

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως  
Easter 2-C; 28 April 2019  
St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster

**Witnesses**

*In nomine...*

**I. Intro**

There's a new superhero movie out. This week my kids were on spring break, so on my day off, we went to see it. Superhero movies are fun for escapism, but they always leave me feeling a little disappointed. In part because of the aggressive, one-dimensional view of the world they portray: it doesn't match up to reality as I experience it. And in part because of the confident, super-masculine traits they hold up as heroic. I want to be a hero – but I don't match up to that!

On my first job out of college, I was hired into a startup whose founder I knew. He was a kind of super-hero: both famous and a little notorious in his industry. We were management consultants, serving large companies whose names and brands you know. When I was introduced to my biggest client, one of the biggest multi-nationals in the world, the one for whom I would be the point person, my boss took me to an early meeting and urged me, "Speak up, say anything: I'll back you up." But here's the deal: I knew NOTHING about their business. I knew nothing about our project. All I knew how to do was to write computer code. I wanted to be a hero, like my boss, or at least a faithful sidekick, like Robin. But in the end I said nothing, because I didn't have anything to say. I couldn't match up to the role I was being invited to play.

**II. Thesis**

So I feel a lot of empathy for Jesus' disciples, especially the 12 apostles, his closest friends, as we encounter them in the Gospels. We like to make fun of them for being bumbly who say stupid things. James and John ask for important jobs, Peter denies Jesus on the night of the passion, the eleven refuse to believe the testimony of the women who had met the risen Lord, and Thomas refuses to believe, even after being told by his friends, until he is invited to stick his own dirty fingers into Jesus' open wounds.

But then we see this complete turn-around in the book of Acts. The apostles become superheroes of the faith, martyrs in every sense of the word. What changed?

At the beginning of the book of Acts, the apostles have one final encounter with the bodily presence of the resurrected Jesus. Then they begin to experience a new manifestation of God's Holy Spirit in their lives. And what they find is that, as they live into the things God teaches them to do, such as telling others about Jesus in ways they can understand, or caring for the sick, or feeding the hungry, people take notice.

### **III. Good News**

What I notice about the apostles is not that they have suddenly become super-heroes. They are not taking over the world or forcing their ideas on anyone. They're not even offering arguments and proofs for what they believe. No creeds, no systematic theologies, no arcane rituals. What the apostles have to share, over and over, is the story of their own encounter with Jesus, and the evidence of how they have chosen to live their own lives in response to that encounter. That story we sometimes call testimony as from a witness. The apostles say, "...we are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him." The apostles are just telling what they know, and as they do so they are becoming increasingly aware of God's Holy Spirit testifying within them and through them to this truth that has been revealed to them and which they are now proclaiming to others both in word and deed.

### **IV. Invitation**

The invitation I hear in this story is two-fold.

One is not to live a life shaped by fear. The immediate context of today's reading is there in Acts. Just a few verses before today's reading, the apostles were jailed overnight for their teaching. Just a few verses later they were nearly executed, but then flogged instead. Flogged! I'm not even going to get into that! But can you imagine?!? This is not the apostles' first encounter with the Sanhedrin. But their response to a previous talking-to was to pray to God what? Protection? A cleaner separation of church and state? Freedom to proclaim their faith? They prayed for none of these things! Instead, they prayed for courage to continue to live as

God had called them to live in the face of opposition. To be faithful in the place and time where they found themselves. This was the fruit of the Holy Spirit at work in them.

We today live in a time and place that often does not always want to hear our message. Christianity has a well-earned reputation for being small-minded, judgmental, and exclusionary. One of the things I love about the Episcopal Church is that I rarely hear sermons designed to evoke feelings of guilt and shame. Because that's not what we're about. We know our guilt and shame were nailed to the cross along with Jesus, who offers us something better instead. We have encountered a God who has already forgiven not just some sins, but *the sin* of the world: all of it! We have encountered a God who invites everyone into a loving relationship with God, no matter what. That's good news!

The second part of this invitation is full of grace for me. Because God is not asking me, like my first employer did, to walk into a room and speak what I don't know. God doesn't demand of me anything that God hasn't already given me and cultivated in me in the first place. The stories I tell others about God don't have to pretend to be something more than what I know. God's invitation is based on what I *do* know. The ways I *have* encountered God in my life. The reasons why I bothered to show up to church *today*. Those are my testimony, my witness, my message that I am invited to share very naturally with others as I live my life in community.

Here in this Easter season, God is inviting us not to be super-heroes, but to be authentic, genuine witnesses to the love of God as we have experienced it in our own lives. That is what Lent and Holy Week are all about: to remember how God's story of redemption intersects with the stories of our own lives.

In this Easter season, I invite you to take some time to reflect on your experiences of Holy Week and of God at work in your life. What is the story you will tell when someone asks about your experience of God? What does faith mean to you?

God doesn't call us to be superheroes. The superhero bit: maybe you could say that was what Jesus did. Albeit in a more nuanced, less hyper-aggressive way. Jesus took care of the big stuff, creating a world that's safe for us to follow his example in the small stuff, the particular stuff of our individual lives. May God give us the boldness to follow the apostles' examples, with lives that channel and are enabled by and reflect the super-power of God's love. FIN