We are called to be witnesses – to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in the Name of Jesus

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It was the first day of week; in the morning the women had gone to the tomb and found it empty. They told the eleven disciples what they had found. Luke tells us that the apostles thought the women’s report sounded like an “idle tale,” so Peter ran to the tomb to check it out for himself. When he got to tomb he stooped down and looked in; the tomb was empty, the only thing in it was the linen cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus’ body. That same day, in the evening, Jesus suddenly stood among the eleven disciples. He said: “Peace to you!... Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.”

During the evening Jesus had a bite to eat – “a piece of broiled fish.” Then He continued to teach His friends, His disciples, about their mission in the world. He explained that “everything written about [Him] in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms” had to be fulfilled and “that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead.” Then He gave them their marching orders: He said to these eleven men, “repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in [my] name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” Jesus said, “You are witnesses of these things.” In a very real sense this was the beginning of the Church of Jesus Christ. And members of His Church today, you and I, are also called to be witnesses to the people around us. In our Parish Mission we affirm our call to “lead others into a saving relationship with [Jesus] through Biblical teaching and fellowship.”

One hundred years ago the Titanic was making its first voyage from England to America. John Harper was on board; he was coming to America to become the senior pastor of The Moody Church in Chicago. As I’m sure you’re aware, the
Titanic was considered an unsinkable ship, but as it neared Newfoundland it struck an iceberg. The “unsinkable ship” sank with the loss of 1,595 passengers and crew members, including John Harper. Sometime after the sinking of the Titanic a young Scotsman stood up in a church in Hamilton, Ontario and gave the following testimony.

“I was on the Titanic when she sank. As I was drifting alone on a piece of wood in the icy water on that awful night, a wave brought John Harper of Glasgow near to me. He shouted, ‘Man, are you saved?’ ‘No, I am not,’ I replied. He answered, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.’ Then the waves carried him away; but, strange to say, a little later he was washed back alongside me. ‘Are you saved now?’, he asked. ‘No,’ I replied, ‘I cannot honestly say that I am.’ Once more he repeated the verse, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.’ Then losing his grip, he sank under the water. And there, alone in the night, with two miles of water under me, I believed in the Lord Jesus. I am John Harper’s last convert.”

Inviting someone to join your small group or offering to bring a friend or a neighbor to church on Sunday morning may not sound nearly as dramatic as what John Harper did for that young Scotsman in the icy waters of the North Atlantic, but it could have the same impact on another person’s life.

The reading from Luke’s Gospel this morning is one of several post-resurrection appearances reported in the Gospels. As I said earlier it appears to have taken place during the evening of Easter – perhaps in a hiding place the disciples had found in Jerusalem. Jesus had appeared to two men on the road to Emmaus (a village about seven miles from Jerusalem) and after He left them they rushed back to Jerusalem to tell the eleven disciples everything that had happened. “As they were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them…” He said to them, “‘Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not
have flesh and bones as you see that I have.’” As they were marveling at all that was happening, Jesus said He was hungry. The disciples “gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate before them.” Luke provides all these details to emphasize the physical reality of Jesus’ resurrection body. It was not a “spirit” who appeared to the disciples, it was the Lord and Teacher whom they knew.

Before Jesus left that evening He charged them to proclaim “repentance and forgiveness of sins…in His name to all nations, beginning [from where they were, in] Jerusalem.” They were to spread the word! At the end of Mark’s Gospel Jesus says, “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.” He says in Matthew’s Gospel, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” [28:18-20 ESV]

Despite the dangers and risk of persecution, the early Church quickly moved ahead in obedience to Jesus’ marching orders. During the Easter season we’re reading several passages from The Acts of the Apostles that describe how first century Christians set out to “make disciples of all nations.” Empowered by the Holy Spirit Peter and John began teaching in Jerusalem. The fourth chapter of Acts begins with the healing of a beggar at the gate called Beautiful in the Temple in Jerusalem. Peter and John healed him in the Name of Jesus and they continued to teach, on Solomon’s Portico in the Temple, about Jesus and His resurrection. The priests and the Sadducees weren’t pleased; Peter and John were arrested and put in prison. Despite this Luke tells us that about 5,000 men came to faith and that’s where our reading begins this morning.

Peter and John are brought before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high court – made up 70 elders (Sadducees, Pharisees and priests) with the chief priest as the
presiding officer. It must have been an intimidating group to stand before, but Peter, empowered by the Holy Spirit, witnessed to them with boldness. “Rulers of the people and elders, if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead – by him this man is standing before you well. This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”” [Acts 4:8-12 ESV]

Peter’s statement that there is salvation in no other name was an invitation to the members of the Sanhedrin to place their faith in Jesus. Talk about boldness! Jesus’ name brought healing to the crippled beggar and that same powerful name brings eternal salvation to everyone who believes. Peter must have remembered Jesus’ words to the disciples on Easter night: “repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.”

As believers in Franklin or wherever we live and work, we also are called as witnesses to this amazing truth and power. The constitution of the Anglican Church in North America states that The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, written in 1571, reflect the “fundamental principles of authentic Anglican belief.” Article XVIII states: “For holy Scripture doth set out unto us only the Name of Jesus Christ, whereby men must be saved.” – that was the witness of the early Church, it was the witness at the time of the English Reformation and it needs to our witness today.

The reading from First John is another example of the apostles’ witness. Remember that it was Peter and John who stood before the Sanhedrin and proclaimed the Name of Jesus. Late in the first century, John wrote to the churches in Asia Minor (present-day Turkey). He wrote as an eyewitness – if you look at
first four verses of chapter 1 there are a dozen or so first-person, plural pronouns ("we," "our" and "us") that highlight the eyewitness testimony of John and other early Christians. John wrote to emphasize the core teaching of the Christian faith, but equally important to invite people into the "fellowship" of the Church – fellowship "with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ" and with other believers. Article XIX states, “The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ’s ordinance…”

John also picked up on Jesus’ call to be a witness. He wrote: “…if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

“My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation… [Jesus is the perfect sacrifice that turns God’s wrath for sin into favor on our behalf]…He is our propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.”

It’s sobering to remember that these early witnesses spoke the Name of Jesus at great risk; John was the only apostle who died a natural death. Although the historic record is incomplete, tradition says that Peter was crucified head down; James, the brother of John, was beheaded by Herod Agrippa; Philip, Andrew and Matthias were crucified; Matthew, Simon the Zealot and Thaddaeus died as martyrs; Bartholomew was skinned alive and crucified; James, the son of Alpheus, was thrown down from the temple and stoned to death; and Thomas was killed by a spear as he witnessed in India. These men were willing to give up their lives to tell the world about Jesus and that “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no
other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” And even today, in the 21st century, there are believers around the world who are willing to suffer and die for the Gospel.

Although you may experience rejection or embarrassment when you share your faith that’s no reason to be disobedient to our marching orders from the One who is “our advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous;” the One who died on the cross for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.” You and I are called to continue to pursue the mission that Jesus gave to His church. We’re to be His witnesses and to proclaim “repentance and forgiveness of sins” in His name. As Anglican Christians we’re called to work with other believers to reach “North America with the transforming love of Jesus Christ.” And just as the disciples were to begin in Jerusalem, we’re to begin where God has placed us.

In a cartoon a crusader is riding a horse and carrying a big shield with a cross on it. He is thrusting a spear down on the throat of this guy on the ground who’s saying, “Tell me more this Christianity. I’m terribly interested.” I don’t think so! So how do you do it? Thomas Aquinas once said that if you want to convert a person to your view, you go over to where he is standing, take him by the hand, and guide him. You don’t stand across the room and shout at him. You don’t order him to come over where you are. You start where he is and work from that position; that’s the only way to get people to budge. So I urge you to ask, in prayer, for the Holy Spirit to guide you as to how you are to be a witness to the people around you, wherever you are.

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O God, whose blessed Son made himself known to his disciples in the breaking of bread: Open the eyes of our faith, that we may behold him in all his redeeming work; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Father Jack Potter+