

So, it's been one heck of a stressful, exhausting, whirlwind week for my family. And yesterday, I told my husband I didn't think this would be one of my best sermons. Matt looked at me and said, "Don't worry, honey, people only half listen to the sermons anyhow."

This past Monday, I received the kind of call every parent dreads: my daughter telling me she'd been in a car accident. She said she was okay, but she was crying hysterically, so I couldn't get details. I asked her to put her friend Jason, who'd been her passenger, on the phone. Then I started with the typical questions you ask when there's an accident: Are you hurt? Are you safely off the road? Did you call the non-emergency police number? Is the car drivable? Jason responded, his voice calm and clear. And I thought, alright, it's a fender bender, but thank God they're okay.

I drove to the scene, my mind still processing this as a minor accident. It even drifted to thoughts of who might be at fault and whether my insurance would go up. But when I got to the intersection, that train of thought stopped in its tracks at the sight before me: a firetruck, an ambulance, three police cars,

EMTs examining Jordan and Jason, a tow-truck driver sweeping glass from the road, Jordan's CRV, its side completely crushed in and airbag deployed.

The short summary: Jordan and another vehicle turning left on green got t-boned by a school bus approaching from the perpendicular intersection.

Jordan and Jason were very lucky to walk away from that wreck. Two seconds later, two feet distance in the point of impact, it could've been a very different story. Indeed, I am able to find good news in this story. At least physically, Jordan is not seriously injured. The school bus had no children in it. No one got taken away by the ambulance. I thank God for all these things.

But what if it had been a different story? The kind of gut-wrenching, devastating, life-shattering event that happens to people in various ways every day. If disaster struck and the worst happened, how would I have witnessed to the goodness of God then?

As I considered our readings today, it occurred to me the apostles must have felt some degree of devastation after losing their beloved Jesus, yet again. About 40 days now they've been with their resurrected Lord, who spends time expounding on the kingdom of God. And here we are this last Sunday of Easter, Acts 1 recounting the ascension of Jesus.

The apostles are wrestling with the question of when God's promise to Israel will be fulfilled, and Jesus tells them it's not for them to know the time. Instead, he instructs them how to use the Holy Spirit power they'll be given: "...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Here Jesus establishes that God's kingdom is not bound by national borders, nor does it wield the world's power. He promises a spirit that will empower them to witness to the Good News. And then, he leaves them.

And the disciples, alone again, must figure out how to move forward, amid the chaos, danger, and confusion of the moment.

Everyday life bears for us a similar question: How do we witness in this broken world? Amid suffering, when we're in pain, when loved ones fall ill, when we lose someone close to us, when we see violence and hatred spreading like wildfire around us?

We are not all that different than the early Church. They too were divided, scattered, and afraid, trying to figure out how to follow Jesus' commission.

The Lord knew this would not be easy for the apostles. The resurrected Jesus deliberately spent time before his ascension establishing firm footing, reassuring the disciples, teaching them how to build up the kingdom, calling them to bear witness to the glory of God.

How do we do this, irrespective of our circumstances?

I want to stop here with a moment of full transparency: Preachers often pose difficult questions without having good answers ourselves. We try to find ways to help answer these questions, without offering cliches and oversimplifying. We

believe posing the question is more important than delivering answers. But still, we know we're expected to at least provide some helpful insights, and often, we fall short. When I find myself in danger of this, I return to the text. And this morning's scripture offers many possibilities in considering how we're called to witness.

First, let's think about the fact that eleven men standing on a Palestinian hillside watched their Lord, their leader, their beloved Messiah vanish into the heavens. And as they stand there, amazed, two men in white ask the why they're looking upward. So together, they return to Jerusalem to wait—wait for Jesus' return, not knowing what lay ahead for them. The eleven along with the women, likely the witnesses to the empty tomb, as well as Jesus' mother and brothers. This humble group forms the first Christian congregation. From this, the Church is born.

Contemporary theologian Randler Mixon says, "At least by implication, this passage recognizes the central place of community in the life of the church. It is not enough to go it alone. They met, traveled, and worked together. We too must

meet, travel, and work together in Christ's name. We need each other's witness as support, challenge and care, in order to live into the possibilities and expectations of God's realm." The passage calls us "to be both Great Commandment people—loving God with our whole being and our neighbors as ourselves; and Great Commission people—carrying the good news of God's love in Christ to the ends of the earth."

But how exactly do we do this? I mean, it looks good on paper. It looks good until you get hit by a bus.

Scripture gives some insights on this, specifically in Acts' account of the apostles' actions following the ascension. Seeing Jesus lifted up out of their sight, these men of Galilee return to Jerusalem, and gather. They gather in community and they pray, receiving the power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus promised before he left them. A power that offered unfathomable possibilities to the apostles then, just as it does for us now. Jesus delivers both a promise and a command, for the early Christian leaders as well as for us today: a commission to bear global witness to God's love.

All this happened just a week-and-a-half before Pentecost, the birthday of the Church, which we will celebrate next week. But not much has changed since the apostles gathered in that upper room. We are still here, Jesus remains at the right hand of the Father, and we still have much to do to build up God's kingdom.

And so, we bear witness, Christ working within us, each of us carrying our individual stories of God's love at work in our lives. We bear witness as a community of believers, as we are at Christ Church: in how we welcome the stranger, include the other, pastor to those ill among us, in how we meet hate with love, division with unity, violence with peace.

Last week in his sermon, Mike called this place our refueling station—an apt description, in my mind. In times of joy and times of suffering, here we draw strength in connection and resurrection through relationship. We can't do it alone—and I'd hate to try to. I'm so thankful for this community of love.

Together, we gather, pray, and receive the power of the Spirit. We bear witness, just as the small, unorganized group

of early Church leaders did, men and women who though traumatized and scared and ill-equipped, still somehow managed to establish Christ's Church on Earth—a universal movement more than 2,000 years old and 2 billion followers strong.

Amid the fiery ordeals taking place in our world today, amid our own personal heartaches, whether praising, crying out to, or screaming at God, we are called to a witness that does not waver in untenable circumstances. This is the work of building up God's kingdom: witness that nurtures the Church, sustains the Church, and empowers us to be the Church in the world.

How will we choose to witness to the glory of God?

I truly don't have any special insights or answers. But I know this world desperately needs such witness. I find peace knowing the Spirit will equip me, just as it did our early Church founders and all the saints before us. And I am grateful for this loving group of witnesses at Christ Church, making this journey with me.



As our Lord Jesus prayed on our behalf, let us now pray: for open hearts and minds to receive the Holy Spirit, for courage to act on the power of that spirit, for strengthening of the bonds of our community, and in thanksgiving for the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ.