

## FROM FEAR TO WITNESS

### STUDY ONE—SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER YEAR A

#### Acts 2.14a, 22-32

<sup>14</sup> But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: ‘Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say.

<sup>22</sup> ‘You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth,\* a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know— <sup>23</sup>this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. <sup>24</sup>But God raised him up, having freed him from death,\* because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. <sup>25</sup>For David says concerning him,

“I saw the Lord always before me,

for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken;

<sup>26</sup> therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; moreover, my flesh will live in hope.

<sup>27</sup> For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience corruption.

<sup>28</sup> You have made known to me the ways of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence.”

<sup>29</sup> ‘Fellow Israelites,\* I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. <sup>30</sup>Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. <sup>31</sup>Foreseeing this, David\* spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah,\* saying,

“He was not abandoned to Hades,

nor did his flesh experience corruption.”

<sup>32</sup>This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses.

With this excerpt from Peter’s speech on the day of Pentecost we begin our journey. We will journey all the way to Pentecost but there is much we need to learn as the disciples did so long ago.

Peter begins his reply to his interlocutors who suggest that the ravings of the apostles have all the authority, and relevance of a drunken tirade and comical pantomime. The speech goes from verse 14 to 36, but we will look at only the portion chosen.

This speech highlights for us three key elements of mission. God has a plan for the world, the resurrection of Christ is critical and the newly founded body of believers are witnesses.

First, this whole story of mission is about God and what God is doing. It makes the point clearly that Jesus is central and critical to mission. God’s story, whatever it is, is the story of Jesus. It is not about some generalised idea of God, some philosophical musing for the entertainment of the enlightened or those wealthy enough to have spare time. It is highly specific; it is located in space and time and a specific human being. God acts in human culture to achieve whatever God’s goals are. They are not clear in this portion.

Second, Peter directs the attention of his readers to Jesus. He speaks of Jesus' humanity and cultural and geo-political location. Whatever the good news is it is humanly and culturally located. It is not generalised musings about morality or religion. It is specific.

This Jesus comes with the authority and attributes of God. He may have no authority in his cultural and political setting but God works through him. He did not think great thought but acted like God acted. We need to remember at this point that Luke wrote both the Gospel and Acts and, as Peter reminded his audience, they knew that. Signs, deeds of power, wonders were not part of an apocalyptic terror campaign to frighten people from hell to heaven, but were signs of what God was planning for the created order; freedom from death and decay, freedom from distorting effects of sin and freedom from slavery to forces greater than our weak and fragile selves.

However, those forces got to work and destroyed him; they crucified him. They were at ease. The power of God's life and love exceeded their imaginations and expectations. This one cannot be held in the power of hatred, greed, love of power and status. Now the light begins to dawn on God's future.

This had always been God's plan. The psalms that Peter quotes (16.811 and 132.11) provide that clue. Jesus is not a new beginning but a new chapter in a long drama. These old texts show how God would never let death win. Psalm 116 is a lament that expresses trust in God's power to deliver from harm. Such trust leads from despair exultation and joy in the Presence of the Living God. In that life and light triumph over corruption, decay and abandonment among the dead.

Third, at the very end Peter addresses his place in this story. He, and all his fellow disciples, are witnesses to this miracle of life over death. We will return to this theme again and again in Acts because it is a fundamental description of a group of believers. In Acts 1.8, which we will discuss later in this series witnessing is world encompassing.

The important note here is that these witnesses are not some smug chosen few, given some secret knowledge. Their knowledge of life is for all.

### *Question*

Praying through this text what is most important element of this story for you?

Have you discovered something new? Note that, and pray it into your life

### **1 Peter 1.1-12**

<sup>1</sup>Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,

To the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, <sup>2</sup>who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood:

May grace and peace be yours in abundance.

<sup>3</sup> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, <sup>4</sup>and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, <sup>5</sup>who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. <sup>6</sup>In this you rejoice, <sup>\*</sup> even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, <sup>7</sup>so that the genuineness of your

faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. <sup>8</sup>Although you have not seen\* him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, <sup>9</sup>for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

<sup>10</sup> Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours made careful search and inquiry, <sup>11</sup>inquiring about the person or time that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated, when it testified in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the subsequent glory. <sup>12</sup>It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in regard to the things that have now been announced to you through those who brought you good news by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things into which angels long to look!

### ***Greetings (verse 1-2)***

We will read and explore selected passages from the First Letter of Peter. It can be described as one of the most beautiful and compelling books in the New Testament. It is rich in its understanding of Christ and his Church, salvation and hope, and living a peaceable and loving life in a hostile world. Our question to the readings will be: How can they help us grapple with God's mission in our world? How can the text help us to listen to the Spirit in our world?

Letters usually began in its simplest form Mary to John, greetings. You can see how Peter expands the simple form in verses 1-2. He begins with his name and then adds an important qualifier. He has a title 'apostle'. It is a title for an authorised agent or representative. It is not a title of status but of function. His only status is to perform the function for which he is sent. In this case he is the agent of Jesus Christ. His authority is derived and dependent on that of Jesus Christ and no-one else. He is the agent to carry out Jesus Christ's mission, no more and no less. It is a very humble designation.

### *Question*

Reflect on Peter's authority. It is a high calling but its chief virtue is humility. How might this be an important insight for us in our mission and spirituality?

Peter then addresses his readers, a multiracial, multicultural, multi-religious group of people with wide gaps in social and socio-economic status. They mostly live north of the Taurus mountains in Turkiye in widely diverse geographical and local political locations. What can possibly hold them together?

Sometimes we are tempted to look at the human and sociological aspects of the church and see only a seriously deficient human organisation. No matter how hard we look we may find little to encourage us. The same applied to our ancient brothers and sisters. Indifference, intellectual, social or political hostility as well as the depressing and the sometime evil character of the institutions' behaviour may discourage us.

On the other hand, Peter discerns something quite different (verse 2). What he discerns is a people who have a vocation to carry out God's purposes in obedience to Jesus who died for them, bringing them home into a loving relationship. The Spirit is the one living resource who transforms their lives into living images of the holy God with whom they are reconciled. They are to be people of grace and peace imitating Jesus.

*Question*

Does Peter's greeting help us to discern the church's calling and its spiritual resources?

***A living hope 1.3-12***

Peter is addressing his brothers and sisters in a time of anxiety and an oppressive sense of insecurity as the Empire flexes its muscles. The letter indicates that the disciples are alarmed. So, Peter counters with a prayer (verses 3-9) that is full of hope. Fear and self-pity have no place in this living faith. Thanksgiving and praise are the key-notes of the disciple. The praise is specific about who deserves such praise; the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The central focus for this beautiful prayer is verse 6; suffering and trouble and the shame and exclusion they bring into our lives. This topic will arise again and again in this little letter. It will be taken very seriously, but not in the way of victimhood, but in joy and blessing.

Now we can understand Peter's recitation of the blessings we have in Jesus Christ as disciples. It begins with new birth into a living hope, not futile wishful thinking but grounded in the sure sign of God's new creation in the resurrection. The corrupting, ravaging and destructive power of death over life and beauty is done. Life and beauty are fadeless.

For the moment we wait for that. We wait in trust, but not with gritted teeth. Our trust is grounded in deep mutual love even though we cannot "see" (note Thomas in John's Gospel below). We do know because we love Jesus Christ and in living that trusting love we find joy, the indescribable but presently experienced taste of the future. The future is the joy of unlimited trustworthiness, beauty and love. That is salvation. (Soul is not some ethereal part of us. It encompasses the whole human being).

Suffering comes to us all; it is inescapable and it will test out our love and trust and joy. As in all relationships that suffering will test our relationship with Christ; our trust in his faithfulness, love and promises. Joy seems a far-off memory, an illusion even.

*Question*

In the present in which we find ourselves what might some resources for hope?

Reflect on your

How can we care for each other in suffering?

What might it look like to live lives of joy and blessing even in bad times, that are not fake? Are there clues in the reading that indicate how that might be possible?

In our present times and circumstances is there something in our story that might help or encourage our friends and neighbours?

***1.10-12 A little reminder***

Peter reminds his readers that this salvation is not a new philosophy or self-help remedy, cooked up in obscure circumstances; there were plenty of those in their world just as in ours. It is grounded God's long, turbulent history with his ancient people, Israel. They lived their journey of trust, love, suffering and disobedience and despair in the Spirit, always looking for the day of Christ's great suffering and also great glory. Their labour in faith and

trust is their gift to us and also their challenge in our circumstances. After all, they faced joy and sorrow, at home and facing exile, despair at loss, humiliation and liberation. They trudged their journey to serve us.

The other reminder is that other creatures, angels, long to see the wonder of this glory. It blows their minds and imaginations that God would do such a thing as to subject himself to human violence, risk death, then overcome it all for the sake of the human creatures and the world they live in.

I understand that some readers may find Peter's aside about salvation puzzling. We cannot let the experiences of ancient Israel fade into forgetfulness no matter how strange it seems to us. They still interrogate us in uncomfortable ways as well as give us hope and comfort. To ignore them is to disdain and dishonour their pain and faithfulness and eventually we starve ourselves to death.

And as for angels, whatever the cosmic created is or contains it is in awe of God's great design for us and our world. No matter how small we are we are not insignificant as some may claim or we may feel.

### *Question*

In our journey from fear to witness where has Peter led you? Whatever that place is stay with it for a time.

### **John 20.19-31**

<sup>19</sup> When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' <sup>20</sup> After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' <sup>22</sup> When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup> If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

<sup>24</sup> But Thomas (who was called the Twin\*), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup> So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

<sup>26</sup> A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' <sup>27</sup> Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' <sup>28</sup> Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' <sup>29</sup> Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

<sup>30</sup> Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. <sup>31</sup> But these are written so that you may come to believe\* that Jesus is the Messiah,\* the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

On Easter day we celebrated that first morning, the new day dawning, the possibilities of a new creation bursting forth on an unsuspecting world. Here is the centre of the Christian faith, not Christmas. Who would celebrate Christmas if there was no resurrection?

Today we arrive at the evening of that day, the first day. Mary Magdalene has already come to the disciples on the explicit command of Jesus with an explicit message. He has come through death and his enthronement (ascension) is imminent. The power of death to overcome life is demolished.

Mary Magdalene becomes the first one to announce that good news, herself a stunning sign that a new order is on the way. Good news can be announced by anyone Jesus calls to do so, by any disciple and it does not matter where they fit on any social scale devised by others. The only requirement is her confession of her personal experience, "I have seen the Lord."

By the evening the message is wrapped in fear and locked doors. The political powers that put Jesus to death are still there and that makes them very afraid. For those behind the locked door the world order has not changed. The powers of banishment and death still govern their lives.

Then the risen Lord appears. Although 'Peace be with you' is a common greeting it is now shot through with explosive meaning. The new world order has begun. It is the same crucified One who now comes bearing the peace that God brings, which transforms fear into joy. The death dealing power has found its match and has done so in this very person, Jesus the Word made flesh.

Long ago the ancient story in Genesis recounts God breathed into the newly created humans and life burst forth. Now, it is happening again. Just as our ancient parents were given life to share it, enhance it, and make it be fruitful, so now.

The change happens in the story. Fear changes to rejoicing. Rejoicing is the outward sign of bursting with new life. The old is banished, the new has come. Of course, the old lurks in fear creating power and will forever stalk the disciples but joy, the fruit of the Spirit, will be their mark.

Just as in the old creation the Spirit is the force and driver of creation, so now. The new creation has its agents in the disciples who confess the risen Lord. Their creative power arises from the life of the Spirit of creation and their image is that of the crucified and risen Jesus; "As the Father has sent me so I send you." The disciples will be as the Word made flesh, the image of God's love to the world.

That may strike terror or despair in some hearts. It is such a high honour and thus a responsibility beyond our capacities. Read John 7.37-39 and see if you can find encouragement. The Holy Spirit turns the believer's trust in the Living Water into rivers of living water that flows to the world.

It flows to the world in the message of forgiveness. Forgiveness lies at the heart of all reconciliation. There is always a cost to forgiveness. If I lend all my savings in good faith to a friend in an immediate need who promises to return those savings and that borrower then cannot or will not repay it, I will be left destitute. I have been severely hurt and disadvantaged by the borrower's action so much so I am destitute. I have several choices open to me; I can go to court and seek redress so I don't need to consider forgiveness, I

could simply write it off as though nothing had happened, but that would be colluding in a wrong rather than forgiveness and it would not restore the friendship. I choose to forgive them their debt as the Lord's Prayer says, "...forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." Where is the cost in this? I think it must be with me. It is the pain of destitution I will bear to have reconciliation and friendship again. In forgiveness I have given up my right to demand satisfaction or retributive punishment.

Of course, the other side to this is that the offending party must want the forgiveness offered. What happens if they refuse the offer? Even though the offer stands the debt remains and reconciliation remains unfinished business. The pain and hurt inflicted remains, the friendship in tatters.

The Word made flesh bears, in himself, the cost of forgiveness and reconciliation, the overcoming of death over life that humans have chosen.

Thus we come to the message the risen Lord gives to his disciples to untap the flow of living water. It is a word of forgiveness and thus the restoration of a loving fellowship in which the two identify with each other by making each other's needs his or her own. Forgiveness offered opens up all the possibilities that the living water offers.

Sometimes verse 23 is read as though I might be able to sit at the door of the church and dish out forgiveness to whomever I wish and withhold it from others. Institutionally it has been used to exert power and control in dangerous ways rather than become a fundamental step in freedom. Given some of the preceding discussion and John's description of the Spirit's role nothing could be further from the truth.

Forgiveness is not the end but the beginning; it opens the gates to new possibilities and it is always relational. Read John 16.7-11 and meditate on it. The Spirit's work will, through the disciples, offer fellowship that some will rejoice in but the same message will also confront others who do not wish it. The very same message will offer freedom and the possibility, even probability of its rejection.

Thomas, like his brothers and sisters who did not believe Mary's testimony, won't believe theirs either. They go to Thomas with the same announcement as Mary but he refuses it. He is in no way rebuked for that. In Thomas' case Jesus comes with the same message of peace. The relational is not solely communal but personal. Sometimes Thomas' doubt is held up as a virtue. Here it is neither a virtue nor a vice. It simply is. His confession, however, is crucial. This person is not just a fine example, a rabbi of great moral and legal thought, or prophet of great discernment. The creator is among us and a new age has begun. Now, Thomas needs witness to those who have not, and will not, see but who will believe like Thomas, that God is renewing the world.

### *Question*

Reflect for a time on "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." What might that look like for you?

By what authority do disciples go about their business? How does that control how we behave and what we say?

How much is joy a mark of your reconciliation and fellowship with God? How might a church live in joy?

What difference would joy make in mission?

What might a spirituality of joy look like (or not look like)?

We have come to the end of this week's readings. Bring together the thoughts you have had from listening and praying and thinking. Sit with and ask the Spirit where to go next with them.

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Easter 2023