

**The Body of Christ: Risen**  
A Sermon for Every Sunday, Easter 2C  
*Acts 5:27-32*

*When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, saying, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us." But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. 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." (NRSV).*

On Easter Sunday someone usually says, "Christ is risen!" and everyone else says, "Christ is risen indeed!" But some people have a hard time with the Resurrection: they have a hard time believing it actually happened.

I can't say that I blame them. I've been to a lot of funerals, but I've never seen anybody sit up in a casket. I've been to a lot of cemeteries, but I've never seen anybody climb out of a grave. When the other disciples told Thomas that they had seen the Lord alive after his horrible death on a cross Thomas said, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark, and put my hand in his side, I will not believe." Easter has always come a little too close to April Fool's Day. So, in the Gospel lesson for today, when Jesus came back on that first Sunday after Easter, he did it for Thomas. He didn't want him to be a doubter any longer; he wanted him to be a believer. He showed Thomas his hands and side and invited him to come and do what he had asked: to put his finger in the mark of the nails, to put his hand in his side. But all Thomas could do was stand there with his mouth open and finally croak out the words, "My Lord and my God!"

And then Jesus said, "Have you believed because you have seen, Thomas?"

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” And he was talking about us, at least about all of us who have come to believe. But what about those who haven’t? What about people who still have a hard time with the idea of resurrection? When people ask me about it I often say, “*Something* happened on that first Easter Sunday. If Jesus had been a pretender, if he had died on a cross and they had buried him in the grave and that was it, his story would have died right along with him. It didn’t. So, I hear some people say, ‘Well, the *movement* rose from the dead. The movement continued.’ Or, ‘the Spirit rose within those disciples and helped them [go forward].’ And I say, ‘That’s fine. If you want to talk like that, if you want to believe that, that’s fine, I’m just telling you something *happened* [on that first Easter]. Those disciples were not the same people anymore.’”

And that’s what I want to talk about today. Whatever actually happened on Easter Sunday morning the result of it was that the disciples, who might have simply scattered and gone back to their old lives, came together and formed a community of believers that Paul would later call “the body of Christ.” And in those days after Easter that body rose: men who had been fearful, cautious, and clueless disciples were suddenly fearless, bold, and surprisingly sure of themselves. They weren’t the same people they had been before. Whatever happened in those days after Jesus’ death and burial changed them, drastically, and that may be all the proof of resurrection we need.

I frequently talk to people who want to change, who want to be different people than they are, but they just can’t seem to do it. Maybe it’s some stubborn vice that’s got hold of them, one nagging addiction that won’t let go, but whatever it is they feel helpless in its grip. And that’s why the first step of the twelve step program used in Alcoholics

Anonymous is so important. It says, “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.” Because once you recognize that your own power is not enough, you can start looking for power elsewhere. Let’s try not to be too specific at this point. Alcoholics Anonymous calls it, “a Higher Power.” We might call it the Power that raised Jesus from the dead, the Power of the Holy Spirit, the Power of God. Whatever you call it, it is the Power that can change lives, and you don’t have to look any further than the example of Peter.

I’m going to step out on a limb here, but I believe that the stubborn vice in Peter’s life, the nagging addiction that wouldn’t let go, was *fear*. He wanted to be fearless, wanted it as much as anyone has ever wanted anything, but when the moment came fear took over. Do you remember how he told Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, that even if everyone else abandoned him he wouldn’t? In Luke’s Gospel he says, “Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death,” but Jesus replies, “I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know me” (Luke 22:33-34). And that’s what happened. Peter fell asleep while Jesus was praying in the Garden. In a show of bravado he swung a sword and cut off someone’s ear. But then, in the high priest’s courtyard, a servant girl asked him if he was with Jesus and he said, “I do not know the man.” When the rooster crowed he had denied him two more times. As Luke tells the story Jesus turned in that moment and looked at Peter, and Peter stumbled out of the courtyard weeping bitterly.

He wanted to be brave. He wanted to go with Jesus both to prison and to death. But when that servant girl asked her question his self-preservation instinct kicked in, just like when someone takes a swing at you and you throw up your hands to defend yourself.

It wasn't that he thought about it and then answered; he just answered: "I don't know the man." But it must have haunted him through the rest of that long night, and through the awful and endless day that followed, when he saw his Lord hanging on a cross, and thought that he should be hanging right there with him. Why wasn't he? Because he was afraid, too afraid to admit that he knew Jesus, that he was one of his followers, that he loved him as he loved his own soul. But as Luke tells the story, early on the first day of the week some women came back from the tomb with a story that Jesus had risen, and while the rest of the disciples dismissed it as "an idle tale" Peter got up and went to the tomb, found it just the way the women had described it, and went home "marveling" (Luke 24:12). That may have been step one for him: a willingness to believe.

And then Luke tells us about those two disciples on the road to Emmaus, who encounter the risen Lord but don't realize who it is until he breaks bread with them in their own home. Then their eyes are opened, then they see him for who he really is, and in the very next moment he vanishes from their sight. But they say to one another, "Didn't our hearts burn within us as he opened the Scriptures to us on the road?" And they hurry back to Jerusalem, seven miles away, where they burst into the upper room gasping for breath. Before they can tell their story the disciples say, "The Lord has risen indeed and has appeared to Simon!" (meaning Peter, of course). Paul confirms it in 1 Corinthians 15 when he says that Jesus appeared to Cephas (another one of Peter's names), and *then* to the Twelve. But the story of that private resurrection appearance is nowhere to be found in Scripture. It makes you wonder what happened. What did Jesus talk to Peter about? Whatever it was, it must have been step two for him: an encounter with the risen Lord.

And then in Acts 2 Luke tells us about the Day of Pentecost. We'll save that story for Pentecost Sunday, a few weeks from now, but suffice it to say that when the Holy Spirit roared into that upper room with a sound like the rush of a mighty wind, something happened to everyone, but most noticeably to Peter. He and the other believers poured out onto the streets of Jerusalem and began proclaiming the mighty acts of God in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Someone said, "These people are drunk!" But Peter said, "No we're not! This is what the prophet Joel was talking about: that day when God would pour out his Spirit on all flesh." And then he said, "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men" (Acts 2:22-23). In other words, Peter accused his audience of murder, and that's just not something you do, not if you want to stay alive anyway.

It wasn't a twelve-step program, but Peter seems to have entered a three-step program to overcome his fear. Step one was a willingness to believe; step two was an encounter with the risen Christ; and step three was the coming of the Holy Spirit. After Pentecost Peter seems to be completely fearless. When he heals a lame beggar on his way to the temple he tells the crowd, "Don't look at me, as if I did this. This was done in the name of Jesus, whom you killed, and whom God raised from the dead." When he is brought before the authorities for questioning he says, "If you're wondering how a lame beggar was healed then know this: it was by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him that this man is standing before

you well.” And when they bring him back later, to ask him why he and the others won’t stop preaching about Jesus, Peter says, “We must obey God rather than men. You put Jesus to death, but God raised him up, and exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.” And that makes them furious; they’re ready to kill Peter; but Peter doesn’t seem to care. Have you noticed: the one who was unwilling to admit that he knew Jesus is now unable to deny him?

He’s fearless!

But just as they were on the verge of dragging him out and putting him to death a Pharisee named Gamaliel stood up and said, “Wait a minute! Let’s think this through. Do any of you remember that fellow named Theudas, who claimed to be somebody, and rounded up 400 followers? He was killed. His followers were scattered. It all came to nothing. After him was Judas the Galilean and the same thing happened. When he died his followers disappeared. So, if this fellow Jesus is just another would-be Messiah, come in from the country to cause a big stir, it will die down, but if God is in this you won’t be able to stop it. You could even be found opposing God!” That seemed like good advice to them, so they beat the apostles and let them go, and they left the council rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer for the sake of the name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus (5:35-42).

I love that line about how they rejoiced because they had been considered worthy to suffer for the sake of the Name, as if it should be spelled in all capital letters: the NAME. Whose name was it? Well, not the name of Theudas, certainly. And not the name of Judas the Galilean. Peter suffered for the name of Jesus, the very one he had

denied because of his fear. But now he's a different man. Now he has opened himself to the possibility of belief, he has had an encounter with the risen Lord, he has been filled with the Holy Spirit. He is fearless. He is unstoppable. He is, at last, the rock on which Christ can build his church. "If God is in this you won't be able to stop it," Gamaliel said, and just look how right he was. This movement has been going on for nearly two thousand years. It now claims more than two *billion* adherents. That little group of believers Paul called "the body of Christ" has risen in the world, it is present and active, it is still going strong. Tell me:

Do you need any more proof of the resurrection than that?

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