

The Second Sunday of Easter
April 11, 2010

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Title: The Apostolic Witness
Text: John 20:19–31

“Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?” This is the oath administered to a witness prior to their sworn testimony in a court of law. Assuming that the witness answers, “I do,” we are to trust that their testimony will be a word of truth and that light will be shed on the subject at hand.

Such matters may seem out of place on the Second Sunday of Easter, but when we look into the Scripture texts assigned for today, beginning with the reading from Acts, we see Peter and the apostles standing before the council in Jerusalem as if before a court of law. The high priest challenges them for their teaching in Jesus’ name, but they respond by claiming obedience only to God. Their testimony is summarized in verse 32 when they say: “We are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.”

What is important here as a starting point is the logic that takes places in this reading:¹

- The apostles are witnesses to God’s work in Jesus, particularly in raising Jesus from the dead;
- The Holy Spirit is a witness to the same;
- The Spirit comes from God and, therefore, its testimony must be true; and
- The apostles obey God.

Here is how this logic works itself out: The apostles receive the Holy Spirit, which comes from God and always speaks the truth. The apostles obey God and not human authority. Therefore, the apostles’ teaching and testimony about Jesus must be true because it is guided by the Spirit.

This is the key to trusting the testimony of the apostles and the words of Scripture: Their testimony is from the Holy Spirit, who is the perfect witness to the work of God in Jesus Christ.

We are not accustomed to thinking about the Holy Spirit as a witness, but much of the language about the Spirit in the New Testament speaks about it in this way.

In John, chapter 15, before his Passion, Jesus said: “When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf.” And again in chapter 16 Jesus says: “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”

¹ Notice the similar pattern in the Nicene Creed. The Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, has spoken through the prophets, and given to the Church.

Notice how Jesus talks about the Holy Spirit: The Spirit will hear, speak, testify, declare, and guide. But, above all, the Spirit will glorify Jesus, he says, just as Jesus glorifies the Father.

It's beginning to feel a lot like Pentecost with all this talk of the Spirit, isn't it? While the Liturgical Year is extremely helpful in providing the Church with a rhythm for its life of worship, that rhythm is often based on the Synoptic Tradition, meaning the account of Jesus as held mostly in common by Mark, Matthew, and Luke. Luke and its counterpart, Acts, for example, place the Day of Pentecost fifty days after the resurrection, which is when we will celebrate it here, six weeks from today.

But today we hear of a different timeline. The outpouring of the Spirit occurred on the day of Jesus' resurrection in John. John tells us that when Jesus appeared to the disciples on the evening of his resurrection, he breathed the Holy Spirit on them, gave them the authority to forgive sins, and sent them into the world with his peace.

It is from this word "to send forth," *apostello* in Greek, that we get the word "apostle." At the moment that the Spirit was breathed on them, the disciple's ministry became an apostolic ministry, for just as the Father sent the Son into the world to save it, Jesus sent the disciples with the Holy Spirit into the world to continue the ministry of forgiving sins in his name.

Through the risen Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit as witness to his resurrection, the disciples were commissioned to carry out the mission of Jesus, the forgiveness of sins, the mission of the Church.

It is clear from today's Gospel reading that the way in which that mission first took shape was through the disciples' Spirit-led testimony to others that they themselves had seen the risen Lord. It is no coincidence that the words of the disciples to Thomas were the same as that of Mary Magdalene earlier in the day when she said to them: "I have seen the Lord."

It almost seems too easy to sum up the disciples' mission and Jesus' resurrection in that one simple phrase, "I have seen the Lord," but this is the starting point in the Christian faith for hearing the word of forgiveness that God gives. As I've heard it said before: If we can't look someone in the eyes and tell them that God raised Jesus from the dead, how can we share with someone the promise of Christ's healing, the forgiveness of sins, and everlasting life?

Indeed, the matter at hand in today's readings, especially in the gospel reading, is faith in the risen Lord Jesus. It is clear in the account of Thomas that the matter at hand is specific; it is about faith in Jesus as a bodily resurrected person (not simply some kind of spiritual appearance or ghost-like encounter). Thomas, who initially did not believe the other disciples' testimony about the resurrection, put his finger in the marks on Jesus' hands and side and himself cried out: "My Lord and my God!"

“We may not touch your hands and side, nor follow where you trod,” the choir will sing during Communion today, “but in your promise we rejoice, and cry, ‘My Lord and God!’”²

Since that first Easter morning, Christians down through the centuries have witnessed to the central truth claim of the Christian faith: Jesus Christ, descendant of David, has been raised from the dead.³ Today’s Gospel reading is one Spirit-led testimony in that crowd of witnesses that speaks to us as well: “These things 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.”

Indeed, faith that God raised Jesus from the dead is the starting point for the Christian faith, a faith given in our baptism as gift and nurtured throughout the rest of our lives. This is what we hold in common with a world-wide communion of believers and call the catholic, universal, or Christian faith.

But we are members of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church,⁴ which means that we, like the disciples are sent forth as apostolic witnesses to testify to that faith in our daily lives. How we live with others, the ways in which we do business, the kind of student we are, everything in our lives bears witness in some way to what we believe, even how we worship as the body of Christ.

At the font, where we were buried with Christ and raised with him to live in God’s new creation, we celebrate the gift of faith as given by the Spirit. We listen as we hear the Word proclaimed and enjoy the gift of Christian community. We answer the three-fold question “Do you believe in God?” with a matching set of “I dos!” in the Creed and then share in the Peace of Christ.

Finally, in the Communion Meal, we see, taste, smell, and consume the crucified and risen Christ in bread and wine, his body and blood given for the forgiveness of our sins. Much like Thomas, our faith is restored in this encounter with the risen Jesus and we are sent forth with the Spirit as witnesses to all that God has done through him. We go forth, empowered by the Spirit, testifying to light and truth himself, Jesus Christ our Lord.

He is risen!

² “We Walk by Faith and Not by Sight” by Henry Alford, 1810–1871, alt.

³ 2 Timothy 2:8

⁴ Nicene Creed, article 3.