rural Virginia that is so small it cannot afford a pastor. So they have a different preacher every Sunday. There is a small brass plaque in that pulpit. It says, "We want to know Jesus."

We would know Jesus. Since Peter, on that Pentecost, first talked in the crowded street of Jerusalem, this has been why we preach and why we listen - to know Jesus better and to trust him more.

This morning I stand before you, not to entertain or impress but simply, like Peter, to share my faith and to repeat the story of Jesus, "a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs . . . killed by the hands of men outside the law . . . this Jesus God raised up." I'm here to preach your life. For the heart of faith is for you to say yes to this as your story, too. In it you can find yourself. Its memories can shape your values; its triumphs can give hope to your future. Jesus has lived this story in our place, so we need not live it but only learn it as our own.

Conclusion

A man stood in front of the window of an art store in which a picture of the crucifixion of our Lord was on display. He was gazing intently at the display; the bleeding, dying, suffering form of the man on the middle cross had captured all his thoughts, and he was barely conscious of another person who stood beside him. Finally, turning around, he noticed a little boy with his eyes, too, fixed upon the scene. He was just a ragged little mite of humanity, standing there in torn clothes. The man thought he would see if the boy knew what the picture was about, so he said, "Son, do you know who that is?" The child was quick to reply, "Yes, sir," pointing to the man on the middle cross, "That's our Savior." He was so surprised that that the man seemed not to know about him, and with a bit of pity in his voice, the boy eagerly told him the story of Jesus. "So," he continued, "them's the soldiers," pointing to the Romans who had nailed Christ to the cross. Then, pointing to a woman near the edge of the crowd, he said, "That's his mother, see. The woman who is crying." He pushed his hands deep into his pockets, as if waiting to see if the man wanted another answer about the scene. After a long silence, the boy said, "Yes, sir, that's Jesus, and they killed him." "Where did you learn all this?" the man asked. "At Sunday school, sir," the boy replied. The man, with mingled feelings, turned once again to the crucifixion scene in the window and after a moment slowly walked away. The little street urchin was left looking at the picture alone. The man had not walked more than two blocks when he heard the sound of small feet beating exultantly on the sidewalk and a childish voice crying, "Mister! say, Mister!" Turning around, the man saw the same little lad running toward him. He was nearly out of breath, but when he reached him, he cried out triumphantly and joyously, "I forgot to tell you, HE ROSE AGAIN! Yes, Mister, HE ROSE AGAIN! That's the most important part!"