

“To This We Are Witnesses”—Acts 5:27-32

I know of a high school track and field coach who has been retired now for many years and who before every practice and every meet would gather his team together and have prayer. He knew, and everybody knew, that this was against the rules—students could initiate prayers, but coaches couldn't. Yet he refused to stop—he took the attitude that, “If they want me to stop, they'll have to come down here and fire me.” As far as I know, no one ever made a complaint against him; neither the school administration nor the system administration ever said a word about it; and he went on coaching until his retirement.

That, sisters and brothers, is a witness—this coach risked his job to share Jesus, even if it was only through prayer.

I know of another teacher who has probably retired by now but who kept an open Bible on her desk. She didn't initiate any conversations about God or Jesus with her students, and she knew that she was probably dancing on the edge of the regulations—but she said, “That Bible is there in case a student wants to talk to me about it. And if they want me to stop, they'll have to fire me—but until they do, my Bible is staying open on my desk.”

That, sisters and brothers, is a witness—a teacher who might have gotten into big trouble because her open Bible opened a door for students perhaps to learn about the love of God.

I don't know if this story is true or apocryphal, but I like it: It seems that there was an elderly gentleman who was almost completely blind and almost completely deaf, yet every Sunday morning, rain or shine, hot or cold, he walked to worship at his church. Along the way, there were some hecklers who shouted, “Hey, old man! Why are you going to church? You can't hardly see what's happening, and you can't hardly hear what's going on! Why do you bother to go to church?” One Sunday the elderly gentleman stopped, turned to his hecklers, and quietly said to them, “I go to church because I want God to know I'm on his side.”

That, sisters and brothers, is a witness—while so many who claim the name of Jesus find the flimsiest excuses for missing worship, one elderly gentleman walked to worship every Sunday so he could participate in the worship of the community of faith.

I could go on and on with these stories, but what we need to know is that they all have a common thread—they're all rooted in the difference the cross and the empty tomb have made in the lives of believers, a difference that these witnesses and so many others want to share with others. The cross and the empty tomb, the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Son of God—to this, sisters and brothers, we are witnesses.

And we are in good company—for we as witnesses stand in the line of witnesses that stretches all the way back to the apostles, those who had been with Jesus in his earthly ministry. They had heard his teaching and preaching; they had witnessed the displays of his miraculous power; they had seen him crucified, albeit from afar, and they had watched him die. But they had also seen the empty tomb, and they had experienced his presence as the resurrected Jesus appeared to them. They had seen him taken up into heaven, and they had experienced the Pentecostal power of the Holy Spirit coming upon them and the incredible miracle of speaking in foreign tongues they didn't know but which were understood by those outside who heard them. The cross and the empty tomb—the death and resurrection of Jesus—had made such a difference in their lives that they just had to tell the Good News of God's love revealed in his Son—"To this," they said, "we are witnesses."

Of course, the Jewish authorities weren't too keen on this apostolic proclamation of Jesus as the Son of God, who had been crucified but whom God had raised from the dead and through whom people could find forgiveness of sins and eternal life. The authorities thought they were done with this Jesus and his rabble—they had convinced the Romans to execute Jesus, and certainly his movement died with him. But now his followers were preaching and teaching about Jesus, and thousands were turning to what was known as "The Way." This was simply unacceptable.

So they had the apostles arrested and brought before the High Council, and they told them to stop this preaching about Jesus. But the apostles didn't stop, nor could they—for the cross and the empty tomb had changed their lives, and they were compelled by the Spirit to tell everyone who would listen about Jesus.

So the authorities had the apostles arrested again, and this is where our Scripture reading meets us today:

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."

Now, if we were to continue reading, we would find the High Council so enraged with the apostles that they wanted to kill them. But Gamaliel, a member of

the council said, “Listen! If this Jesus movement is a human thing, it will fizzle out on its own, and we have nothing to worry about. But, if this thing is from God, you won’t be able to stop it, and we might even be fighting against God!” The council thought these were wise words, so they had the apostles beaten and released, with orders not to preach about Jesus anymore. And the apostles rejoiced that they could suffer for Jesus.

But this thing was indeed from God, and, try as they might, the authorities couldn’t stop it. After Stephen was stoned for powerfully preaching Jesus before the council, a persecution broke out, and James the brother of Jesus was killed. As Paul preached in the synagogues of the Mediterranean world, he was constantly opposed, not just by upset Jews but also by Gentiles who saw this Jesus movement as a threat to them, both socially and economically. According to tradition, Peter was executed in Rome during Nero’s persecution, and Paul was beheaded in Rome. Tradition also says that all of the apostles except John died violent deaths for the sake of Jesus. The Book of Revelation was written as a word of comfort and encouragement to Christians in Asia Minor who were suffering persecution under the Roman emperor Domitian. These and countless others suffered for the sake of Jesus, and we call them *martyrs*, which in the Greek simply means “witness.” They suffered for the sake of the cross and the empty tomb—to this they were witnesses.

History teaches us that, despite their best efforts, the powers that be have tried to suppress and even eradicate the witness of the cross and the empty tomb. In Nazi Germany, as Hitler co-opted the German church and made it a tool of the Reich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Niemoeller, and others led a movement that maintained an authentic witness to the cross and the empty tomb. In fact, Bonhoeffer had a chance to escape Nazi Germany and was urged by many to take it—but he said that he had to stay and lead this movement for the sake of Jesus. That, sisters and brothers, is a witness!

There are so many other stories to tell, so many more histories to recount—we could talk, for instance, about the repression of Christianity under the Communist rule of the former Soviet Union, yet there continued to be witnesses to the faith. And even today, people seeking to enter the ordained ministry in Russia face not only financial pressure but social pressures as well. We could talk about countries where it is illegal to be a Christian, and the punishment is death. Yet there are those who still proclaim the cross and the empty tomb—to this they are witnesses.

But the question you’re probably asking is, “So what? What does this mean for me?” Now, I’ll grant you that it’s not likely that we’re going to be imprisoned or killed for following Jesus or for sharing about him with others. And it’s not likely, at least not here in Southwest Georgia, that we’re going to be threatened on our jobs for praying or for having an open Bible. And people entering the ordained

ministry here are cherished and celebrated rather than reviled (even though the cost of a seminary education is still incredibly burdensome). But what if? What if we were threatened physically or economically or socially for claiming the Name of Jesus and sharing him with others? Has the cross and the empty tomb made such a difference in our lives that we'd be willing to risk it all to be a witness for Jesus?

We don't have to face those challenges—the physical and economic and social threats—that our spiritual forebears faced and that many Christians in the world are facing today. We should count that as a blessing, but we should also see it as an opportunity. Without the physical and economic and social threats, we should feel free—free *from* any constraints, and free *to* share Jesus with others. If in fact the cross and the empty tomb have made a difference in our lives, then we should feel compelled by the Holy Spirit to share Jesus with others. We should be irresistibly moved by that same power that drove the apostles, that drove later witnesses, and that drives people today to share the love of God made real in Jesus. The cross and the empty tomb—to this we are witnesses.

What are willing to risk to share Jesus with others? The apostles and followers of The Way were willing to risk everything to witness to the cross and the empty tomb. For almost two thousand years, faithful Christians have been risking it all to be witnesses for Jesus. And even today, there are faithful Christians all over the world who are risking everything to tell people the Good News of God's love. Perhaps we're not called to take such risks here in Southwest Georgia—but we're still called to step out and share with others the cross and the empty tomb—for to this we are witnesses. Dear God, make it so for all of us!