

“In the Name of the Risen Christ”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
April 7, 2013

Acts: 5: 27-32

It hurts to lose. For any of us who are sports fans, we know this feeling well. When our team loses, we feel heart-broken, angry, upset. When we are part of a team, losing feels worse. Moral victories are not much consolation to a team who has spent countless hours practicing, working, and sacrificing for one another. Because when a team loses, it feels as if they have failed their fans, their coach, and themselves.

Failure is one of the most penetrating feelings we experience as human beings. It can be in sports, when either we or our favorite team or athlete fails to win. It can be in school, when we do not meet the standards we set, or more importantly, the standards our teachers and peers set. It can be at work, when we drop the ball on an important project, not doing the absolute best work we know we can do.

What I’m getting at here is that failure can be very devastating to us. It can be like depression, where for some people, you never shake it, and are always living in its shadow. It doesn’t help to hear someone say, “It was a moral victory” or “Don’t worry, you’ll get over it.” Failure can fundamentally change a person’s life, and is not something trivial.

When the disciples were holed up on Easter morning, they concluded that evil had won, and God had failed. There was no sign of their Lord. And even when the women came to tell them they had seen Jesus, they didn’t believe them. They failed to believe because failure had changed them.

But, as we know, the final word on that matter was yet to come. Jesus came into their midst, let Thomas touch his hands and side where he had been pierced, and overcame the disciples’ failure to believe. God did win out over evil, and overcame our failure to believe in the impossible. That is the message of Easter which we are called on to live out each day of our life. And it is the message the disciples are preaching in our passage today.

After being imprisoned and then freed by the Holy Spirit, Peter and the apostles are brought once again before the high priest. The high priest is wary. He thought that by crucifying this Jesus of Nazareth that would end all this crazy talk that he was the Messiah. But apparently his followers stole his body from the tomb, and now they all claim he was raised from the dead. He wants them silenced, but is unsure as to how to do it.

In Peter’s response, we hear the challenge of God to us as to how we will live in light of the resurrection. “We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus . . . God 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” (Acts 5:29-32).

We could easily follow the ways of humans, and accept them as the norm. We could live our lives drowned in failure, taking as truth when someone tells us we are no good. We could live in the shadow of Good Friday forever.

Or we can live in the light of Easter. We can say with conviction that nothing will hold back the reign of God in this world. We can witness, without doubt, that God is the one who conquers all doubts and disappointments. We can believe that the story of the cross is one of victory, not defeat; that Easter is about God's goodness triumphing over our human failures.

Marilyn McEntyre writes: *When the disciples stand before the high priests they don't invoke principle. They speak from a lived relationship with God, whom they know with an intimacy and certainty that trumps all other claims to obedience. It's not just a spirit of resistance that drives them, but irrepressible love. The logic of that love is fairly simple: here we stand. We can do no other.*

I am struck not just by their courage in speaking truth to power but by the simplicity and clarity of their response to accusation. With such clarity there is little need for defiance. Their point is not to argue in their own defense but to bear witness to the one they must obey. Must is a key word: what compels them can't be argued away because it is not a matter for argument. Bearing witness is not the same as making a case.

*I am even more struck by the disciples' freedom. The high priests don't have power over them; the disciples live outside their jurisdiction: as they are no longer under the law, the agents of the law cannot bind them. No longer afraid of death, they are free indeed. In a few bold sentences they tell a story that is more invitation than defense, offering great good news to the very people who killed their Beloved. Their freedom reminds me of a survivor of three concentration camps who said, "When you've really faced and accepted your own death, you are free." Hers was a powerful testimony to what it might mean to "be not afraid" (*Christian Century*, April 3, 2013: 20).*

Last week I asked the question: How will we be witnesses to the resurrection through our lives of testimony? The example we read of in the Book of Acts today is a group of Christ's disciples who were not afraid of what might come as a result of their testimony. And it's not because they stood on principles or that "it was the right thing to do." It was because they knew their lives truly depended on the life, death, and resurrection of the one who loved them without condition or excuse. They were not afraid, and their testimony was based on that trust and faith.

We honor the risen Christ when we rise above selfish motives, and seek what is best for the good of the whole. We serve the risen Christ when we stop allowing fear to rule our lives, and allow faith and hope to rule all that we do. We trust in the risen Christ when we believe that we are stronger when we rely on one another, rather than relying only on ourselves. We become the body of Christ when we stand together, with clarity, courage, and conviction, and say unabashedly: "I do this in the name of the risen Lord."

May the faith of the apostles be our model for serving each and every day of our lives in loving gratitude for the risen Lord Jesus.

Thanks be to God. Amen.