

Witness to the Resurrection

Acts 1:15-26

May 13, 2001

“One of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.” Peter’s first speech to the church after Easter addressed the hard reality that there was a great, gaping hole in the leadership of the church. Even the good, old days of the church were not so good. Their struggles give uncommon comfort in the midst of our own. Jesus Christ, who had been crucified, dead, and buried, had now been raised and had ascended into heaven, but the apostleship of the church was broken and incomplete. Judas Iscariot, “who was guide to those who arrested Jesus,” not only betrayed Jesus Christ, but also, by the same action, wounded the church of Jesus Christ very deeply. One of the twelve, there from the beginning, hand-picked by Jesus Christ, had fallen away, and not quietly, but in a most spectacular and destructive way. It was a scandal. It was an open wound. It was a horrible, impossible possibility, that one chosen and loved by Jesus Christ should fall away. How could the church function after this? How could it move ahead? How could it believe the gospel in the face of such failure?

The first part of the gospel in today’s reading, the leading edge of the good news here, the word of God for us yet today, is that the church goes on. The church of Jesus Christ goes on. Even after what might have appeared to have been a mortal wound, the church of Jesus Christ goes on. It does this because the enemies of Jesus Christ are not allowed to destroy the church of Jesus Christ. God does not permit it. He did not let Judas destroy the early church in its infancy. Neither does he allow those agents of the devil who continue to attack the church today to destroy the church. They may betray the church. They may deny the gospel. They may attack the ministers and the members. They may reject the scripture, the faith, and the teachings of the church. They may reject the polity, the discipline, and the nurture of the church. But what does today’s reading teach us? The church of Jesus Christ goes on. The church of Jesus Christ perseveres. The church of Jesus Christ continues throughout the centuries and into eternity. It does this, not by human strength, not by human goodness, not by human accomplishment, but by the direct will and power of God. The church then had 120 members. Today it has billions. Someday, heaven will be full. The church of Jesus Christ goes on. Let no one deceive you. Do not be fooled by the enemies of Christ and by those who are

detractors of the church. Their mouths are full of lies. They are on the losing side. Their doom is sure. The church of Jesus Christ goes on. Don't you want to be part of the greatest movement in history, part of God's redemptive work, part of that which will survive beyond this world and into eternity? The love we share here is forever. The relationships we are building here will be part of eternity. One day this building will no longer stand. One day the United States of America will no longer exist. One day this planet will vanish. One day the sun will burn out. But you and I, and all the members of the church of Jesus Christ, will continue to exist, and to live, and to love, and to know each other, and to enjoy the mercy of God and the communion of the saints. The church of Jesus Christ goes on, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

The way the church went on in those days was by filling the vacancy in the apostleship and healing the wound inflicted upon the church. It was necessary to have an eye witness to Christ to fulfill this responsibility. Jesus had initially chosen twelve men, and so twelve men it would be. The church is the new Israel, the new people of God, and just as there had been twelve tribes, so were there twelve apostles. Two names were put forward. And they prayed and said, "Lord, who *knows* the hearts of all men, show 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." Matthias, apparently the less prominent of the two, by human calculation, was chosen by God and enrolled with the other eleven apostles. The church of Jesus Christ goes on.

What is especially important to us is not only the number of apostles but the duty of the apostleship and therefore, by extension, the duty of the entire church and the very purpose of our existence. Peter said, "One of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection." That's it: "a witness to his resurrection." This is who we are. This is what we are about. This is what we do. We bear witness to the resurrection. Make no mistake: without the resurrection, we have nothing; with it, we have everything.

In order to insure the authenticity and veracity of the early witness of the church, all of these first apostles were eye witnesses to the baptism, life, ministry, betrayal, resurrection appearances, and ascension of Jesus Christ. They told of what they had seen. They spoke of what they knew. It was not their imagination. It was not wishful thinking. They gave first hand accounts. Their witness provides the basis of all Christian preaching since then.

John Calvin wrote of this passage:

Peter, in appointing himself and his colleagues preachers of the resurrection, puts them under the stringent obligation to teach. He names the resurrection, not because they are to bear witness to that alone, but because, firstly, in that is comprehended the preaching of the death of Christ, and secondly, we have in that the end and the completion of our redemption; also it carries with it the heavenly authority of Christ and the power of the Spirit in protecting his own, in establishing justice and equity, in restoring order, in abolishing the tyranny of sin, and in putting to flight all the enemies of the Church.... The resurrection is mentioned in place of the rest, as being the chief point of the Gospel.¹

The resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is the promise of our own, is the main point of the whole gospel. Though many would deny it today, and though many would quibble over it, and though many would dismiss it, we hold to it firmly as the heart of the gospel. God raised Jesus Christ from the dead and made him alive again, and this is the good news we have not only for ourselves but for the world. Those who are detractors from the resurrection shall not hold sway.

It is written in the Nicene Creed that “we believe one holy catholic and apostolic church.” Sometimes this is misunderstood to apply to an unbroken succession of ordination from the apostles to the present ministers of the church. Even as important as appropriate leadership is, which is one of the points of today’s reading, I would suggest, on the basis of today’s reading, that what is really important is not so much the procedure of succession as the content of the purpose of the apostleship and therefore the content of the purpose of the ministry. The entire purpose of securing a new apostle was to make whole and complete again their witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That was the purpose of the apostleship. That is the duty and high privilege of the church. That is the purpose of the ministry of the church today, to help the whole church in making this witness. That is what it means that we are an apostolic church, not that we have bishops, but that we witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Having said that, and in light of our recognition today of graduates from high school, college, and graduate schools, it is not inappropriate that we should mention

¹John Calvin, *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*, eds. David W. Torrance and Thomas W. Torrance, vol. 6, *The Acts of the Apostles 1-13*, trans. John W. Fraser and W. J. G. McDonald (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965), 6:44.

Christian vocation. God calls everyone of us into some life work. God gives us gifts, talents, and abilities, and calls us into some life work that contributes to the building up of human community. Today I want to mention in particular the call to the ministry of the gospel. In every generation, in every congregation, the church needs preachers of the gospel of Jesus Christ to carry on the witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Perhaps one of our graduates here today, or perhaps one of our other young people, or perhaps someone listening to us on the radio, is being called into the ministry of the church. If this is happening to you, take it entirely seriously. Do not brush it aside. Do not ignore it. You cannot hide from it. Ask yourself what God is calling you to do. Someone here, and perhaps several, are being called and led into the ministry and into the leadership of the church to help carry the witness to Christ's resurrection into the next generation, into other congregations, and maybe into other nations. Are you the one? Are you the one whom God is calling and choosing today for this task and responsibility? Ask God about that on your knees in prayer. No, no one is up to the task. But God will provide. "One of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection."

To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.

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