

## To Welcome Hope

[Acts 2:37-42](#)

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Sunday, April 13, 2008

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

As I was reading this passage from Acts this week in preparation for this message, I reflected on my visit last Sunday morning with some high school students who are preparing to make their profession of faith.

At any age in life there are all sorts of reasons for making that choice to follow Jesus. The reason that kept coming to mind as I was sharing some of my own journey with these young people, was that they are making the choice to welcome hope into their lives—hope for today and for the greatest and most challenging days they will meet in the decades to come.

Faith in Christ shapes us for compassion, for service, and for a perspective that looks forward to a day when Christ will complete all that we might leave tarnished, unfinished, or incomplete in life. The promise seems too good to be true. So we take that first step by faith. Whether you are turning to Jesus for the first time in this hour, or you are turning back after wandering far away, or you are here to be renewed in a faith decision you made long ago, you are making a choice to welcome hope into your life.

Let us pray:

*Lord, you give us the gift of language, in which we delight. So many words that carry such significance in our lives to communicate joys, sorrows, expectations, hopes and dreams. At the pinnacle of all language, human and divine, is your inviting and authoritative word to us in Scripture. Your word that informs and transforms. Help us hear and receive that word today, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Our passage from Acts this morning is a report of what follows as one of the great sermons in Scripture. Peter, the leader of the twelve apostles, gives it in response to critics who thought those speaking in tongues at Pentecost were filled with wine.

Remember how he starts that sermon, Acts 2:14. Peter raises his voice and proclaims *"Listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk...this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 'In the last days...God declares... I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.'"* It is a forward-looking message that culminates in verse 36 with a full proclamation of the Gospel: *Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made Jesus both Lord and Christ.*

Here Peter connects the sweep of Israel's history, with the coming of God's son, proclaiming that the Messiah that they have been waiting for has come in the person of Jesus, with the full authority of the Father. Only his victory took a course no one would have expected. He reigns now in heaven and in human hearts through his compassion for us on the Cross, and by the power of his resurrection from it. This affirms what Paul says in Romans 6:5, *For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.* Meaning, when we take up our calling to live in Christ, we follow a path which leads to the destruction of doubts and dark expectations, to hope with assurance and bright expectation for the power of God to transform the day.

Peter admonishes everyone within earshot, v. 40, *Save yourselves! Hold no longer to the ways of this corrupt generation.* When they heard Peter's message, Scripture says they were *cut to the heart*, and immediately ask each other and the apostles, *What shall we do?* And the apostles say, *Repent and be baptized.*

Verse 41 states, *So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added.* On that day they welcomed hope for themselves and hope for their generation, as does every generation that answers the call for Christ and his Kingdom. It is a choice to let the Word of the Gospel permeate our lives to such a degree that we are taken in by its very content, its very substance.

As Christians we have a profound appreciation for language, don't we? For words, for nuance of meaning, for Scripture we know as the Word of God, for Jesus we know as that Word incarnate. This passage from Acts is about the early church receiving its first new members after Jesus' ascent to heaven. They were taken by the language, content, and Spirit of Peter's message.

When we first encounter the church, whether as a child or as someone new to the traditions of a congregation, we have to learn the language of that faith community, don't we? And sometimes it's the little words that trip us up.

I will never forget the time I visited an Episcopal church as a young person years ago, and started down the aisle to take communion. One of the lines grew shorter than the other, so when I got up the usher asked if I would move to the "lectern side." I did not have a clue what he meant. It sounded official, so I nervously sat back down afraid I had made a mistake. At that moment an elderly woman next to me took my arm and guided me to the proper line. "You're in the right place," she told me. Her grip on my elbow and expression of reassurance on her face made me know I truly was in that line for Jesus.

The language, the lingo of the church, even the very language of the Gospel message itself: words like crucified, resurrection, reconciliation, proclamation, and hope become personally meaningful to us as we live them out in Christian community. We use such words before we fully understand them, and over time we live into their meaning. Such words reveal their meaning in the particulars of our faith experience: a relationship you form with someone for whom you are building a home, the insight of a mentor

who has been through the same struggle you are currently facing, the innocence of a child's answer to a big question in a Sunday school class, the attending grace of church members who surround you at the death of a loved one. You are taken up into a word, which is beyond you, but nevertheless absolutely clear. You start to "get" that word for yourself.

Dow Edgerton, of Chicago Theological Seminary, loves the power of words and tells the story of when his firstborn was learning to talk and couldn't sleep. The little toddler pointed outside the window. "As I held him up to see," he shares, "he began to call out in a tone of mixed delight and awe, 'tree,' 'light,' 'car,' 'rain!' The words weren't just said, they were exclaimed. It was as if each word was a prayer bead made of recognition and acclamation, recited in an urgent liturgy of speaking. As he learned to talk, as he learned the ways of signs and gestures, he was being incorporated into a shared world of names, a language-shaped world." <sup>1</sup>

I think that begins to get at what these three thousand newbies to the faith in Acts must have been going through when they had heard people speaking in all kinds of languages: a cacophony of sounds without apparent meaning. Kind of like the sound of having the TV, radio, and three people talking all in the same room, a combination that is somewhat painful to the ear. Words on top of words.

Peter stands up, and a certain clarity of conviction, a familiar string of words about a Messiah to come, begins to overtake them with a fresh and unexpected power. The clarity of their hearing is not so much about the physics of sound, as it is the working of the Holy Spirit in their hearts and minds in that moment. It is like the sound of bells ringing in a random, unordered form and finally resolving into a pattern of internalized peace. All that language of the Gospel, all that Jesus lingo, starts to take them up. It is a word of power that overcomes. It is a message that *cuts to the heart*.

Or, as Edgerton puts it elsewhere "In the simplest and most complex sense, the Word of God is the communication stronger than death; of faith, by faith, for the sake of faith, of hope." <sup>2</sup> It is that moment when it truly dawns on you that this is God's word, to ME, and it is very, very good. It is no longer merely religious lingo, but a personal address. What is so powerful about that personal Word is that it takes the whole of your life into account, not just the pretty and perfect parts. But also and especially the deep and ugly parts: the regrets, the things you would not want anyone to know.

To Christ, the words of all that ugliness can be spoken, and he will not turn away in disgust. Rather, with tearful compassion and hope for your redemption, he extends his arms to draw you closer. It is this piece of knowing that God can redeem the whole of your life through Christ that makes the message so powerful. If he only took up what was perfect and acceptable, then what would be the point?

When you offer up that prayer "Take my life, Lord, all of it for your purpose!" there is that sense that God is so much bigger than what we could hope for with our own imagination. That is why a profession of faith is often accompanied by tears (a release of all we attempt to hold and manage on our own) into the hands of someone so much more capable to the task.

I have often been drawn to the idea that prayer is more for us than it is for God. I remember feeling guilty when I was new to prayer, and realized I had forgotten to pray over the course of the day, as if I had somehow cheated God. I have come to realize that, even more, I'm really cheating myself when I forget to pray because I'm cheating myself of the reminder, the renewed assurance of what we all feel when we first say those words in a whisper or a shout "Lord, I welcome you in. I need you." In that moment you know he's hearing and will answer.

Psalm 33: *Truly the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love.* Psalm 71: *For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O Lord, from my youth.*

I don't know where you are today. Perhaps you've reached a point where you need to be renewed in that prayer, and reminded of who you are in Christ. You need to be reminded that your life has not a *small*, but a very *great* purpose for him. Perhaps life has challenged you so greatly of late you need to hear his word afresh, more profoundly, for you to continue in your walk. Or perhaps, like the three thousand in our passage, the Gospel is taking you in for the very first time, affirming for you that Jesus is Lord and Christ.

Now his Word becomes your own: *The Lord [is] always before me, for he is at my right hand that I may not be shaken. You have shown me the paths of life; your presence will fill me with joy.* (Acts 2:25, 28)

Now is the time to welcome hope.

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

1. W. Dow Edgerton. *Speak to Me That I May Speak*. (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2006), 75.

2. *Ibid.*, 105.