**Daily Devotions**

**April 2024**

*01*

“The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.”

— Psalm 188:22

Out of rejection, a new foundation. Jesus quoted this about himself in Mark 12:10 at the end of the Parable of the Wicked Tenants, in which those who were renting the vineyard killed the owner’s son in order to steal the inheritance. And no one has suffered a more profound rejection than Jesus—turned on by his people, betrayed by a trusted friend, denied by another, abandoned by almost all of them, humiliated and murdered in the most painful way possible by the State, abandoned even (or so he felt) by God. And why? Because he loved us. Loved us so deeply he was willing to experience the worst of human experience on our behalf. Loves us so deeply still that he continues to experience our worst pains and trials with us every day. Thus he has become of the foundation for all of living. We can all stand firm on the knowledge that we are not alone, that Jesus lives in and with and through all of us. We are the temples in which God lives, and Jesus is the foundation on which those temples are built anew each day. This Easter Monday, may we be deeply grateful and exceedingly joyful that the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone of our faith.

What helps me to stay connected to Jesus as a foundation of my daily life of faith?

*02*

“So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

— Mark 16:8

What if this was all there was? What if this short account in Mark was the only ending in all of the gospels? The tomb was empty. A young man in a white robe told the women Jesus had been raised and would meet everyone in Galilee. And the women were so terrified they didn’t say anything to anyone. Full stop.

Would it be enough for us? Would we believe Jesus had been raised? Would we be able to explain the growth and persistence of Christianity in the face of incredible resistance and persecution?

Scholars who have researched what we can actually know about the historical Jesus posit that this is, in fact, where the whole thing ended for the disciples. And yet something happened to them and with them that drove them to devote their lives—and frequently lose their lives—to share the good news of all that Jesus had said and done for them and for the world. And from their commitment, the movement grew and grew and grew.

What if this was all we believed? I think more of us are unsure as to whether Jesus was actually raised from the dead than we’d like to admit. Does believing or not believing this make a difference to our faith? Why or why not? What is it that Jesus has done for us and does for us still that sustains our faith? I don’t have answers, though I have my own personal theories that inform my spirituality, my faith, and keep me solidly connected to God through Christ. As you read this abrupt end to the Gospel of Mark, I encourage you to wonder about it, not as a skeptic, but in the true sense of wonder—openness, amazement, awe—and ask yourself where you continue to encounter Jesus each day.

*03*

“Now after he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. She went out and told those who had been with him, while they were mourning and weeping. But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it.”

— Mark 16:9-11

And here is Mary again. She was at the tomb. She saw the man in the white robe. She fled, terrified, with Jesus’ mother and Salome and between the three of them, they said nothing. Then, when she was presumably alone, Jesus was there with her. We don’t know, from this account, what was said, or if he even spoke to her. It doesn’t seem as though maybe she caught him in a crowd somewhere. Or just thought she saw him somewhere. The use of the words “appeared to” indicate that he wasn’t there, and then he was, whether it was instantly materializing or if he just came around a corner and met her. Do those details matter? Only to our modern, too-many-crime-scene-investigation-show-watching minds. The only thing that matters is that there was an encounter, and a woman who loved and was deeply grateful to Jesus was convinced that Jesus had, in fact, risen as the man in white had said.

Yet no matter how convinced she was, she failed to convince anyone else. Not only did the others not believe it, they “would” not believe it.

How often do we face the same sort of obstacles in our own lives? How often have we tried to express a spiritual experience of one sort of another and been met with skepticism even by those who love God as much as we do—even those who are desperate for a sign, like the mourning and weeping disciples? How often have we ourselves been the skeptics, secretly rolling our eyes when others tell us of their faith lives, even in moments where such testimony is so needed?

Of course we would all like proof. Of course we would all like to see his hands and his side for ourselves, and have it proven by whatever scientific standards we might require. Perhaps we need to let go of our need to control—to judge truth by some artificial standard of our own making—and open our minds and our hearts to what the people around us are saying.

When have I been inspired to faith by the least likely source?

*04*

“After this he appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country. And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them.”

— Mark 16:12-13

Ah, it wasn’t just Mary who wasn’t believed. Although lacking in pretty much every other detail, this does evoke the story of the walk to Emmaus. Two disciples walking in the countryside running into Jesus, then running back to the others to tell them what had happened. In the Luke story (Luke 13-36) we hear that Jesus himself stood among them as Cleopas and his companion were telling the others what had happened. But in this account, when they share their story, once again, the rest “did not believe them.” And I can surmise that, as with Mary Magdalene, they “would” not believe them.

Sometimes in our grief, we can’t see what is right in front of us. Sometimes we are so convinced of the tragedy and injustice of the world that we don’t recognize all the ways Jesus is still among us, still working in real and vital ways in and through us and other people. It can be easy to become cynical, to reject even compelling testimony because we can’t make it “fit” with our experience of the “bad” things.

Jesus calls us to open our eyes and our hearts to his presence, to hear his voice in the loving voices of others, to set aside our cynicism long enough to hope.

When do I have the hardest time reconciling Jesus’ presence with what I see happening in the world.

*05*

“Later he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were sitting at the table; and he upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen. And he said to them, ‘Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.’”

— Mark 16:14-15

I love that Jesus is irritated with his friends here. He had appeared to Mary and the two disciples in the countryside, making himself known, showing them that he had risen from the dead, and yet his friends had shown “lack of faith and stubbornness.” So he scolds them. “How could you? Oh you of little faith!” Or so I imagine. “Did I teach you nothing?” Who knows how long his diatribe lasted. Mark is so terribly succinct, a single sentence suffices to indicate his disappointment. And then, turning on a dime, he commissions them.

Think about that. “You have really ticked me off! Oh, and by the way, I’m trusting you to share the good news with the world. That very good news you refused to accept!” And maybe that was the point. The disciples needed to experience first hand how their testimony was going to be rejected. They needed to reject it themselves to understand the mindset of all those who would be hearing the message without Jesus’ physical presence to back it up. What better training than experiential training? I am sure that it gave his friends a deeper appreciation of the task in front of them, and perhaps strengthened their commitment. Maybe they debriefed Mary and the other two disciples testimonies and strategized about how to respond to the kind of unbelief they themselves had exhibited. In any case, the fallacy of their lack of faith was pointed out, and then used as a springboard to sharing the good news with the world.

When have I had my own deep deficiencies transformed into an asset?

*06*

“So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it.”

— Mark 16:19-20

Jesus is gone. Yet we hear in v. 10 that Jesus didn’t leave the disciples unequipped to share the good news. They were able to do “signs” to help convince their listeners that they were telling the truth. In the book of the Acts of the Apostles, we hear about all the different miracles Jesus’ friends could now do that they weren’t able to do when he was in the flesh with them. But at no time did any of them try to set themselves up as a new Messiah. They only testified to Jesus. So we can imagine the same was so according to Mark. They shared the good news about Jesus, supported it with “signs” of various kinds, and gave credit where it was due.

This can be a slippery slope for us humans. Just think of how many times you’ve seen it—a charismatic person gives powerful testimony about God and brings people to faith. And before you know it, they start to think they’re “all that and a bag of chips.” That it’s not really God who matters in this equation, but them. Even if it’s not on some national scale, we’ve seen it in our congregations, among our friends, even. It’s so easy for the human ego to forget that we’re not God. We need always remember that sharing the good news of Jesus is about Jesus, not us. The best thing about that is that when we keep this in mind, how our testimony is received is not about us. There is freedom in being able to share our faith without having to convince anyone of anything. That’s between God and the listener.

Is it easy or difficult for me to share my faith with others?

*07*

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

— Acts 1:8

Main Idea: The most important thing about witness is that we never have to do it alone.

These are two very different texts about witness. The first takes place after Jesus’s death and resurrection, while the second takes place beforehand. The first is framed by abstract, philosophical questions about the end times, while the second is more tactical and instructional in nature. The first includes heavenly actors in white robes and an almost literal peek into heaven, while the second is based very much in the mundane—the dusty-floored houses of strangers. But these pieces of scripture are linked by two, fundamental claims about what witness to the good news of Jesus looks like.

Did you notice that Jesus is present and leading the conversation about witness in our passage from Acts and our passage from Mark? This is a simple but very important reminder for us as followers of Jesus today—that he is the ultimate source of the love we are called to share, and that the story of his life, death and resurrection is our true north. We tend to associate evangelism with the church, and while that isn’t problematic in and of itself, it can be good for us to recenter in Christ and Christ’s words more directly.

Did you notice, too, that Jesus only ever intended for his followers to witness in a posture of togetherness? In Acts, he instructs the apostles together so that they have an experience in common to reference as they continue in their work. Even after he ascends into heaven, Jesus inspires the apostles and their loved ones to find strength in numbers, congregating and praying together in the Upper Room. In Mark, Jesus also instructs the disciples together. Then, he sends them on their missions two by two so that they won’t have to face any uncertainty alone.

These texts have a lot to tell us about witness—that it takes intentionality and time and courage. That it entails some risk, and even more trust. That it won’t always seem to make sense to us in the bigger picture. That it can be rewarding beyond our imaginations. Most important of all, though, these texts combine to reinforce for us that in our journeys of witness, we will never be alone—we will have Christ and we will have each other as encouragement.

*08*

“Then they prayed and said, ‘Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.’ And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.”

— Acts 1:24-26

Can God speak through casting lots? I find it fascinating that the disciples chose this method to select a replacement for Judas. It seems like it would be something they would view as conjuring, though I’m not sure of the context, honestly. It does make me wonder how anyone can be sure that the guidance they are getting—by whatever means—is actually from God, or if it’s an expression of self-will or group consensus or even mob mentality. Maybe in some ways it makes sense to do this very objective practice, entirely divorced from emotion, to make a decision. Of course, I’m not advocating that we consult dice or tarot cards or draw lots to tell us what God is saying. These things are entirely random. Not that God couldn’t work through them if God wanted to… I just hesitate to think God would want to.

I personally find it a good practice (in addition to prayer and meditation on an issue) to check in with a few trusted people in my life and get feedback. They have to be people who know me through and through and who are not afraid to be honest with me, even if it hurts my feelings in the moment. Far better to be confronted with an uncomfortable truth than to make a decision based on people-pleasing. And in my experience God speaks volumes through other people. This can be reinforced by serendipity (or vice versa) perhaps even in the casting of lots, but such things should probably be secondary at best.

How do I discern whether any guidance I receive is from God?

*09*

“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.”

— Acts 2:1-4

Close your eyes and really imagine this scene. Put yourself in the room. Hear the sound like the rush of a violent wind. Not a wind itself—just the sound. Is it howling? Deafening? Room-shaking? Imagine the thrill of fear coursing through you at it. Your eyes wide and staring around the room. And then… the flames—small and dancing over the heads of all of your friends. You see in their eyes the shock and awe and know that there is a flame over your head, too. Do you feel it? Is it a localized heat warming your scalp? Or is there a fire burning through your whole body, driving you to your feet. Feel the Holy Spirit filling you, your chest aching, heart pounding, limbs firing with adrenaline, a joy so intense you’re suddenly laughing as you’ve never laughed. And then.. do you hear the words coming out of your own mouth? Do you recognize they’re in another language? Do you understand what you’re saying? Or is it all your own native tongue in your mind, and just the response of the onlookers that tells you something miraculous is occurring?

Sometimes I think we gloss over this very short passage way too quickly. Yeah, yeah. Wind. Flames. Languages. Wild, huh? Next. Today, I invite you to really savor it. Go over it again and again as described. Maybe journal about what it might have been like, how we can experience this kind of outpouring in our spiritual lives even today. The Holy Spirit is not gone. This was not a once-and-done occurrence, even if we ourselves haven’t experienced it quite so dramatically. The Holy Spirit was and is and is to come. Open yourself to it today.

When do I most feel connected to the Holy Spirit in my daily life?

*10*

“No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.’”

— Acts 2:16-18

Joel’s prophecy continues to be fulfilled today. The speaking of God’s word by the Holy Spirit is not limited to a certain group of individuals, specially designated for such a role. In fact, God has poured the Holy Spirit out on every single one of us, and as such, we ought to listen carefully to one another in love.

In my work with children, I have time and again been blown away by what I have learned—different perspectives, an openness to wonder that adults are less willing to express or even let themselves feel. In my lifelong participation in the church, I have been moved by the words of young and old, male and female, different ethnicities, gender identities, sexualities… no one is denied this gift, this anointing with the Holy Spirit. Let anyone with ears listen!

Who in my life most clearly embodies the fulfilment of Joel’s prophecy?

*11*

“So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

— Acts 2:41-42

I’ve often thought about living in intentional community. There is something so appealing about these stories of the earliest days of The Way. What a beautiful, simple life devoted to prayer and sharing food and learning to live together in peace. In some ways this passage makes me think of being in college. It was a time in my life when I had nothing to pull me away from my academic pursuits. I had time to share fellowship with friends. I was as yet fairly exempt from the greater responsibilities of “the rat race” that beats so many of us down. I’m not saying a person should relinquish all responsibility in life—we all ought to be contributing in some way. But I am saying that we make our lives far more complicated than they need to be. That there is a way to simplify, to set aside our Martha-ness and be Marys (Luke 10:38-42), and enjoy time with our fellows in spiritual pursuits. Mind you, I am a classic Martha and I truly struggle with this (which is why I keep thinking that living in intentional community would be good for me—though it might be a serious challenge at first!) But before I run off to Iona, I would do well to explore simple, concrete ways in my current living situation to carve out space to devote myself to “teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers.”

How could I simplify my life even a little to make more room for spiritual pursuits?

*12*

“All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.”

— Acts 2:44-45

Let me be frank. (And maybe a bit political). The fact is that our economic system in the United States is unjust. Some jobs are overvalued to the point of generating obscene amounts of wealth that no human being could possibly need. Other jobs are undervalued to such an extent that those who work them are forced into abject poverty even as those of us with means benefit from their labor. We look down on those doing the hardest and most under-paid jobs, rather than recognizing that our society does not function without them, and we try not to think about our complicity in their poverty. The rhetoric that those who are poor are somehow lazy is absolutely false. Absolutely. False. We have a duty to one another to work for equity. We have a responsibility to pay our fair share into the system, which includes being willing to pay more for fast food or sanitation or child care or teacher salaries. Is this model of mutual financial support in the early Christian community practical in our modern context? Probably not. But it is a direct call to us to consider how we can move toward the ideal of mutual support. Everyone deserves not just to survive, but to flourish. God calls us to make that a priority.

How am I engaged in bringing about a flourishing life for all people?

*13*

“You are the descendants of the prophets and of the covenant that God gave to your ancestors, saying to Abraham, ‘And in your descendants all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’ When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you, to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways.”

— Acts 3:25-26

We are blessed to be a blessing. We are the descendants of the prophets and of the covenant, not via genetics, but in Christ. And as the fulfillment of the promise (which has been, is being, and continues to be fulfilled each day) we get to carry the good news of unconditional love and redemption into everything we do and say.

Do we still have “wicked ways”? I would say we have challenges, character flaws, areas for improvement. And God continues to work with us to grow closer to God’s will for our lives and our very selves. But part of that work is the continual commitment to being a blessing to those around us in any way we can. Doing loving service for others brings gets us outside of ourselves and draws us into spiritual community with the world.

How do I feel blessed to be a blessing?

*14*

“But Peter said, ‘I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.’”

— Acts 3:6

Main Idea: When we open ourselves to true encounter, we create space that the Holy Spirit uses to transform us.

At their worst, stories of healing in the New Testament can read like ableist narratives that diminish the beauty of the diversity inherent in human bodies. In more neutral interpretations, stories of healing in the New Testament can read like magic tricks: Look! This person was suffering for years and years, and now, in just a matter of moments, every one of their problems is solved!

This account from the Book of Acts is a story of healing from the New Testament at its best—a story of healing done right. And that is because it reminds us that healing for everybody is a matter of transformation. Physical, emotional, and spiritual change is not about a moment wherein a problem is solved. Rather, it is about a moment of true encounter—a moment wherein our minds and our hearts open to something completely new.

It is clear in this passage from Acts that the man begging at the Temple gate has a premonition about how his exchange with Peter and John is going to unfold. The text tells us “he expected to receive something from them,” insinuating that the “something” was money. We can assume, especially because we know that this man’s disability has shaped his experience from birth, that he has premonitions like this in every facet of his life. The fact that other people carry him to the Temple gate every day indicates to us that he is operating out of a status quo that is framed entirely by what his body can (or can’t) do.

The intentional and very pointed, mutual “looking” between Peter, John, and this man marks a turning point, both in the story and in this man’s life—the introduction of a new status quo rooted not in his ability, but rather, in a radical love unlike anything else that he has experienced. This man allows himself to see Peter and John differently than he had expected to, as more than just potential donors. Peter and John allow themselves to see this man in a new light, as well, as more than just part of the Temple landscape. As their respective “normals” are upended, the Holy Spirit comes in to stabilize them and make the formerly impossible, possible.

What might we look at differently this week? Who might we truly see and how might we be transformed because of it?

*15*

“While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came to them, much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead. So they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. But many of those who heard the word believed; and they numbered about five thousand.”

— Acts 4:1-4

“Much annoyed.” This makes me chuckle. It’s so terribly understated. On the other hand, it’s not funny at all, because this “annoyance” among the authorities of the time would soon lead to harsh persecution of the early Christians, including the death of many, many of them. It’s scary to watch the political and social scene play out in the United States lately. If only we were all capable of keeping things to being “much annoyed” by our differences. It seems as though these days we escalate instantly from much annoyed to completely outraged, and lash out on social media, verbally in person, and even with threats of violence and actual violence. We’re increasingly polarized and intolerant of any view that doesn’t fit with our own. And this is what leads to the kind of unspeakable acts visited on marginalized groups throughout history (the early Christians being one of them).

The hope in this passage is in the five thousand who heard the good news and became Christians in spite of the Sadducees annoyance. We are all still called into this work of peace and community no matter what is going on around us. We can still learn to de-escalate our own rhetoric, to open our hearts and minds to listen to other’s concerns without judgment. It’s a lot of work, but it’s good work.

Have I become more polarized in my viewpoint? Has it come out in negative ways toward others? Do I owe any apologies?

*16*

“And now, Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

— Acts 4:29-30

Boldness is so necessary in the work of justice. It’s not the same as bulldozing over others to force our own agenda. It’s not a violent kind of strength, but a strength that arises out of humility. Boldness is courage—a willingness to do what is right even when it is not popular, or in some cases even legal. The early Christians were facing threats of violence regularly, but they knew what they had been called to do—proclaim “The Way” of Jesus, a new way of being in relationship with God and one another for the flourishing of all creation. It went against the status quo. It called out hypocrisy and injustice in the powers that be. It made a lot of comfortable people uncomfortable.

Like it or not, most of us are now the status quo, or at least benefit from it in real ways. Those engaged in justice work certainly need to pray for boldness as they face resistance. But we all, even those doing such work, need also to pray for an openness to the boldness of others. Instead of feeling called out and defensive when someone has the boldness to speak truth that we find uncomfortable, we can ask God to help us listen for truth and be willing to take action to change ourselves for the betterment of our fellow children of God—which is everyone.

Where am I called to speak with boldness? When have I been called to listen to boldness with humility?

*17*

“Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.”

— Acts 4:32

COMMUNISM!!! Sorry. That just burst out of me. Honestly, sometimes I wonder how any Christian can defend the kind of caustic capitalism that characterizes our international economic systems and results in the unbelievable gap between the wealth of the richest and the poorest among us. I’m not promoting communism as it’s been (disastrously) practiced thus far, nor any particular sociopolitical ideology. I’m just saying that these early Christians were so moved by love for Jesus and one another that it was no longer necessary for them to accumulate wealth for its own sake. It was instead necessary to ensure that everyone in the community had enough, and that the group as a whole could be self-sustaining. People still worked, still made money. Bread didn’t buy itself. But people looked beyond themselves, beyond their self-centered fears of not having enough, and were committed to the flourishing of their neighbors. Is this too idealistic? Or is dismissing it as such just indicate an unwillingness to look honestly at how things could be different?

How do I feel about the lives of the early Christians? Can such principles be applied in our modern context? Why or why not?

*18*

“While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!”

— Acts 5:4

This is a wild story. It would be easy to look at what happened to Ananias and Sapphira and conclude that Peter was somehow coercing wealth from the early Christians—it feels distinctly cult-like, to be honest. But I find a little more nuance in this particular verse (4). Peter isn’t calling Ananias and Sapphira out for keeping back a portion of their wealth, but for lying about it. He says here, basically, “No one was preventing you from benefitting from this wealth, so why lie about it?” The issue wasn’t the money at all, but the willingness to be fully honest with the community. Entering into a life of faith is not a casual undertaking, though I suspect most people see it as such. It’s not about being part of a social group. It’s about giving our entire lives to God, turning over absolutely everything to God’s care. This is a deeply personal thing, yes, but insofar as we choose to participate in a Christian community, it is also a public thing. If we are to be honest with ourselves and with God, we need also be honest in our dealings with our fellows. When we deal dishonestly with anyone for any reason, it undermines our sense of integrity, which inevitably erodes our self-worth until we find ourselves running from God like Jonah to Tarshish.

Not that God will strike us down for not pledging enough to the capital campaign! But, again, I don’t think that’s what this strange story is about.

When has my honestly (or lack thereof) with others been at odds with my self-honesty or honesty with God?

*19*

“A great number of people would also gather from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all cured.”

— Acts 5:16

Why not today? The stories in Acts perplex me a bit sometimes. Jesus performs miracles and his disciples seem not to be able to, at least with any consistency. Then Jesus is gone and suddenly people are cured just because Peter’s shadow falls on them. A few chapters later, we’re knee deep in the story of Paul, who survives a venomous snakebite and then resurrects someone. I don’t know about you, but I’ve never seen or heard about anyone being able to perform these sorts of miracles that seemed to be thick on the ground in the early days. Sure there are plenty of “rational explanations” for such faith healings, along with plenty of folks willing to just call this more or less an ahistorical allegory of some sort. But the fact remains that the early church, even in the absence (physically) of Jesus, took root—so tenaciously that no amount of persecution could eradicate it. What brought all these people flocking to Peter and the other disciples? What made them open to hearing Jesus’ words of healing and wholeness? Or profound love and redemption?

We are all sick and tormented by unclean spirits at times in our lives, literally or figuratively. We all experience healing—physically, emotionally, or spiritually—in one way or another. And we are all called to recognize the presence of God in those instances of being made whole, even as we are called to recognize God in the midst of our pain. We might give credit to God or to medical/psychological professionals or both (they are not mutually exclusive). We may not be able to simply lie in the shadow of some charismatic faith healer and be made perfect again. But the fact is that miracles of healing still occur, if our eyes and hearts are open to see them.

Have I experienced a miracle of healing? When? What were the circumstances?

*20*

“But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors, brought them out, and said, ‘Go, stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about this life.’”

— Acts 5:20

“The whole message about this life.” I love that. This is what we are to share in our faith journeys. The whole message about what it is to follow in the way of Jesus. It’s a reminder that our life in Christ cannot be compartmentalized. It doesn’t just happen for an hour or two each week in a church building. Or at a Bible study. Or in our time of prayer and meditation. It's fully immersive. “This life” is just that—life. All of it. And like the apostles, who were freed by an angel, we are liberated by the Holy Spirit from whatever holds us back, so that we can be open about exactly how our lives are directed, enriched, and made abundant by God’s presence in everything we do and experience.

How do I share “the whole message about this life” with others?

*21*

“Some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.”

— Acts 17:4

Main Idea: Rejection does not have to alter the strength, the consistency, or the nature of God’s love that we strive to bring into the world every day.

This passage from Acts is a bit bizarre, not just because it touches on some explicit conflict, but also because feeds into a kind of bigger-picture mismatch in they way that many of us understand Paul’s early ministry. We have context clues in our 1 Thessalonians text and in some other portions of the New Testament that suggest that Paul’s involvement in Thessalonica was quite significant—that he spent a good amount of time establishing the church there. But this story is the only one we have, the only one we hear. And it’s a far cry from a success story as we tend to think of evangelism.

What’s most important for us to remember here is that Luke’s target audience in the Book of Acts is people who are already following Christ—not people he thinks need to be convinced to follow Christ. That means we should think of his purpose as witness instead of apology; his voice as matter-of-fact instead of forming an agenda. Luke isn’t actually making any one, central theological claim in this text. He is simply relaying the fact that, in a life of faith, you might encounter disagreement. Discomfort. Rejection. People might not like you because they associate you with something they cannot possibly get behind. And realistically, some of this friction might be high stakes enough that it is scary. That’s because faith is such a foundational and visceral piece of our identities—the most baseline determiner in our day to day lives.

Implicit in this observation is a call to resiliency. A charge to keep going. Especially when we read this portion of Acts alongside Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians, we understand that persecution is nothing to revel in. It’s nothing we should feed or give energy to. It’s simply something we can anticipate. And because we can anticipate it, we can easily sidestep it to keep our focus on what is most important: proclaiming God’s love and making room for the Holy Spirit to do her work and to call us into it alongside her.

Our main learning today is that we need not be distracted or discouraged by howothers might perceive us. We already know that we’re facing a mixed bag of reaction. In Christ, we are liberated to focus, instead, on how others might be loved by us, might be served by us. In Christ, we are liberated to focus, instead, on what is truly important. And that is kingdom-building work.

*22*

“And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.”

— 1 Thessalonians 1:6-7

Adversity is inevitable. The more we try to avoid it, the more it creeps up on us in subtle ways. We might think we have absolutely everything together but can’t figure out why we’re still not happy. Or, without warning, something really challenging pops up. It might be in response to an action we took or didn’t take, or it might be completely random. The bottom line is that we don’t have to led adversity keep us from living the kind of flourishing life God desires for us.

The Thessalonians knew that, as did so many of the early Christians, who experienced persecution for their beliefs. In spite of the challenges, they had “joy inspired by the Holy Spirit” and that joy in the word became an example to others.

This isn’t to say that we shouldn’t let ourselves experience and honor the emotional difficulties that come with adversity. We’re not supposed to just “buck up, little camper!” That attitude can be damaging to mental health. But we can, with the Holy Spirit, walk through adversity in the knowledge that we are not alone—we are held—and perhaps, looking back, see how we have weathered our challenges as a gift to others in the sharing of it.

When has a serious challenge in my life become a source of strength and inspiration for others?

*23*

“Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.”

— Acts 6:3-4

I love how a friend of mine puts it. The early Christians were neglecting their duty to the widows and orphans so instead of actually addressing it wholesale, they select a group of seven guys to handle it so they can go on neglecting it.

That being said, there is a time and place for delegation. Not everyone can do everything. Some people are better suited to different aspects of service. Here, they were careful about who they chose to attend to their duties to people who were poor and who did not have the social support they needed to flourish. They wanted people who were of good standing, and full of the Spirit, and of wisdom. These would be people who wouldn’t be tempted to steal money or cheat others out of their due. They would be inspired to truly care for those they served. And who knows, maybe Peter would have been utterly lousy at this job, while Stephen nailed it.

We are, as Paul writes, many members but one body. We all have gifts that can be useful to others in multiple ways. I’m a writer. I love to dwell in scripture and reflect and I hope my efforts are of service to those who read. I would be absolutely awful in the church kitchen for any more than a brief stint. I’m not good with preschoolers. And administrative tasks, while I can do them, ultimately bore me to tears and lead me to find ways to avoid them (not so great…) I can make fun of Peter and the others for enabling themselves to further neglect their duties. But there is wisdom in giving tasks to those who love them, provided everything actually gets done.

What do I bring to my congregation in service? What could I be better at?

*24*

“They set up false witnesses who said, ‘This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us.’”

— Acts 6:13-14

Change can be threatening to some people. Because it’s not really change that we fear, but the loss that change entails. The loss of the familiar, of the comfortable. Especially if there’s a loss—or a perceived loss—of power involved. This is what these witnesses are railing against. And they really aren’t false witnesses at all. Jesus does, in fact, change everything, and Stephen does, in fact, name it as such. Maybe the whole “he never stops saying things” is a fabrication. Maybe Stephen was fairly quiet about his faith, preferring to just act in service to the widows, with which he had been tasked. But following this passage, he certainly does talk—explicitly—about Jesus and what his ministry meant, resulting in his death.

What this says to me is that words are powerful in bringing about change. Yes, actions are necessary, but it starts with someone being bold enough to speak truth to the status quo. And this is sometimes dangerous, as those with power are especially invested in preventing a change in that fact.

God invites us to speak up. To proclaim the reign of Christ—one characterized by justice and equity for all people. At the same time, God invites us to embrace change, because we, ourselves, can be hesitant to speak the truth if we know it will mean we have to change, too. Change can be scary. But it can also be exciting and wonderful and filled with joyful expectation! We can greet it with expectation and, most likely, it won’t kill us.

When have I been afraid of a change in my life? What was the result?

*25*

“Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it.”

— Acts 7:52-53

Stephen has a valid point. Scripture is full of stories of God sending prophets to let God’s people know they were way off the beam. And since no one likes to be told they’re doing something wrong, often this resulted in those prophets having their lives threatened. I think it’s interesting, actually, that this is what the biblical writers focused on. Why keep a record of all the ways your people have royally screwed up? Why not concentrate on the good stuff? It’s terribly self-aware. Which is why it’s maybe surprising that there continued to be so much resistance to Jesus’ ministry and message. Haven’t they figured it out yet? They fail again and again to live as God wanted. The law and the prophets were pretty darn clear. So why was it so hard to hear the same message yet again but by a different prophet?

And what of us as Christians? The Way of Jesus survived every attempt at extinction in the beginning only to be transformed by empires into its own empire, which has visited trauma upon anyone out of step with the powers that be for centuries. We have “received the law” and gospel “by angels, and yet [we] have not kept it.” We find all sorts of ways to reinterpret scripture to support our own ideas, to the detriment of the powerless and marginalized. Do we need a Stephen standing in our midst, upbraiding us for our failure to recognize what Jesus was all about? Maybe. I’ve seen, heard, and read plenty of Stephens in my life, and I am grateful for it, even when, at the moment, I’m threatened by what is being said. We would do well to listen to the Stephens in our midst, and even better, perhaps, to become one.

When have I heard an uncomfortable truth about my faith? How did I respond? When have I shared an uncomfortable observation about the church with others? How did they respond?

*26*

“But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.”

— Acts 7:57-58

Mobs are terrifying. Chances are that if Stephen had been speaking conversationally with a smaller group—maybe in a bar or at a church coffee hour—he would have survived the encounter, as unpleasant as it may have been. There may have been ear-covering and shouting. Perhaps it might even have come to blows, but others not involved in the altercation would likely have pulled the combatants apart.

Instead, Stephen is standing alone in a large group of people who disagree with him. And those people are feeding off each other’s negative energy. Maybe one guy snaps back at Stephen, and this encourages others. Maybe as Stephen’s speech escalates into name-calling (“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears!” v. 51) the others start shouting insults back. And pretty soon everyone is so fired up any possibility of civil discourse is obliterated. It only takes one person to throw the first punch before all hell breaks loose. In this case, we don’t know who lit the fuse. We only know that the mob rushed Stephen, dragged him away, and stoned him to death. Probably no one even thought about what they were doing in the moment, they were so carried away by emotion.

These things still happen. Violence breaks out at peaceful protests because one or two people whip others up into a mindless frenzy. People allow their anger to sweep away their reason. They believe anything that justifies their anger. And they sometimes kill people.

It’s easy to talk about “those people” and think we would never been so riled. But if we’re honest with ourselves, I think we’re all capable of that kind of mob mentality under the right conditions. God help us to tirelessly pursue diplomacy—and listening—especially when emotions run high.

How do I help myself take a pause before acting in anger?

*27*

“But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.”

— Acts 8:3

What jumps out of me the most is the phrase “both men and women.” Why be so specific as to name this if it’s not significant? I get the sense that women didn’t have much agency at the time, being entirely dependent on husbands or sons to support and protect them. Does that mean they weren’t held accountable for things? Would they not normally have been dragged off in a raid looking for rabble-rousers? I don’t know. But it does strike me that Saul was well aware the women knew what they were doing. They were choosing to follow in The Way of Jesus. Which makes me wonder about just how much freedom The Way granted to women. While it doesn’t come across that clearly in the gospels, Jesus’ words, actions, and choice of disciples indicated that he was quite a feminist. Possibly women flocked to be his followers because he treated them as equals. He spoke to Mary and Martha as friends. Mary Magdalene was among his closest disciples. Possibly that strong affinity for The Way by women continued as the church grew. The first European convert was Lydia, a wealthy, independent woman. Paul engaged several women to carry and interpret his letters to the early churches, and named them apostles. That this was stripped away as the church gained power is unfortunate. Just imagine how the world would be different if women had been equal in the church from then to now…

This is, of course, all speculation on my part. But scripture invites us to wonder. To ask questions. To be inspired. That’s one of the things that make it so amazing.

What jumps out at me in this passage and why?

*28*

“Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.”

— 1 Corinthians 1:10-11

Main Idea: Jesus doesn’t need you to get faith right. Jesus needs you to get faith going.

It seems in this text like what the Corinthians are hung up on—what is causing divisions and fights among them—is dogmatics. Logistics. Teeny tiny details woven into their lives of faith that might seem important in the moment, but that don’t actually bear any weight on the faith at all.

Paul is calling the Corinthians to reset. To refocus. To remember that what they need to be worrying about is Jesus, and what they need to be emulating is his humility. And this is because knowing Jesus doesn’t entail understanding Jesus. Knowing Jesus doesn’t entail any kind of exclusivity or superiority. No—knowing Jesus is about experiencing Jesus. Knowing Jesus is about sharing in love and joy and good news. Paul explicitly says that proclaiming the gospel is not about presentation. He states that an inelegant, ineloquent witness is perfect, because it’s gritty and real and just as counterintuitive as Jesus, himself.

The Corinthians seem set on establishing and communicating legitimacy in their faith, but Paul is telling them that they already have all the legitimacy they need: Christ. Instead of arguing, he wants them to align. Instead of turning inward, he wants them to go into the world and to share what they’ve experienced in Jesus (and what Jesus has done for them). Where are the places in your life where you could try this focus change this week?

*29*

“What I mean is that each of you says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ or ‘I belong to Apollos,’ or ‘I belong to Cephas,’ or ‘I belong to Christ.’ Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?”

— 1 Corinthians 1:12-13

I’m surprised this didn’t happen more, to be honest. I’ve commented before on how interesting it is that the early Christians didn’t try to pass themselves off as the true hero of the story. Even without Jesus physically in their midst, they pointed, always, to him as the source and perfecter of faith. Even when they were miraculously healing people, they refused to take any credit. It wasn’t about Paul or Apollos or Cephas. It was only ever about Christ, in whose name we are baptized.

I see examples of this kind of single-minded commitment to God within my recovery circles. We work very hard to practice the spiritual principle of anonymity, which means that we don’t seek after any distinction within the fellowship (or without). When we hear a particularly engaging speaker, we don’t go running around blabbing about them by name. We might say, “I heard someone in a meeting say…” No one takes credit. We are all only recovering one day at a time because of God’s work in our lives. When someone compliments me on something I say in the rooms, I thank them and turn it back to God. When someone outside of recovery compliments me on how I handle a challenging situation, for example, I am quick to credit my recovery program (and, ultimately, God) for my serenity and effectiveness.

We are called to this kind of humility, as characterized by anonymity, in all areas of our lives. Paul here challenges us to remember who we are and, more importantly, whose we are, and instead of breaking into factions surrounding this or that charismatic personality, to re-center ourselves in Christ.

When do I find myself following after individual personalities rather than trying to emulate Jesus?

*30*

“But Peter said to him, ‘May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain God’s gift with money!’”

— Acts 8:20

Was this maybe a little harsh? I mean, Simon the magician clearly did not understand what Jesus was all about. He was used to getting attention for doing tricks, so when Philip showed up and started doing “signs and wonders,” which were miracles from Jesus rather than tricks, he understandably wanted to know how it was done. And he was willing to pay for the secret. I feel like it was ignorance, more than arrogance, at play here.

That being said, I think most of us would love to be able to purchase the strong faith and peace of mind that comes from navigating adversity with God’s help. Pain is not the only source of spiritual growth, but it is a powerful one, and one that I think almost all of us can relate to. How great it would be to have the benefits of such pain without the actual pain. If it could be purchased, people would absolutely buy it. In fact, some try—paying money to try to avoid pain of all kinds, or to develop faith or resilience through self-help books, celebrity speakers, and other “get-healthy-quick” schemes. But we can’t “obtain God’s gift with money.” You can’t completely avoid pain, and the only way out of pain is through it. This is what Simon the magician—and so many others—just don’t get.

When have I tried to avoid pain? What was the result?