

“Telling the story” (Pinegrove, 6th In Easter)
(Readings: Acts 17: 22-31 and Psalm 66:5-7, 16-20)



Did you notice that our bulletin says that today is the 6th Sunday of Easter? And last week the 5th? We're in the Season of Easter, the seven weeks from Easter morning until Pentecost (on June 8). Fifty days of celebrating and spreading the Good News of the risen Christ.

For us here today, this is a time of happy anticipation, full of things to look forward to; spring is here (finally!), the Green Thumb Tea is about to happen, and some of us can't wait to get their fishing gear out. But for the early Christian community, the time that followed immediately after Easter was not very cheerful. It was chaotic, and filled with fear. Jesus had died only recently and everything had screeched to a halt. This was the end. They didn't know what to expect or what to do and what to plan for. They felt... lost.

But then... people started to see Jesus again. First some women, then the disciples, and then all kinds of folks. What was going on? How did this fit with the things Jesus had told them, they began to wonder. What did this mean for them in the here and now, in this Roman empire that was determined to stamp out this Jesus movement?

Our readings from the book of Acts talk about one person who recently had become a follower of "the Way": the apostle Paul. Today we find him in the Areopagus, a big public space in Athens, Greece, trying to make a case for his new found faith. You can still visit that place, this is what it looks like now.

Now Paul was a "city slicker" who had grown up and studied in big cities; he felt comfortable there. He knew where things were at and how people lived; he knew the different religious customs, he knew the different gods and goddesses that were worshipped there in all kinds of temples and shrines.

And then he notices this one altar dedicated to "an Unknown God". This was an altar to make sure all the bases were covered, so to speak; an altar just in case some god had been missed, because there were a lot of them. And Paul sees this as an opportunity to talk about his faith.

"I can tell by all the temples around us that you guys are very religious", he says; and then he thanks them for this opportunity to talk about the god they overlooked, namely the God *he* worships, the One True God who sent us Jesus, the Christ. Even Paul knew it's easier to catch flies with honey than vinegar.

But then he tries to argue them into accepting Christ's message by using logical arguments; arguments he figures would connect to the educated city folks of Athens. And it doesn't work. A little bit later in that same chapter we are told that Paul wasn't very successful that day. Most people walk away unimpressed, and just a handful think that there might be *some* truth to it, but they don't follow through on it.

I don't know about you, but I find it just a tiny bit gratifying that even the great Paul of Tarsus preached some sermons that bombed. Well, not totally. There were two converts – Dionysius and Demaris. But you never hear of them again. And Paul never managed to establish a church in Athens like he did in Corinth, Ephesia, and Galatia and at least another dozen places all over Asia Minor and Europe. But not in Athens.

Maybe that's because here in the Areopagus Paul doesn't follow his own convictions. Maybe he's a bit spooked by all those Greek intellectuals, so he doesn't preach what he has preached everywhere else: the story of the crucified Christ. In other words, Paul doesn't tell the story *he* has come to believe in. He tries to use Greek logic. He tries to reason and argue them into the faith. And by doing that, he compromises. And he fails.

Faith never is a matter of facts and proof, the way we believe, say, that the earth is round. When you talk about your faith to someone else you don't use facts and arguments to express its importance. It's *passion* and commitment and *excitement* of telling our *story* that does the work of the Spirit.

The Psalm we just read gets it and does exactly that. "Come and see", the author gushes; "Come and see what God has done! Come and hear *my story*; let me tell you what God has done for me!" It sounds almost like an enthusiastic child proudly showing his drawing to her mom or dad, or what she can do on the monkey bars. "Come and see!" And you come over and you look and you say, "Wow, that's great, that's wonderful. Show me more!".

There's something powerful that happens when a person is able to share something important and meaningful with another person. It really is a powerful thing, you can't help but listen to passion and enthusiasm.

It's also important for the person who tells the story. Sometimes, things don't even seem real until you are able to share them. What's the first thing you say when you see something special, or something incredible? You turn to a person near you, it could be a total stranger, and you say, "Did you see that?!" And if there isn't anyone around, you call someone, or you post it on Facebook. It's almost as if it didn't really happen - unless you are able to share it with someone. That's not about logic, it's about passion. It's not about facts, but about the story.

In church we have a name for this kind of storytelling. We call it... "evangelism". Yes, the "E" word... Now I know that "evangelism" has a bad rep. It makes you think of total strangers accosting you in the street or knocking on your door, wanting to "save" you. I'm not talking about that type of evangelism. That's more like trying to argue people into faith, or sometimes even intimidating them into faith, and that never lasts long. It didn't work for Paul then, and it doesn't work for us now. No, "evangelism" is simply sharing the story of our faith with others just as you would share anything great or extraordinary in your life. "Listen to this!"

So here we are, almost 2000 years after Paul got egg on his face in the Areopagus and we, too, are faced with proclaiming the Christian message in world that has a lot of other things on its mind; a world with many other gods: we worship the god of entertainment and sports, of shopping - but most of all, we worship the god of the economy and the bottom line, for which we're prepared to sacrifice pretty much anything.

Our passages for today offer us some direction on how to proclaim the gospel to the world in which we live now. We are told that we need to tell the message of the Gospel with *passion*, and *without compromise*. If people think we live our faith in a wishy-washy, lukewarm way without much excitement or enthusiasm, how can we expect them to be touched by that wishy-washy kind of faith? They'll just shrug and walk away.

We are offered the same opportunity as Paul was; and it *is* an opportunity. As a community of faith and as individuals we are called to *live* our faith, and that also means to *talk* about it. And that is not always easy, is it? Most people would rather have a root canal than talk about their faith. Because we have to ask ourselves some tough but essential questions first. Call them the *What, Why and How questions*: what do we believe, why do we believe it, and how does it show in our daily lives?

And don't worry if you find you're not so sure about those things, in fact it's normal. There are no hard and fast answers to questions like these. But *do* struggle with those questions, explore them, discuss them. Because that is how we grow in our faith: by asking questions; sometimes hard questions.

What was foundational for the early Christian communities was this baffling presence of the Risen Christ in their midst. It transformed them on a fundamental level. It transformed them from a fear-filled group of followers into fearless proclaimers of the Gospel, ready to die for living in the way of Jesus Nazareth.

They asked themselves the hard questions: what do we believe exactly and why; how should we live it? Clearly, they had found some answers. And they couldn't help but share them, despite all the risks involved.

We need to recapture the passion they had in their faith; we need to ask the tough questions they asked themselves: how to live this faith, how far to go. Do we do that? And if not, what is holding us back? What are we afraid of?

This Season of Easter invites us to reflect on those important questions. May the answers we find help us rekindle our passion for the risen Christ in everything we say and do.

Amen.