

Easter 2 - A (2020)  
Acts 2:14-15, 22-24  
1 Peter 1:3c-9

Only a week past Easter, but we're jumping ahead in the story of the early church jumping ahead 50 days. So, from our reading from Acts today, we see Peter, standing in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, raising his voice and launching into a sermon.

The introduction wasn't great.

When you have to preface a sermon by telling the congregation you're not drunk as Peter does in verse 15, there's a pretty good chance it could all go downhill from there! Imagine that happening today. The preacher steps to the pulpit, or out on the stage, or staggers into a circle amid the congregation and says, "Folks, just so you know, I'm not drunk, I swear. I haven't been drinking, really, not a drop ...". For his first sermon, Peter did not start out well.

Many preachers remember their first sermon. I remember my first sermon – kind of. It's something I'd rather forget. I was nervous and I'm not sure that it went over very well. I did receive one written comment – a positive comment and, while I don't remember all the details, it gave me encouragement to go on. But, with every sermon, I'm not always sure how it comes across.

It's like that old story about a preacher who was leaving a congregation on his last Sunday. At the end of the service, he stood at the door while the people filed out and said their last goodbyes.

One woman came to the preacher weeping, full of emotion. The preacher attempted to comfort her. "There, there, sister. Even though I'm leaving, I'm sure the bishop will send you a wonderful preacher."

Through her tears she replied, "That's what they've been telling us for 20 years and it hasn't happened yet!"

If you read Peter's sermon through, it takes less than five minutes. Chances are if I went that short on a Sunday morning, the SPRC would either want to cut my salary in half or double it -- depending on which direction its appreciation was flowing!

But Peter's first sermon boils down the essential content of the gospel into a message that would be repeated over and over again by people who have never needed seminary degrees in order to preach. It's the simple affirmation *that the Jesus who was crucified is the Jesus who has*

*been raised from the dead, and all of us are witnesses to that fact through the eyes of faith, the witness of Scripture and in the ways we live our lives.*

In a world of YouTube videos and cable television and streaming services, storytelling and the art of preaching are sometimes considered to be a dying relic of days gone by. Everything moves fast and so many people are plugged into so many different things. The internet has expanded the contacts people make exponentially and it can be difficult to preach a message to so many different people with so many different viewpoints and theologies, not to mention the different ways that people hear things.

Preaching is the art of fleshing out the message and telling the story in ways that people can relate to from whatever background they have come. It is laying out the groundwork again – the basics of faith.

These are things that most Christians can agree on. When Peter preached that first sermon after Pentecost, he was stating what the early church had come to believe about Jesus of Nazareth. In other words, this was not just Peter reciting his personal beliefs, this was the preacher proclaiming the common beliefs of the Christian tradition of the time. I believe that there are things that every Christian who hears this message on Facebook Live or who will hear it on YouTube at other times can agree on.

Peter's sermon reminds us of those things: we are born again because God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Now we live with a great expectation, that those who believe will share that resurrection. Though we may have trials, we can overcome by grace.

What would it be like if each follower of Jesus could learn to have the hope and joy of resurrection of which 1 Peter speaks? What would it mean if we could reach beyond our own situations and bring that hope and joy to others by our actions and words?

The Christian French philosopher, Blaise Pascal, said that in every human heart there is a God-shaped vacuum that can never be filled by any created thing. The vacuum can only be filled by God, made known through Jesus Christ.

The only explanation for Jesus being able to fill that vacuum is that he was raised from the dead on Easter Sunday morning. Anyone who has had a personal dynamic relationship with Jesus understands Pascal's thinking.

The Peter passage was written near the end of the first century to Christians who never had the chance to see Jesus in person. Those early

Christians were already beginning to suffer persecutions for their faith. Many today can relate to what Peter is saying for there are a number of people today who are suffering and affected by the coronavirus pandemic and the resulting restrictions and the economic fallout not to mention normal sickness and death. Peter writes in this chapter of his letter, "It is by his, i.e. God's, great mercy . . ." no matter what we do or how far we may fall away, God keeps coming to us, bringing resurrection and raising us up! We are already receiving the outcome of our faith!

The readers of this letter, 1 Peter, were removed by miles and decades from the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Not only were they not eyewitnesses of Jesus' ministry, they had probably never even met an eyewitness. In that way, their experience was like ours. We are not first-hand eyewitnesses of the resurrected Jesus, but with the eyes of faith, we can see the signs around us and are called to tell the story.

My first sermon wasn't very polished, but hopefully I've improved since then. Your first sermon might not be very eloquent, but that's not the point. At first glance, Peter seems totally unqualified to preach. He hadn't spent his last three years in seminary, but in the school of apostolic embarrassment.

- + He wasn't known for careful study before speaking, but rather had a "ready, fire, aim" approach to shooting his mouth off. He was the one, after all, who rightly identified Jesus as Messiah but then rebuked the Son of God because he didn't agree with Jesus' cross-shaped agenda (Matthew 16:13-23).

- + Witnessing the glory of Jesus' transfiguration, his first response was not to worship but rather to form a building committee (Luke 9:28-36).

- + This fisherman had a chance to actually walk on water rather than sailing on it, but his lack of faith made him sink (Matthew 14:22-33).

- + When Jesus needed his prayerful support the most, there in the garden of Gethsemane, Peter fell asleep (Mark 14:37).

- + When Jesus chose to go peacefully with his captors, Peter turned to violence. Yet, he wasn't even very good at that, missing his target and cutting off a servant's ear instead (John 18:10-11).

- + Having boldly proclaimed that he would follow Jesus even unto death (Matthew 26:35; Mark 14:31; Luke 22:33; John 13:37), he

instead denied that he even knew Jesus -- not once, but three times (Luke 22:59-62 and parallels).

+ When he found out that Jesus was alive, his first response was to go back to his old job – fishing (John 21:3).

If you were looking for a qualified preacher to deliver the first Christian sermon ever, you'd probably look over this track record and ask the divine Bishop to send you someone else.

Then again, the Scriptures reveal time and again that God usually doesn't call the most qualified to speak for him, but qualifies the called instead. Although Peter was largely a bumbling, impetuous disciple before his first sermon, he had learned the truth about Jesus the hard way. No one knew better than he that Jesus could forgive and restore those who had betrayed him out of sin and fear. He had experienced it all, and now he had a story to tell that no theological degree could match.

In our two Bible readings today, we have Peter giving his testimony to how Christ was raised from the dead and came to him, raising him from death to new life also. Peter, who denied knowing Jesus three times. Peter, who must have felt more deeply than anyone the weight of his own failure.

What did God do with Peter, this broken, ashamed, deeply doubting man? God raised him up to be the first witness, the first preacher, the first one to tell others the good news of Jesus Christ! God then led Peter and Paul to take the message beyond the chosen people and share it with the Gentiles. Tradition tells us that God then took Peter on to found the church in Rome, and lead as its first bishop.

And whether or not the first letter attributed to Peter was from his own hand, it is surely representative of Peter's own, personal experience of Christ having given him a new birth into living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

In good times and in troubled times, the world needs to hear not just hope, but the reality of God's promise fulfilled. In all the difficult times, God's grace allows us to overcome the difficulties and the dead can be raised and new life is not just possible but guaranteed.

There are as many ways to preach God's message of good news as there are people to hear it. And each one of us has a way to tell the story in the way we can tell it. You may not know who needs to hear it or if they have heard it or if they've accepted it, but the important thing is to tell the story. Tell it like you mean it and don't be afraid to tell it because of the difference it has made to you in your life.