

Acts 2:14a, 22-32

¹⁴But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, ²²"You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know— ²³this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. ²⁴But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. ²⁵For David says concerning him, 'I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken; ²⁶therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; moreover my flesh will live in hope. ²⁷For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience corruption. ²⁸You have made known to me the ways of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence.' ²⁹"Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. ³⁰Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. ³¹Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying, 'He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption.' ³²This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses.

John 20:19-31

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." ²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." ²⁸Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." ³⁰Now Jesus did many

other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

SMALL STEPS OF FAITH

When we read this passage from Acts, we can't help but marvel at the great change that occurs in Peter. This is the guy who denied Jesus three times, and who hid behind locked doors even after Jesus appeared to him. **I wonder what sort of experience it must have been to cause him to make such a bold public testimony.** For me to preach here is one thing; to do so in Times Square is quite another. In the church you might expect me to proclaim Christ boldly and enthusiastically, but even as a pastor I could not make the same kind of public proclamation as Peter. Could any of us?

I'll be honest; I'm **a bit concerned about my image**, about what people think about me, and I don't want people to think I'm a lunatic. It's much easier for me to wear this nice clerical collar so that they know I'm a pastor, and mind my own business, and let people come to me on an individual basis to talk about faith. It's much easier to wear a cross necklace, or have a bumper sticker with that little fish and the Greek letters in the middle of it, something not quite so direct, so blunt. I think most of us are like this regarding our faith. But I don't think that Peter or Thomas or the other disciples were any different from us in this respect; people have always been self-conscious, and people don't like to draw too much attention to themselves, especially when that attention could lead to their arrest and possibly their execution. So something else must have prompted Peter and Thomas and the other disciples to bust out of their hiding place and start declaring Jesus as the risen Savior.

The simple answer would be that the Holy Spirit fell upon them, and it's true that the Holy Spirit did fall upon them. But having the Holy Spirit fall upon you is **not the same as coming down with a flu** – the Holy Spirit is not some sort of divine laughing gas that takes over your body and sends you into fits of hysteria (I remember when it was called the Holy Ghost, and I thought it to be something mysterious and a bit scary, so I guess people started referring to it as the Holy Spirit which is not a great improvement; it's still just as mysterious even if the name is slightly less scary). The Holy Spirit certainly did lead the disciples to boldly declare the Resurrected Christ, but it worked in a far different way than a virus works, because, if you recall, the Holy Spirit is one third of the Trinity, which means it is fully God, as Jesus Christ is fully God and as the Father/Creator of the world is fully

God. So when the Holy Spirit fills us we are fully conscious of God's presence, and more specifically Christ's presence, and Christ's presence can cause a very strong physical and emotional reaction within us. The Spirit empowers us to know Jesus Christ and to know his presence, and that can certainly bowl you over. It may not bowl you over in the same way that it bowled over the disciples, who knew Jesus in the flesh, who traveled with him in the years leading up to his death and resurrection, and though you and I have not shared that kind of experience with Jesus, the Holy Spirit still has the power to bowl us over.

I've read the newspaper thousands of times, and I do so without a lot of emotion, and I look at the pictures and read the articles in a pretty humdrum manner. But if I'm reading the paper and I come across an article about my wife and see her picture there, my heart starts racing, I'll call her and tell her about it, I'll clip out the article, and I'll probably go out and buy a few more copies of the paper. Why? Because *my wife* is in the paper! I want to tell people about it. In other words, the relationship determines my reaction to that newspaper article. It determines how excited I am and how likely I am to proclaim the news to others.

The same holds true with respect to Jesus Christ; the better we know him, the more likely we are to *proclaim* him. Knowing the mechanics of salvation – that Jesus-died-for-my-sins-so-I-would-have-eternal-life is different from knowing Jesus himself, and so you're not going to be a terribly enthusiastic evangelist. Knowing Bible verses is not going to make you a terribly enthusiastic evangelist. To be an enthusiastic evangelist, to be an enthusiastic *Christian*, you need to be enthusiastic about Jesus, and for that you need to know him as the risen Savior, with a lot of emphasis on *RISEN – He is alive today and working in you*. If he's your Savior who rose two thousand years ago and you haven't heard from him since, he's not going to be much of a source of inspiration for you. But the better you come to know him as the Living God, the Risen Christ, the more enthusiastic you'll be, and the more boldly you'll proclaim him. Which begs the question: *how do we get to know Jesus better?* The simplest answer is to study scripture and pray. It works! Building the relationship takes time, but there's plenty of scripture to study and there's plenty of time to pray, and like the love between husband and wife grows steadily over time, so too will your relationship with Jesus Christ. And the more time you invest in it the better the relationship becomes.

This morning we will study scripture a little, and we'll pray a little. As a result your relationship with Jesus Christ will improve a little. I don't know if any of you to leave here today and immediately start proclaiming Jesus Christ inside the Staten Island Mall, though I would be thrilled if you did. I

don't expect it because even those closest to Jesus, who lived with him and traveled with him, were reluctant to speak much about Jesus for awhile. None of the disciples were declaring anything in the days immediately following Jesus' resurrection. They were afraid of being arrested themselves for their association with Jesus; Peter came very close to being arrested and had to deny knowing Jesus to avoid arrest, and the rest of the disciples had fled the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane, afraid of meeting the same fate as their teacher. Even after news of the resurrection had reached them, the disciples remained behind closed doors...which may lead us to believe that they were not just afraid of the Romans or the Temple police; they may have been afraid of Jesus himself. After all, if Jesus were really alive, what kind of mood was he in? If they imagined that he might have somehow survived the terrible ordeal of the cross, he might not be in the best of spirits when he dropped by to visit. One of his disciples had betrayed him, one had openly denied knowing him, and all the others had abandoned him. They had not performed well when it mattered most. They must have felt not only fear but shame. What would Jesus say to them? What would he do to them?

I remember when I was 16 and got my driver's license. When you lived in rural Virginia, and you're a teenage, driving meant everything. My nearest friend was five miles away, and most lived ten or more miles away. There were no busses or trains or ferries, so driving meant everything. Of course to my father it meant additional expense of having a teenage driver on your insurance policy. Well as a wild and carefree teen, I was not the best at observing speed limits, and within a few months of receiving my license I also received my first speeding ticket (66 in a 55). Well I told my father who handled it with grace, but told me not to get another one that year lest the insurance premiums get outrageous. Well guess what? I received the second one. You know how hard it is to tell your dad, after he's warned you? I don't remember how I broke the news; only that I dreaded telling him. Now imagine that you have abandoned person who you have believed to be the greatest thing since sliced bread, *hung him out to dry*, so to speak, and he's alive! I imagine that part of the reason the disciples locked the doors of the upper room was to keep JESUS out.

Well it didn't work. Jesus entered through locked doors, which must have scared the disciples even more! But then Jesus says something quite simple that probably caused them to let out a communal sigh of relief; he said "Shalom," or "Shalama" in Aramaic, which we translate as "Peace" but not peace in the casual, hippy understanding; Shalom means much more than "peace." Shalom is the root of the word "Islam" which means "submission to God" Shalom means completeness, wholeness, harmony, and reconciliation. "Shalom" is understood to be a state or condition that God

brings about. To the disgraced band of disciples it was the most welcome word they could hear from their Lord. Jesus brought them peace akin to grace. What "shalom" communicated to the disciples was divine forgiveness, Jesus had been crucified for blasphemy, for claiming the authority of God, and part that authority involved the forgiveness of sins. Jesus not only forgives his disciples for their lack of nerve; he tells them that they too have the authority to forgive others, to forgive one another.

And I believe it was this magnanimous display of grace that caused Thomas to go beyond declaring "Christ is risen" and declare something much more profound: "My Lord and my God," He took that step from acknowledging that Jesus was unique in God's eyes to acknowledging that he was God himself. It was the magnanimous display of grace, grace that sought after Peter and asked him to take care of Christ's sheep despite the fact that he had three times denied knowing Jesus, that caused Peter to declare Jesus' lordship. It is the very nature of God to forgive us, to fix what is broken, and to believe in us even when we don't believe in ourselves.

No, we may not have the courage or faith to declare Jesus our Savior the way Peter did in Jerusalem, the way Thomas must have done in India and elsewhere. But experiencing such grace and forgiveness may bring us a bit closer to that end. It may bring you a bit closer to knowing the Risen Christ as the one who forgives and doesn't lose faith in *you*. To know God, to know Christ, as one who brings "Shalom" to our broken lives and our broken world can bring us closer to that joy that in turn leads us to boldly declare Christ's lordship. May the Holy Spirit draw each of us closer to Jesus Christ, that we may declare his mighty works, works that he has wrought within us and works that he can do within all those who need to know such grace.