

## **Preach It!**

Acts 2:14 and 22-33

Delivered: University Place Christian Church, Champaign, IL

As many of you may know, before serving here as the minister for community and campus relations at UniPlace, I was a district executive for the Boy Scouts of America. As a district executive, it was my job to raise money and find adult volunteers for local Cub Scout and Boy Scout programs. But it was also my job to go into elementary schools and get children to sign up for Cub Scouting.

These visits to schools, which were called Boy Talks, usually took place while elementary children ate lunch. And as you can imagine, they were as chaotic as they sound.

Each Boy Talk I had consisted of a routine. It usually started by me pulling up to the elementary school and chugging as much Red Bull in my car as I could before I would walk into the elementary school with rolls of stickers and fliers I would then stand in front of 500 screaming elementary school children and say my speech.

My speeches to children in school classrooms were always chaotic. Even with a microphone I was always shouting. And every moment I was always fighting to keep the attention of the children who were preoccupied with hitting each other or putting french fries up their noses.

However, giving these speeches was an emotional high for me. And for the many other District Executives who gave them that were in scouting as a youth, they were also personal testimonies. Because not only were we energizing youth who wanted to do new things and have new experiences, but we were also giving a testimony about how much fun we had in scouting at their age and we were sharing our personal experience to persuade the children to join.

One could only imagine the emotional energy among Jesus disciples and others after witnessing the resurrection of the one whom they saw crucified and buried. Witnessing such an event and the emotional energy after such event not only culminated in the creation of the early church. But it also laid the formation of the art of the “first Christian testimony.”

It would be safe to assume that if not only Jesus disciples and followers who were having an emotional high, but Peter was also as he gave this proclamation where the crowd would have been loud and anxious.

All of you listen up,” Peter is saying. This is Jesus, the one whom you crucified. He is more than a prophet and a good man. He is the Messiah, the Holy One proclaimed by David and our other prophets. He is the Savior whom we have been waiting for generations. Every single one of you is a witness to this truth. Either you see Jesus with your own eyes or are now hearing the good news for the first time, you are a witness to what I am today.

This proclamation by Peter is the first of nearly 30 speeches found in the books of Acts. It kicks off like biblical scholar Katheen Bostrom says, “a bottle of fine champagne cracking

the stern of a ship on its inauguration launch. The Jews from Egypt and Mesopotamia and Crete and Arabia and Rome and many other places took the message of Christ back with them and return to their homes. And its through that witnessing and emotional high that Christianity began.”

When looking at today's scripture of the emotional chaos stemming from the witnessing of Jesus resurrection and Peter's proclamation spoke not only to the prosecuted and forgotten living under an oppressive Roman rule, it also speaks to us today. And in a way, gives us an emotional spiritual high much like it did those at the time it took place. Last year I took a course on Disciples Church history which allowed me to learn about The Disciples as I navigated the ordination process with our denomination.

As someone who was raised Presbyterian, what I am finding interesting about the early church leaders of our church were their Presbyterian roots.

One of those Presbyterian ministers who contributed to the early development of our denomination was Barton Stone. Stone, a Presbyterian minister who was the influencer of the Stone Movement in the early 1800s, found himself at conflict with the Presbyterian teachings and the Calvinistic doctrines of total depravity, predestination and unconditional election. He also believed Calvinism had been responsible for the many divisions in the Presbyterian Church.

But there was also other things happening in American Christianity during the 1800s during what was the “Second Great Awakening,” And one of these things got Barton Stone in trouble with Presbyterian church leaders.

Between August 6 to August 13, 1801 Stone and ministers from other Presbyterian and Methodist churches held what would become known as the Cane Ridge Revival. This revival included over 10,000 attendees expressing their relationship with God through outbursts of emotion through songs, words, and their bodies.

“Some wept, others laughed uncontrollably, still others trembled, some ran about, others barked,” one attendee reported.

While the revival included attendees expressing their relationship with outbursts of emotion through songs, words, and their bodies, Presbyterian church leaders censured ministers such as Stone who not only attended these revivals, but for their leadership in them. For these Presbyterian and Methodist church leaders, the rivals were too emotionally driven, to unorthodox and went against the traditional doctrine of the church.

Ever since the beginning of Christianity there has been tension between what was seemed as the traditional expression of one's faith and how the church says we are to express it. And our scripture today about the early start of Christian Church is a great example of that.

A few years ago, I found myself getting into a theological debate with a friend who is an ordained minister with the United Church of Canada. During the debate, I expressed my contentment towards evangelical Christians.

“I am bothered by how the term “evangelical Christians is seen as a negativity, particularly with you Americans,” she said. After all, isn't evangelism what we have been called to do as Christians?

In America, when ever we hear the word evangelize, its a natural reaction for all of us to get that look on our face as if we have just tasted that milk with that questionable expiration date in the back of our fridge or when we learn that one of the Kardashians are in the news again. We get that “ew not again” look on our face.

Perhaps this is because some of us associate the term of a Christian evangelist as someone who stands on a street corner holding a sign warning about the pending rapture and the need to repent right away.

But for Canadians like my friend, the term “evangelical Christians isn't as scary as the way we see it here in the United States.

In fact, Strong's Greek definition of the word is to “a bringer of good news.”

So if we are all called to be evangelical Christians and called to be a witness to the resurrection and the salvation found through Jesus Christ how do we do that? Do we hold a church event in the parking lot of County Market and hold signs? Do we hold a revival here at UniPlace and encourage weeping, dancing, trembling, and uncontrollable laughter?

One of difficulties for many of us in the mainline traditions, particularly those of us who are younger is to talk openly about our faith. For many of us, particularly those who tend to identify themselves as progressive leaning Christians, we have a fear that if we talk about our faith or share our faith story, we would be enforcing the stereotypes that many have about Christians and hypocritical.

However, while it's important for those of our mainline faith tradition to be advocates for social issues ranging from LGBTQ+ equality to addressing the needs of undeserved communities, we must also share our faith testimony with others and how we feel called to by Jesus to carry out his ministry. Because no matter how many people identify themselves as non -religious or how small churches are getting, this is a story people still need to hear and a story they are still seeking to hear.

This past year we've had over 10 different discussions during our Beer and Theology meetups at Murphy's Pub. These discussions have consisted of examining today's topics in biblical times what they mean for us in our own spiritual lives. These topics have ranged from same-sex relationship, gender roles, mental health, racism, and many more.

What amazes me about these meetups is the people who come to them. Many of them who learn about them on the Meetup app and are in their 30s and 40s. For many of them, they are not quick to share their thoughts and opinions even though we express that we are a “safe place” to do so. However, what many have shared is that for many of them, they grew up with a painful relationship with church doctrine and for many, they continue, like many millennials do, with what they consider “the institutional church.” Yet regardless, they are at a point in their life where they are growing older and are seeking a deeper meaning. One of which they may not have sought in their 20s.

What they seek as most people do regardless of how they define themselves as being “nones” or “agnostic” or “spiritual but not religious” is a deeper meaning—an experience that goes beyond what a secular and humanistic society can provide.

Last Sunday, we witnessed the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And this Sunday, whether we call it evangelism or not, are called to be a witness to a world that is divided politically, racially, and economically.

For us as a church, it's a continuing to recognize that it's time to take our ministry beyond these brick and mortal walls and into our communities and neighborhoods and finding ways to bring ministry in new and creative ways. It's also a call for us as a church to continue in being advocates for social justice issues while also not being afraid to share with others our calling from Jesus Christ.

“Our church must not be about liberal religion or conservative religion,” Princeton Seminary Theology Professor William Stacy Johnson shared in a sermon I heard a few years ago. “But it must be about prophetic religion.” This means basing our religion that proclaims Jesus Christ through words followed by action.

There are a lot of messages out there and a lot of people speaking. There are a lot of messages being shared and a lot of emotional highs being shared by some who are sincere and those who are not.

However, despite the overflow of messages, people are listening and thinking. Yes, for many, it takes time to feel safe and trust the source it's coming from. But that is why it's important for us to be patient and also persistent. Because if we share our message and back it up with our actions of love and justice while giving people a “safe space” it will make an impression. For us, it may take time to know what that impression may be on that new church visitor or that new face at community dinner. But if we proclaim our faith while showing love and show compassion, it plants seeds of hope which can someday move mountains in people's lives.

“Evangelism without social work is deficient; social work without evangelism is impotent.” writes John R. Mott

This scripture is also a call for us personally. It's a call for us to share our testimony of what God had brought us through and how we have witnessed and experienced the redemption and liberation through Jesus Christ. It's a call to celebrate the season of Easter, not just on one day of the year, but every day.

And so, this first Sunday after Easter, let us dedicate ourselves to be a witness not only through words but through our compassion, justice, but a witness. But let us rejoice for what we have witnessed last week that despite the difficulties in our world and lives. My friends, here the good news. Through Jesus Christ we find redemption, salvation, and new life. And that is something for us to we should stand, weep, laugh, bark, march and shout Hallelujah! Amen.

## Bibliography

*Feasting on the Word: preaching the Revised common lectionary.* By David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville (Ky.): Westminster John Knox Press, 2011. N. pag. Print.

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