

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL
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Worship Series: Victorious

Service Theme: Witness Marches Victorious Over Restraint

Sermon Theme: Eyewitness= I Must Witness (April 24, 2022)
Acts 5:12, 17-32

We love good news, don't we? A new baby, a new promotion, a lifelong goal fulfilled, and our kids' athletic or academic achievements. Or the not quite so monumental—a great recipe you discovered, or your three-year-old using the big boy potty. When we have good news, we grab our phone or laptop to call, text, or FaceTime our loved ones, and Tweet or post pictures to social media. Because when we have good news, we're eager to share it with others!

So why aren't we so eager to share the BEST news? The best news that all people have forgiveness and eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ who lived, died, rose, and reigns eternally! If I'm honest, even as a pastor, I'm often far more eager to share the good news of a great restaurant or craft brewery with non-Christians than I am to share the best news about the Bread of Life and Living Water. And I'd guess that's true about you too.

Why is that? It's all about how the message will be received by others. It's easy to excitedly share the good news of new babies, accomplished goals, or potty-training success because we know people will celebrate with us. But we know not everyone will celebrate the best news of Jesus our Savior. As Jesus himself warned, ***“All men will hate you because of me.”***

Therefore, as Christians who Jesus has commanded to ***“Go and make disciples of all nations,”*** what we need is to be motivated and emboldened to share the best news of Jesus, no matter how people will receive it! But that's easier said than done, right?

Just look at Jesus' disciples on Easter Sunday evening. They weren't out on the streets, preaching and teaching about Jesus like they'd been

preaching and teaching alongside Jesus for years. Instead, ***“the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews.”*** And who could blame them? 48 hours earlier, they'd seen how people received Jesus' message that he was the Messiah, as they crucified him. And so the disciples locked themselves and their message away, terrified of suffering the same fate as Jesus.

Maybe that's how you live too. You keep your faith in Jesus locked away behind closed doors, afraid of how people would react if you lived with your faith on display. Or maybe you don't try to hide your faith, but you view your faith as something personal between you and God, so you'd never dream of looking for opportunities to witness to your faith in conversation with a non-Christian, because you wouldn't want to offend or upset anyone.

You might not be worried about being killed for your faith like Jesus' disciples, or many Christians around the world today are. But maybe you're afraid of being mocked, excluded, or ignored for your faith. Not afraid of being crucified for Jesus, but you lock away your witness for fear of being ostracized for Jesus; afraid of how your faith might affect your relationships or aspirations. And let's be real. Witnessing to our faith isn't easy, especially as animosity towards Christianity grows in America.

But isn't it interesting to compare the disciples on Easter Sunday evening with those same men in Acts 5, probably just months later? Before, they'd locked themselves and their message away, afraid of what others might do to them. Now, they were boldly and confidently witnessing the message of Christ to others—even after they'd been arrested and locked away for it!

What caused this transformation in them? It wasn't that their society had suddenly changed. Jesus' enemies still opposed his message, hated his followers, and threatened their lives and safety. Jesus' followers were still the small minority opposed by the vast majority. And it wasn't that the disciples themselves had suddenly changed. They were still the same flawed, fearful sinners that they'd been before. Nothing had really changed, except for one thing.

While they'd been locked away in terror, ***“Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” After he said this, he showed them his hands and side.”*** The disciples became bold and confident witnesses after they became eyewitnesses that Jesus really had risen from the dead!

And because the disciples saw that Jesus was alive, it completely changed the way they thought about witnessing for him. It's a pretty tough sell to risk your life to proclaim a guy who was captured and killed by his enemies, and whose still dead in a tomb as the Son of God and Savior of the world! But it's a whole different thing to proclaim that Jesus, who had been captured and killed by his enemies, and who had been dead in a tomb, was in fact alive again! As Peter told the Sanhedrin, ***“The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. We are witnesses of these things.”***

Jesus' resurrection was proof that he really had defeated sin, death, and hell; proof that the message he'd proclaimed was really true; proof that he really was the Son of God and Savior of the world!

And that truth made them willing to witness for Christ, no matter how people would receive it! Because they knew it was that important. As Peter told the Sanhedrin, who had thrown them in jail and threatened them with worse if they didn't stop witnessing for Christ, ***“We must obey God rather than men.”*** After showing himself as true God by his resurrection, Jesus told the disciples, ***“As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”*** And so they obeyed God, rather than men and witnessed.

As eyewitnesses of the resurrected Jesus, they knew they weren't preaching the opinions or preferences of men, but the very words and truth of God himself! As eyewitnesses, the disciples mindset became, “I must witness!” Even if it meant facing persecution, or sacrificing their lives!

Which is extremely compelling evidence that Jesus really did rise from the dead, and that the disciples were eyewitnesses of it. Do you really think if Jesus' resurrection was fiction that these terrified men would almost overnight become bold witnesses, willing to die even the most grizzly, gruesome deaths, when all they'd have to do to save their own skin was just admit they'd made it all up? But they didn't! 10 out of the 11 disciples who locked themselves away in that room, were eventually willingly martyred, rather than deny their faith in the risen Christ. And John, the one who wasn't, lived out his days in exile. Again, how could these terrified men become bold witnesses, unless they had seen with their own eyes that Jesus, the one they preached as Son of God and Savior of the world, really had risen from the dead?

And the same is true for us today! Satan throws all kinds of restraints in the way of our Gospel witness, because he knows the power the message of Jesus has on people's earthly and eternal lives. But whether we face persecution or opposition, the doubts of others, or even our own personal doubts, we must witness, no matter how people will receive it. Because we're eyewitnesses of the resurrection too!

Maybe you're thinking, “Not so fast, Pastor! Jesus has never appeared to me behind locked doors like those disciples.” That's true. He hasn't to me either. And because we don't see the resurrected Christ with our own eyes, we can't give people visible evidence like Jesus gave to Thomas, or trot Jesus out for an interview like a talk show. So how can we witness to people like Thomas, who demand visible evidence before they'll believe in the resurrection of Jesus, and all its implications?

The fact is, God has given us something better than visible evidence. He's given us his powerful Word! He's given us the God-breathed testimony of the Gospels, recorded by eyewitnesses who gave their lives to ensure everyone knew about Jesus what they'd seen. In the Old Testament, God commanded that ***“truth be established by 2 of 3 witnesses.”*** Scripture tells us that God established the truth of the resurrection by revealing Jesus alive to not just 2 or 3 witnesses, but to over 500 witnesses after his resurrection!

As much as the world wants visible evidence, seeing isn't always believing. How many of Jesus' enemies had seen his powerful miracles, but still refused to believe? Luke's Gospel records that when Jesus first appeared to the disciples on Easter Sunday evening, they thought he was a ghost. It wasn't until he spoke to them, breathed on them and said, ***"Receive the Holy Spirit"*** that they believed he had risen. And God continues to pour out the power of the Holy Spirit through his Word to bring people to faith that Jesus is our risen Savior! So with his Word, and the power of the Spirit, God has equipped us with everything we need to be faithful, bold, confident witnesses. No matter how people receive it!

Being eyewitnesses of Jesus' resurrection helped the disciples stop worrying about what would happen to them if they did witness about Jesus. As the Son of God, they were confident he was in control no matter what. But being eyewitnesses of Jesus' resurrection also helped them take to heart what would happen if they didn't witness to others about Jesus. After God's angel released the Apostles from prison, he told them, ***"Go, stand in the temple courts, and tell the people all about this new life."***

If the Apostles had kept themselves and the gospel of Jesus locked away behind closed doors, then people who desperately needed to hear about the new life that was theirs through Christ would stay locked away in the darkness and the death of unbelief. They wouldn't hear God's truth, or receive the Spirit's power if the disciples retreated from witnessing.

And the same is true of our gospel witness. As enticing as it might be, if we keep our mouths shut and our faith hidden, not only are we disobeying God's command of us, we're also robbing people of the hope that is theirs in the risen Lord.

If you discovered the cure for cancer, you wouldn't even think about keeping it to yourself, would you? Even if people didn't believe, or mocked you for claiming such a thing, you'd still share that news with others, because you know how greatly it would benefit people!

How much more then, when we have the cure not just of an earthly disease, but of eternal death? That reminds me of a fascinating quote by Penn Jillette, the big guy who talks from the magicians, Penn and Teller. Now, understand, Penn Jillette is a very ardent atheist. But here's what he said about Christian witnessing: ***"If you believe that there's a heaven and a hell, and people could be going to hell or not getting eternal life, and you think that it's not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward—how much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize? How much do you have to hate somebody to believe everlasting life is possible and not tell them that? I mean, if I believed, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that a truck was coming at you, and you didn't believe that truck was bearing down on you, there is a certain point where I tackle you. And this is more important than that."***

Man, that convicts me. If you don't witness because it might affect your relationship, or to avoid being mocked, or because you don't want to hurt someone's feelings, that's not loving. That's entirely selfish if we only look out for our own desires, but don't care about that person's eternal soul! That convicts me.

But friends, did you notice the first thing Jesus said to his disciples on Easter Sunday evening? Not, "Come on guys! Why are you locked away here, you lazy, fearful losers?" No, he said to them, ***"Peace be with you."*** Not just a feeling of peace, but peace where "Everything is how it's supposed to be." They had that peace because the Savior of the world had risen from the dead. They had that peace, because by showing them his hands and side, Jesus reminded them that on that cross, he had paid for their sins. Even their failures to witness.

If you're feeling guilty and ashamed for not witnessing to your faith in Christ to others, Jesus comes to you today and assures you, "Peace be with you." See his hands and his side, the proof of your forgiveness. And motivated by God's perfect love shown to you, let's go out and show Jesus' hands and side to others, proclaiming the truth that Jesus made possible for all people—peace be with you. We must witness to that truth. Because it's the best news we've ever heard.