

## ***"To This We Are Witnesses"***

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Eastertide, Sunday, April 15, 2018

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

- Our Eastertide Worship Theme is Redemption, Restoration, Resurrection.
- On April 15, we'll draw upon the narrative in **Acts 3 & 4** throughout the service.
- At 10:30 AM, Anna Strickland will open the service with a word of welcome and go over announcements, then read **ACTS 3: 1-10** to set the theme and tone.
- After leading the Call to Worship, Invocation and *Gloria Patri*, Elder Rev. Michael Yandell will read from **ACTS 3: 11-16 and 4: 1-4**.
- After the pastoral prayer and anthem, the sermon follows.
- Elder Susan Stembel will read **ACTS 4: 32-37** when she extends the Invitation to Faithful Stewardship.
- The Communion Invitation will include **ACTS 4: 5-11**.
- After Communion, when Anna and the children return to the Sanctuary after being gone during Children's Church, she and the young people will lead the Benediction, which will include reading **ACTS 4: 11-12**.

### **Acts 3: 11-16 (NRSV)**

<sup>11</sup> While he clung to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them in the portico called Solomon's Portico, utterly astonished. <sup>12</sup> When Peter saw it, he addressed the people, "You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk? <sup>13</sup> The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him. <sup>14</sup> But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, <sup>15</sup> and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. <sup>16</sup> And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you.

### **Acts 4: 1-4 (NRSV)**

While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came to them, <sup>2</sup> much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead. <sup>3</sup> So they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. <sup>4</sup> But many of those who heard the word believed; and they numbered about five thousand.

### Sermon

She stood in front of the bright lights of late night television.  
She was quite a sight in her bulky black boots that laced up her legs.  
She looked into the eyes of the live studio audience

and the eyes she knew were watching on TVs in homes across the nation.  
Over there was the late-night talk show host who was up for jokes and celebrities,  
and she was neither.

She stood still.

She spoke clearly and succinctly,  
knowing that she only had two minutes,  
two minutes to make an impression,  
two minutes to get her message across,  
two minutes to make a world of difference.

She told a story.

She said she'd heard of men and women working the land  
in countries where past wars and current civil strife  
had left landmines scattered and hidden,  
landmines waiting in deadly silence and mystery for years & years,  
waiting for unsuspecting people to touch them,  
waiting to obliterate limbs and lives.

She said she'd invented landmine resistant boots,  
handmade boots with thick soles of leather and metal to deflect the blast.

The thick boots were field-tested, battle-tested, effective and expensive.  
Shepherds and tillers of the soil would benefit if they wore such thick boots.  
However, the cost of the boots was prohibitive to farmers and shepherds.

She said she'd made a website and then she named it,  
saying you can give \$10 or \$100 or more  
toward the purchase of pairs of landmine resistant boots  
for our global neighbors who had the need yet not the means  
for what would save their lives and feet.

That's it.

Her minutes were up,  
and the talk show host was back,  
cracking jokes and announcing the special celebrity guest.

*My Lord and my God!*

She'd two minutes to make a world of difference, and sometimes that is all we get.

She used every second to drive home her passion,  
her creativity and resourcefulness, her love for humanity,  
her hope that there were others,  
thousands and millions of other people who cared,  
who wanted to make a world of difference.

Her passion and compassion and witness blew my mind.

You know, as a matter of fact, I did not see her on television.

I did not witness her passion and drive and hope for humanity.

I heard her story second hand, and now you are hearing it third hand.

I heard someone else tell me the story, someone who had seen her live on late night TV.

So, I researched it and found that it is all true,  
and now here I am telling you her story,  
all worked up because someone wants to make a world of difference  
and is inviting us - you and me and you and you -

to join in and get on board.

Passion is catching.

Compassion that bubbles up and overflows makes a world of difference.

A changed life, a life restored, a soul resurrected,

a life filled with purpose for the common good is contagious.

On the same night that Jesus of Nazareth was betrayed

and given over to the authorities to be crucified,

Peter was afraid, cowering in a dark courtyard.

He stood near a fire, trying to stay warm and incognito

when someone recognized him as being a follower of Jesus.

"I do not know him," Peter said to the woman.

Later, someone else recognized him as a friend of Jesus.

"Man, I am not."

A third person said Peter must be a follower of the man from Galilee

because he is also a Galilean.

"I do not know what you are saying," said Peter.

Then a rooster crowed, and he realized he had denied Jesus three times,

just as Jesus had predicted Peter would.

And Peter went out and wept bitterly.

After the crucifixion, after the resurrection,

after Jesus returned from the dead to new life

and to show us the way to life everlasting,

Jesus returned to Peter and broke bread with him on a beach.

Three times Jesus called upon Peter to love his people, feed his people, serve his people.

Peter knew he was forgiven.

In that moment he was empowered to move forward with life,

to tell his story, to be a witness for love, for mercy, for forgiveness.

Now we find Peter in Solomon's Portico.

He is out and about in the light of day.

He is in the public sphere, in the common arena of the gathering of the community.

He only has a few minutes to let out his gratitude and grace.

"To this we are witnesses.

And by faith in his name,

his name itself has made this man strong,

whom you see and know;

and the faith that is through Jesus

has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you."

We see a new man, a forgiven, forgiving man of faith who lays himself on the line.

When you are forgiven, when someone forgives you,

you feel like Peter did, so glad, so grateful,

so alive and powerful and passionate.

You can't keep it in; nor should you.  
Your joy and relief and power is catching.

Just as Peter had done when he entered the city and said to a person in need, you can say to a neighbor who is blind or lame, broke or broken, helpless or hopeless, "Rise! Walk! Be brave! God is with you! I will journey with you, in the name of Jesus!"

I speak from a similar place, for the forgiveness that changed my life.  
I got in trouble,

I got kicked out of school,

I called home from far away, in tears, ashamed and shamed,

feeling as low and lousy as can be, blubbering out an "I'm sorry."

The voices on the other end of the long-distance call

said, "We love you. Come home."

And in that moment, I went from knowing about Jesus to knowing Jesus.

Forgiveness, hospitality, grace, unconditional love

went from abstract words I had heard countless times;

they became a blessed reality in my life.

When I got home, my home church took me in, loved on me, kissed me

and cuffed me

on the back of my head

put me back on my feet

and sent me back to where I came from

to finish what had been started.

Jesus became real because His followers were real.

The Church became God incarnate; God with some skin on it.

Every time I tell my story I get a lump in my throat.

As the Mumford Sons sang, "You forgave, and I won't forget."

When you forgive, you give away power.

You empower.

When you are forgiven, when your "I'm sorry" is heard, you become grateful.

You are empowered.

It's both an ending and a new beginning.

Everyone here has a story to tell.

Your story may be about forgiveness offered, or received, or shared.

Your story may be about a helping hand offered, or received, or shared.

Your story may be about a healing scar and mercy offered, or received, or shared.

You have a story,

and in the telling

we witness your passion, your power, your persona exemplified.

The way you live your faith out loud

may be the only sermon your neighbor experiences.

Love someone. Serve somebody. Do justice. Embody piety.  
Pray for someone you know and someone you don't know yet.  
Seek to connect your passion and skills and resources to make a world of difference.  
Then, for goodness' sake, tell someone!  
We inform from a distance; we impact from up close.  
When you get a chance to share, go for it.  
Trust me, God gives you plenty of chances.  
Make an impression; tell your story; share your passion; let your light shine.  
*My Lord and my God!*

There is a legendary story in my family from my childhood days  
about the day my mother Buffy was in a back room of the house  
and she heard a knock on the door.  
My brothers answered the knock, and being only 5 or 6 or 7 years old,  
said loudly, "Daddy is not home!" and then promptly slammed the door.  
Buffy hustled to the front and reopened the door  
and helped to smooth a church member's ruffled feathers.  
That afternoon she taught her sons how to open the front door very wide  
and then say, "Won't you please come in and have a seat?  
My mommy or daddy will be right with you."  
A few days later she was taking a bath when she heard a knock on the door,  
and then a young voice said, "Won't you please come in and have a seat?  
My mommy or daddy will be right with you."  
She hustled to get dressed, and when she walked to the front of our home  
she found the living room full of Jehovah's Witnesses.  
Two hours later Buffy was silently wishing  
she had qualified the hospitality lesson she taught her sons.

We are richly, deeply blessed to be given two minutes to make a world of difference,  
and sometimes that is all we get.  
Let's use the opportunities before us to release our passion,  
our creativity and resourcefulness, our love for humanity,  
our hope that there are others, thousands and millions of others who care  
and want to make a world of difference as well.  
Imagine what we will look like and sound like and feel like down the road  
because we dare to share our own personal and communal stories.  
Imagine what the city of God will be like  
because you and I decided on Sunday, April 15, 2018,  
we are going to take a risk and live out loud.  
The point is to give another soul, another family, another home  
the same gift of God that you have:  
the gift of hope, healing and hospitality.  
The point is to love and serve the homeless and hungry and hopeless  
inside and outside our sanctuary and along our city streets.  
The end of the story—and the new beginning—  
is the lame walking, the blind seeing, the thirsty drinking.

The end of the story—and the new beginning—  
is redemption, restoration, resurrection.

And how do you think the story will be known if unless we tell it?

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*

#### Call to Confession

Every now and then we say the right thing at the right time. On such occasions we feel really good, and really connected with the holy and with one another. If only it happened more often! Let's confess the errors of our ways, especially when we've said or done the wrong thing that left an unfortunate mark or scar. Let us also draw strength from the transforming power of God who inspires and informs us to grow into beings who, more often than not, get it right on the way to reconciliation.

#### Assurance of Forgiveness

Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said..., "Rulers of the people and elders...this Jesus is 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.' There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved." (Acts 4: 8, 11-12) Praise God! The Holy Spirit anoints and fills you to overflowing, cleansing your soul and empowering you to speak truthfully, act justly, and love unconditionally.

#### Call to Offering

Econ 101: If you and I give what we gave last year, we will give less than we did last year. If we give what we gave ten years ago, we're giving about half of what we gave then. The language of tithing is not the language of final arrival, but of growth. You and I need to give. Our church needs to receive to fulfill God's mission. Please, let each one of us support Christ's church with our generosity.

#### Prayer for Offering

Please bless these gifts, God, for what they will accomplish in your name, and because each gift is a sacrifice, a show of support, and a tangible sign of faithful stewardship. Amen.

#### Invitation to Holy Communion

Consider what the German theologian Jurgen Moltman meant when he said, "We have attempted to view the resurrection from the viewpoint of history. Perhaps the time has come for us to view history from the viewpoint of the resurrection." When the tomb was suddenly emptied on Easter morning because Jesus had risen from the dead, the whole world shifted on its axis. All was new! In a cosmic moment that shook the universe, the whole people of God were made new, renewed, transformed, reformed. Once God gives you the gift of resurrection power, you are never the same. You walk by faith, see with vision, imagine what can be, and forget the fears that lie and limit. Come to the Table of the Lord and be set free.