

Acts 5:27-32

5:27 When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them,

5:28 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."

5:29 But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority.

5:30 The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree.

5:31 God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.

5:32 And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him."

A couple weeks ago when Pastor Mitzi and I were looking at this week on the worship planning calendar, she said to me "Ok, you're kicking off the sermons series we're doing all the way through Eastertide to Pentecost." And I had a moment where I went "Wait a second, that sounds like a lot of pressure." Because you can kick off a series like Robert Downey Junior in Iron Man. Or you can kick off a series like Terrance Howard in Iron Man. So as I looked at this text and thought about how not to get recast as Don Cheadle, I realized I actually kind of have the easy week in this whole series about the book of Acts. Because the sermon series for the next six weeks is called "We Are Witnesses," and Peter actually says those words not only in this chapter, but in the text we read last week.

If you were here on Easter you heard Peter say to the crowd in Acts Chapter 10 "We are witnesses to all that [Jesus] did both in Judea and in Jerusalem," and he goes on to tell them that Jesus "He commanded [them] to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead." And today we have backed up to kind of a prequel story but Peter says the same thing to the high priest and the council: "We are witnesses," to all that Jesus has said and done.

Any English teacher will tell you that when the title is in the text, that's going to be a big plot point. And any youth pastor will tell you if they are repeating themselves, it's probably something worth hearing. I had a ninth grade student sitting next to me on a bus during a youth group trip many years ago. And she got to witness me repeating myself. I had given the instructions for what we were doing that night and after hearing those instructions three times, another student came up to me on the bus and said "Danny, what are we doing next?" And instead of being frustrated with him for not listening the first time I just said "We're going back to hotel so we can take showers and change, then we're going to walk to dinner, then we're

coming back for debrief.” At which point a third student said “Will we have time to take a shower?” and I said “We’re going back to the hotel right now so you can do that before we go to dinner and then come back for debrief.” By this time the second student had walked away and been replaced by a fourth student who said “Is dinner before debrief?” To which I said “Yes, and before that we’ll go back to the hotel to shower and change.” This happened four more times, at which point the original kid sitting next to me is grinning and goes “Did you just repeat yourself 8 times?” Yes, I did. No, it’s not a new experience for me.

The book of Acts is sort of the point where the disciples have gone from being the youth group kids, not paying attention and asking Jesus the same questions over and over... to being the next generation of youth pastors, calmly explaining themselves over and over to a crowd that almost seems like they’re trying not to get it. But Peter is repeating himself here because it’s important for them to hear this. We are witnesses. Spreading the message of Jesus is what we’re all about.

So if being a witness is what the disciples are all about, what does that mean? When we talk about being witnesses in Confirmation class ever year, we ask students what that word conjures up. And usually somebody quickly talks about a witness in a trial, that person who has to talk about the events or the crime or the wreck they saw.

I actually saw a car wreck just a couple of weeks ago, just down the road, at the intersection of Norwood and Ray. A pickup truck was going straight through the green light on Norwood, not speeding, minding his own business, and a car came off Ray Road and just blew through her red light and turned left in front of him. Everybody was okay, but it ripped the bumpers off both cars and blew some tires and sent the car spinning into the grass on the other side of the road. I was the next car behind all of this and I immediately went from “Danny,” minding my own business, trying to get through my Sunday afternoon task list to a witness to this wreck. And when I say not that I just “saw” the wreck, but that I “witnessed” it, you know what I mean.

You would know without my having already described it that my mind immediately starting processing that whole sequence of events. You know my heart rate when up and my adrenaline spiked and I put my foot on the brake pedal and gripped the steering wheel to make sure that I didn’t wind up a victim of the wreck. And you know that I was immediately compelled to pull over. If I’d come by even a few minutes later I’d have thought “Oh, there was a wreck. Hope everybody’s ok,” and moved on. But I witnessed it happening, so I needed to get out of my car and make sure that everyone was ok. And then even though it was raining and it took 25 minutes for the State trooper to show up, I stuck around to make sure that somebody recorded what I had to say about it. Being a witness means you’ve got all the feelings to go along with the facts because you were there.

Side note: I felt very taken care of by my Soapstone family that afternoon because several people drove past and either stopped and rolled down their windows to make sure I wasn’t the one who got hit, or texted me when they saw me standing by all the cars and asked me if I

needed a ride. I think everyone who saw me felt like they were now witnesses and they were compelled to do something about this too, because they suddenly had a personal connection.

And that's the value of a witness, right? A personal connection. Peter and the other disciples keep getting arrested and hassled and some of them wind up getting martyred because they won't stop talking about Jesus, and what they have seen him do. I learned this week that we actually get the English word martyr from the same Greek word that gives us "Witness." But I think that's also why some of us may find the idea of being witnesses a little scary.

The most recent summer that I worked in Ecuador hosting short-term teams was 2018, shortly before I joined the staff of Soapstone. And my boss, Cameron, and I, were helping our interns with a large team of Episcopalians from South Carolina who were going to be splitting up into groups to work on three different mission projects. So I went along to their orientation. Now these were mostly high school students and their leaders and Cameron was giving them a talk about crossing cultures. So to set them up a bit as she drew them a picture of the religious culture in Ecuador, she asked them about their own – our own – culture. Now Cameron was pretty fresh off hosting a college team from Sewanee and from training college-aged interns who had done lots of homework on crossing cultures before getting to Ecuador, so she maybe should have narrowed the question a little bit for these wide-eyed teenagers. But what she asked was "What is the overarching religious culture in the Southeastern United States?" And the answer she was looking for was "Congregational evangelical Protestantism." But instead (and I'm gonna say it like 25 teenagers said it in unison) the answer she got was "...Baptist."

Cameron and I laughed so hard we were crying after hearing that response. Our staff kind of looked around confused, and our team looked around a little apprehensively like we were going to judge them for the that answer and the amount of disdain with which some of them said it. And I don't think they as a group necessarily had a problem with anybody being Baptist or anything different than them. But in this conversation about culture and about how we talk about our faith, I think they were doing their best to put words to some discomfort, and Cameron and I could both relate. I'm sure all those kids, even at age 14 to 18 had all had that experience where someone of a little more evangelical background than them had asked if they had a testimony or a witness and they weren't quite sure how to respond. I remember being that age and having trouble with that language, because for me growing up in the church, my story of faith wasn't as dramatic as what some people wanted to hear. I couldn't point to that one singular moment the way Peter does in the scripture today where he says "You hung him on a tree." Like "we were there for that big moment and the end, and that's where everything changed!"

But we forget sometimes that even in a trial, there can be character witnesses. Those who can tell what someone has been like over a long period of time so the court has an idea of who they are. And Peter does that here too. He doesn't just say "We were there at Jesus' death, or at Jesus' resurrection." He says they saw "all" he did in Judea and Jerusalem. And we only have to go back a few days in our lectionary calendar to get to that passage in John 18 where Peter, this same dude, was denying that he even knew Jesus. In Matthew's version of that story, when

Peter hears the cock crow and remembers what Jesus told him, it says he went out and wept bitterly. So when Peter says they saw all that Jesus did, he means years of preaching and teaching and healing and miracles. But he also means this.

Maybe you do have that before and after moment in your faith. Maybe you do. But being witnesses of Jesus means that we get to keep looking back and reexamining what we've seen through the lens of new experiences to understand how God has been weaving his way through it all. And it means we get to look forward in hope, maybe even for some of the before-and-after moments that are yet to come.

One of the other things I like to tell our Confirmation class is about why we even talk about Witness with them. And it's because that word is part of what we say in the Baptismal covenant every time someone is baptized, professes their faith, or transfers their membership into our congregation. Over the next few weeks there are going to be five children and adults baptized into our congregation, and nine confirmands professing their faith, so you'll all get to hear and say these words several times. But "witness" hasn't always been one of them. If you look at page 38 of your hymnal, at least here at Soapstone, you'll see a sticker on that page, where we added "witness" to prayers, presence, gifts, and service on the list of ways we promise to faithfully participate in the life of the church. Witness was added by General Conference in 2008 after the Association of Annual Conference Lay Leaders petitioned for it. In their rationale, they said that "Because congregations repeat these vows along with new members, a pledge to "witness" will remind members to be witnesses in the community." Peter could have sat around with his 10 homies in the upper room and reminisced with them about all the things they'd seen. Instead they obeyed God. They were compelled to act on and talk about all they had seen, out in the community, even when it had some ramifications.

I love love love working with short-term mission teams, for a number of reasons. One is that a short-term mission team can be one of those before-and-after moments in faith for people. It was for me and I love facilitating that for other people. Another reason is because Youth World does short-term missions well, which I can't say for every organization out there. That conversation I told you about with the crossing cultures and discussing faith, it came as a part of our Partnership Orientation, where we teach short-term teams about our philosophy of missions and how we judge success. One of those ways is by bearing fruit. And that idea comes from John 15:8 where Jesus, nearing the end of his earthly life and ministry, talks to his friends about love and says "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit." As a cradle Methodist, I think that's just Jesus' less-scary way of saying "Go be witnesses." We tell our short-term teams that the goal is to go bear fruit, but that it would be silly for us to decide what that fruit is going to look like. We can give examples of it. Sometimes fruit has been a team going home and raising money to complete a school building in an impoverished neighborhood. Sometimes it has been someone changing their major or their job. Sometimes it is seeking reconciliation in a relationship. For me it was working with a tutoring program for non-native English speakers back home, and doing a chapel service at an assisted-living residence for differently-abled young adults. Neither of those things were directly related to what I was doing

on my first short-term team in Ecuador, but I could look back and see how God was in all of those things. And I hope in my fruit others were able to see God's love.

OTG is going to sing a song in a while that asks "Is there room in your heart for God to write his story." And that's what being a witness is: not so much having a story, but letting God write his story in and through us. Glory to God. Amen.