

**Testimony**  
**Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; 1 John 5:9-13**  
**May 24, 2009**  
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This is the last of the seven Sundays of Easter. Next week we will celebrate God's empowering gift of the Holy Spirit given to the church when we celebrate Pentecost with the Kwanza African congregation. By this last Sunday of Easter, the Risen Christ has appeared many times to the disciples and here in Acts 1 he has ascended into heaven right before their eyes and up-turned heads. Jesus' departure—ascension—leaves one very big question facing those first disciples for the rest of this chapter, for the rest of their lives (and our lives, too, for that matter). The question is: Now what? Christ has gone to the heights of heaven. Meanwhile, back on earth, our feet are still firmly weighted to dust and rocks. So, now what do we do?

The famous 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian, Karl Barth, to whom we Presbyterians are indebted, once called this time between Ascension and Pentecost a “significant pause” between the mighty acts of God, a pause, Barth said, in which the church's task is to wait and to pray.<sup>1</sup> We are in a “significant pause” of our own, living as we do in this time between Jesus' Ascension and his coming again. Certainly, the church's task in this ‘significant pause’ is still to wait and to pray.’ But just as those first disciples couldn't stand around forever looking up at the clouds, neither can we. Waiting and praying are vital, but pretty soon that crick in your neck makes you want to start moving around and well, *doing* something. The first thing that early Christian community did was to get organized. They got their “act” together, so to speak, in first chapter of the Book of Acts. And in a sense, the church has been trying to get its act together ever since!

The first thing the Eleven decide they need to do is get back to being the Twelve. After Judas' betrayal and death, they decide to elect someone to take his place. Peter says that the replacement disciple should be someone who was with Jesus from his baptism to his recent ascension. And then Peter adds, “one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.”

There are two candidates: Joseph and Matthias. We've never heard of either of them before now. And, get this, after one of them is elected here in Chapter 1, we never hear of either of them again.

Now, I'm not sure if there is any intended significance to that. But it got me to thinking how true and common that is. Joseph and Matthias, like so many, many faithful Christians followers—even leaders—after them, served well, but never got a building named after them, or a Sunday School classroom for that matter, or even a hymnal dedicated to their memory. Sure, everybody remembers Peter, James and John and Andrew, even Judas and Thomas garnered at least negative attention...but really, who remembers Thaddeus...or James, son of Alphaeus? I bet you can't name one good work they did or remember even one of their sermons!

Still, one of the two, Matthias, was elected to become a witness, with them, to the resurrection. They cast lots to see which one would be chosen. While not much is known about that practice of casting lots, from the description I read, it doesn't sound much like our careful Presbyterian process for electing elders! According to one biblical scholar, each person's name was written on a piece of parchment or a piece of wood or pottery, placed in a bowl, and then the bowl was shaken until one of the names "fell into the lap."<sup>ii</sup> I wonder if that is where that expression comes from? "Well, Matthias, how did you come to be one of the Twelve?" "I don't know, really...it just fell into my lap." Except, of course, they believed God caused Matthias' name to fall out rather than Joseph's name. And in that, we agree...for we, too, believe God calls particular people into particular leadership in the church, whether as a pastor or an elder or deacon. It is not random chance, but divine intention and leading.

What has captured me this week in my study and prayer is that phrase in vs. 22: "...one of these must become with us a witness to his resurrection." It was one of the first things the newly-forming church knew they would need to do...bear witness to Christ's resurrection. In their world fraught with sickness and death, with political upheaval and social inequalities, with vulnerabilities and dead-ends...what the young church needed were people who could be witnesses to resurrection. The world hasn't changed all that much really. The evidence of death and dead-ends remains pretty overwhelming. So the church's task is still the same. What is needed is people of faith who will be witnesses to the new life Christ brings through his own eternal life.

We're summoned, in other words, to give a counter-testimony to the relentless testimony of sickness' stronghold on body, mind and spirit. We're summoned to give counter-testimony to the relentless testimony that death has won the final triumph. We're summoned to give our counter-testimony to the relentless testimony of the inevitability of political oppression and social injustice, of vulnerabilities exploited at every opportunity and dead-ends at every turn.

And what is our counter-testimony? It is the very testimony of God that is alive in us. Our testimony to a world defined by death and dead-ends is that God has given us instead eternal life...and this life is in us is even now because God's Son has been raised from the dead and lives in us. So death does not have the final word. You and I, we're really needed as witnesses to his resurrection because, let's face it, there is so much evidence to the contrary. You get a sense of the urgency, the necessity of our witness in our reading from 1 John, where the word "testimony" is used seven times in five verses!

Does it make you nervous to think that you have been called to be a witness to resurrection? That you are called, as a member of the church, to give testimony to the faith that is in you? You're Presbyterian...of course it makes you nervous! We Presbyterians hardly ever use the "E" word (*evangelism!*). Witnessing, testifying conjures up images in us of crusades in a stadium or a wild-eyed, finger-pointing street preacher. It's like that old Peanuts comic strip where Sally, I think, tells Linus she has convinced another boy that her religion is better than his. "How did you do that?" Linus asks. "I hit him over the head with my lunch box," she replies.

In this day of multi-faith sensitivities and no-faith-at-all proclivities, it is easier, safer, just not to bring up religion at all. As someone from New York once observed, "At fashionable dinner parties, you can talk about anything. You can talk about politics, you can talk about sex, you can talk about money, you can talk about anything you want. But if you mention God more than once, you probably won't be invited back."<sup>iii</sup>

In a book about Testimony, Tom Long notes that we talk about God easily inside the church, but outside of it—not so much. We think we have to have our belief-system all figured out first...but that is not true...and frankly not even possible since our faith is always bigger than our minds can comprehend and our vocabulary can express.

Still, we don't want to sound like the Church Lady in "Church Chat!" Tom, though, contrasts the aggressive "in-your-face Christianity" God-talk with a more humble, vulnerable ability to engage in God-talk he calls "cross-bearing Christianity."

Cross-bearing talk is not all talk, but is an authentic and true conversation that involves listening to another person; making room for questions and pain and hope to be shared. Being able to talk about our faith, Tom says, is something we learn in worship, week after week, year after year. Worship is the "language school" of faith.<sup>iv</sup> For here we are able to tell the truth about ourselves: where we have messed up in our lives and in our life together; here forgiveness is spoken and grace is given to begin again. Here words of life are read and proclaimed, our needs for healing and the world's injustices are named. Here we are charged and blessed to be peacemakers and participants in God's new realm.

But giving our testimony doesn't mean we go around using worship words all the time! Speaking piously or even liturgically at others. It means speaking authentically, truthfully, about our own experience of our life with God. It is not always easy to speak this way. In his book, Tom tells about a seminary student, just learning how to preach, who was invited to speak at a service at a local nursing home. People assembled in the room, some using walkers and wheelchairs. As they sang hymns and had prayers, some residents blurted out extemporaneous comments. When it was time for the sermon, the room grew quiet. The student had said only a few sentences when an older woman on a motorized scooter whirled around and headed back to her room, shouting as she left, "Blah, blah, blah!"<sup>v</sup> That's how we feel sometimes about ourselves—even we preachers—when we try to speak authentically about our faith! "Blah, blah, blah." But at its best, "Christian testimony happen when we tell the truth the best we can, tell the truth in such a way that other people come more fully alive, tell the truth so that we and the people we talk to grow in the love of God and neighbor."<sup>vi</sup>

That kind of truth-telling and authentic conversation can happen if there is hospitable space for it within you. If you will make that kind of hospitable place within your own congregation here at Emory. If there is that kind of openness and safety and welcome, testimony happens. Some years ago now, a Lutheran Church in a poor neighborhood in the Bronx held a service during Holy Week re-enacting the whole sweep of events from Palm Sunday to Easter.

As they came to Jesus' trial, beating, and crucifixion, the actors played their roles authentically and well. Then it was Easter morning and the women came to the empty tomb, and returned to tell the disciples the astounding news, "He is risen!" The actors continued playing their parts well, expressing disbelief...these women were only telling them "an idle tale."

But then the script called for three members of the congregation to stand up and give testimony, to bear witness to the resurrection. "I *know* that he is alive," each one was to begin. First was Angie. "I know that he is alive," she said, because he lives in me." Angie then told of her struggles with despair and addiction to alcohol...and now her struggle with HIV/AIDS. But Angie said she found her way into church, started attending worship and a Bible study, making friends...and little by little, she said, she rose from the grave of her life. "I am now alive because Jesus Christ lives in me and through me," Angie said, her face aglow. Two others then stood saying, "I know that he is alive," and gave their testimony, too. That part of the play was over and it was time to move on. But testimony would not stop.

People all around the sanctuary rose up spontaneously. One after another, they stood and said, "I know that he is alive, because he lives in me." One after another came the corroborating testimony, came these witnesses to the resurrection. They wanted, they longed, to tell the truth about what they had seen and heard...<sup>vii</sup>

When the early church was just starting out with 120 members, they knew they would need to bear witness to the resurrection, to share the good news and the new life they had received from Jesus Christ, if others were ever to come into fullness of life. If there were ever to be a church in the world at all. You have said that you want to be a congregation of 200 by 2012. It seems to me that a good place to begin toward that goal would be for each of you to think of how you would complete this sentence: "I know that he is alive because..." And then dare, venture to say out loud how Christ is alive in you. How Christ is alive right here, in this church.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> William H. Willimon, **Acts: Interpretation Commentary Series** (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 20.

<sup>ii</sup> Paul W. Walaskay, **Acts: Westminster Bible Companion** (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 31.

<sup>iii</sup> Thomas G. Long, **Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian** (Jossey-Bass, 2004), 3.

<sup>iv</sup> Long, 32.

<sup>v</sup> Long, 51.

<sup>vi</sup> Long, 116.

<sup>vii</sup> As recounted by Long, p.31. See Heidi B. Neumark, **Breathing space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx** (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003).