

3MAY SERMON FROM WITNESS TO SUFFERING *Easter Threshold — Week 4*

Now dear friends, I want to begin by saying, do not be afraid. Do not be afraid.

We are now far enough into the Easter season to see the shape of the journey we are on. Each week has carried us a little further along the same line: from resurrection flows hope; from hope flows holiness; from holiness flows witness. And now, in this fourth week of the Easter Threshold, we arrive at the place where witness begins to meet resistance. From witness flows suffering. It is not a comfortable step, but it is an honest one. Because once a life shaped by Christ becomes visible, it does not remain neutral. It draws attention. It provokes questions. And sometimes, it provokes opposition. We often think of witness as something we say — an explanation, an account, a defence. But the readings today stretch that understanding. They show us that witness is not only spoken. It is lived. It is revealed in the way a person stands, the way they endure, the way they respond when the pressure rises. And so we meet Stephen.

Stephen does not appear out of nowhere. By the time we reach him in Acts, the early church is already under pressure. The apostles have been questioned, warned, arrested, and told to keep quiet. Stephen belongs to this small, growing community. He is chosen, with six others, to make sure the widows and the poor are cared for properly. He is not chosen because he is important, but because he is trusted. Luke describes him as “full of faith and the Holy Spirit,” which means his life already shows something of Christ. He is steady, reliable, and faithful in ordinary things.

But that kind of life does not stay unnoticed. In a tense city, it begins to stand out. People begin to argue with him. When they cannot win the argument, they make accusations. Before long, Stephen is seized and brought before the council. False witnesses are set up against him. What began as disagreement has become a formal charge. Standing there, surrounded by people who already think he is dangerous, Stephen does something unexpected. He does not defend himself. He does not try to get out of trouble. Instead, he tells the story of God — how God has been faithful to his people from the beginning. He speaks calmly and clearly. Luke says his face is like the face of an angel. I guess Luke must have spoken to an eyewitness.

But the council is not persuaded. Stephen’s words sound like an attack on the Temple and on the law itself. In their judgment this is blasphemy, and under their law blasphemy carries the penalty of death. Stephen the blasphemer is taken outside the city. This is where executions take place, beyond the walls, so the community is not defiled. The men who testified against him now step forward. In their law these ‘witnesses’ must begin the execution themselves, to show that they stand by their testimony. And as sentence is executed, a young pharisee, who we will come to know as Paul is there watching over their cloaks. Maybe this was the eyewitness from whom Luke got his information. Stephen stands in the centre of that circle of ‘witnesses’ and in that moment, Stephen looks up instead. He sees the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. What he witnesses holds him steady. The stones striking, he falls to his knees. And his final sound so like words we heard last on Good Friday. “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”

Stephen’s death is not an interruption to the Easter story. It is part of the same truth the Gospel shows us. When Philip asks Jesus to “show us the Father,” he is asking for something visible, something unmistakable. Jesus answers by pointing to his own life. Whoever has seen him has seen the Father. The revelation is not separate from the life. It is the life. The way he speaks, the way he loves, the way he gives himself: that is how God is made known. So witness is not only what we see. It is how we are seen.

And that is exactly what we have just seen in Stephen. And once a life shaped by Christ can be seen, it will meet resistance. Peter has lived through that himself. He has stood before councils, been warned to keep silent, been imprisoned, and still kept speaking. He has already come close to being killed for it, and though he does not know it, we know that a martyr's death is indeed the fate awaiting him. So when he writes to scattered believers, he is not offering theory. He is speaking from the hard edge of his own story.

[Make interspersed references to the 1 Peter passage, use a handout, emphasise that the ABIDE groups will follow up on the details.]

Peter writes as someone who has lived long enough to watch this unfold. "Who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good?" he asks. And then, almost in the same breath: "But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed." He is not being optimistic. He is being honest. He knows that goodness does not always shield you, and that faithfulness can put you in the line of fire. He is naming the pattern. Faithful witness often provokes resistance. Most of the time, that resistance is not dramatic. It is much closer to the ground. It is the moment where honesty would cost you something, so you soften it. The moment where generosity would stretch you, so you hold back. The moment where you sense what is right, but going along would be easier. Those are the places where witness becomes real. And once it is real, it begins to carry a cost. Peter refuses to treat that cost as failure. He places it within the life of Christ himself. "Christ also suffered... in order to bring you to God." So when faithfulness carries a cost, it is not a sign that something has gone wrong. It is participation in Christ's own path. It is the shape of a life that has become aligned with his.

And Peter is pastorally honest. "Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal," he says, "as though something strange were happening to you." In other words: do not be shocked when witness becomes costly. Do not assume you have taken a wrong turn. Do not imagine you are alone. The Spirit of glory rests upon those who bear Christ's name. The suffering is not the absence of God. It is the place where God draws near.

So this is the threshold we cross today. From witness flows suffering. Not as punishment. Not as a detour. Not as a derailment. But as the next step in a life that has become visible. A life shaped by Christ will, at times, come into friction with the world around it. And the question is not whether that moment will come, but what we will do when it does. Where does your life already show Christ enough to be noticed? And where, when it is noticed, do you feel the pressure to pull back? Because that is where this step of the Easter life is taking shape in you.

Peter's final word is this: "Entrust yourselves to a faithful Creator, while continuing to do good." Because the life we are living is not sustained by our own strength. It is held by the God who raised Christ from the dead. And when that life is seen, it will carry a cost. But it will also carry the truth.

And the Gospel brings us back to the centre of that truth. Philip asks to see the Father, and Jesus answers not with an argument but with himself: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." In the end, our witness is not something we manufacture. It is the life of Christ taking shape in us. He is the one we show. He is the one we trust. He is the one who holds us when the cost comes. And he is the one who goes ahead of us.

And so dear friends, I want to end by saying, do not be afraid. Do not be afraid.