

**Acts of an Easter People:
Courageous Witness
Acts 4:5-12**

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It was as if the whole world was holding its breath Tuesday afternoon. Anita and I were in the car heading home, listening to the reports coming from the Hennepin County courthouse where the verdict in the George Floyd murder case was about to be released.

For the past few weeks it has been major news. Many networks in the US covered the trial live, but it wasn't a US event. CBC, CTV, BBC—all had reporters camped out, bringing multiple reports daily, sometimes live. For a few days it seemed as if Covid had disappeared. All that mattered was a trial in Minneapolis, at least until the Super Football League took over!

But Tuesday the world's attention was back in Minneapolis. What would those 12 jurors decide? How would the citizens of that city, of the US react? What would be the reaction in cities around the world if a not guilty verdict was returned?

It was as if we all held our breath.

The trial had gone on for several weeks. But this was a white police officer. And the number of white police officers found guilty could be counted on one hand. It just doesn't happen—not in the US. Not anywhere.

Especially in light of the original report. The first statement from the Minneapolis Police Department about the death of George Floyd began, "Man dies after medical incident during police interaction." That was the title! Later the report said:

"Two officers arrived and located the suspect, a male believed to be in his 40s, in his car. He was ordered to step from his car. After he got out, he physically resisted officers. Officers were able to get the suspect into handcuffs and noted he appeared to be suffering medical distress. Officers called for an ambulance. He was transported to Hennepin County Medical Center by ambulance where he died a short time later."¹

And in all likelihood, that should have been the end of the story.

If not for Darnella Frazier.

On the afternoon of May 25, 2020 she was taking her young cousin on a stroll to get a snack. It was just an afternoon outing. Only just outside the Cup Food convenience store she saw a struggle between a white police officer and a black man. In her courtroom testimony she said that she could see her own family in George Floyd. He was her father, her uncle, her brother.

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/04/20/how-first-statement-minneapolis-police-made-george-floyds-murder-seem-like-george-floyds-fault/>

She ushered her cousin into the store, and then, did what everyone can do now. She started filming.

She posted an almost 10 minute video to Facebook, and it has now been viewed millions of times. It completely dismantled the official report. One legal analyst, Sunny Hostin called the video the “star witness for the prosecution,” going on to say that it was *“the strongest piece of evidence I have ever seen in a case against a police officer.”*²

In his remarks after the verdict was announced Attorney General Keith Ellison thanked the *“brave young women, teenagers, who pressed record on their cellphones...They performed simple yet profound acts of courage.”* They not only pressed record, but they were willing to testify in court.

A profound act of courage.

As we saw last week, Peter and John’s testimony was nothing short of a profound act of courage. We have jumped back in the text from last week, to hear again part of Peter’s defense of their healing of a man in the temple. Peter and John had been going to the temple when they were stopped by a man who was begging, not to breathe but to live; to have enough to survive. The way to deal with this, we all know, is to avoid eye contact and just keep walking. They were on their way to temple! They didn’t have time for this disruption!

And yet...

They stopped, and in an audacious act of faith Peter declared, “Silver and gold we don’t have, but what we have we give to you. Get up and walk.”

And the man did! He was healed! After years of being placed there day after day, being on the receiving end of people’s pity and charity, he could walk! His response was to jump and dance and shout! Not the kind of thing you see in church, but a perfectly natural and appropriate response!

The response of the temple police was just as natural! You can’t go around healing people in the temple and causing a disturbance! So they arrested Peter and John.

They arrested them for creating a public disturbance, but also for heresy! See, in his explanation, his sermon, Peter had audacity to talk about resurrection! Now the Sadducees, those in charge of the temple, did not believe in resurrection. That was the BIG theological argument of that day. The Pharisees might believe in resurrection, but not the Sadducees!

There have always been theological arguments! Over resurrection, the nature of God, the place of the pope, the nature of the church, who can preach, whether women can be ordained, can the church accept LGBTQ individuals. We are always arguing about something!

And many times the response of the keepers of the temple is to make sure the proponents of anything different are arrested, or thrown out. We can’t let that kind of heresy continue! There has to be standards!

² https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/media/darnella-frazier-george-floyd-trial/2021/04/20/9e261cc6-a1e2-11eb-a774-7b47ceb36ee8_story.html

That seems to be the stance of these temple leaders. But let's not be too harsh on them. They are trying to protect their religion, their traditions, their nation, their way of life. If we are going to be really honest, we have to confess that they are too much like us!

But thankfully, for once, Peter is not like us! Remember, this is the one who when confronted by a maid in the courtyard the night of Jesus trial swore that he didn't even know Jesus!

But here...Here, not in the courtyard but in the court; not being confronted by a maid but by the high priest himself, Peter is "filled with the Holy Spirit."

Normally when we hear "filled with the Holy Spirit" we imagine those videos of charismatic worship services where people start shouting and dancing in the aisles. But that had already happened! That was what that man had done. That was why they were here in the first place.

But now, "filled with the Holy Spirit" ever begins to testify! That is what one does in court, right? You give an accounting of what you have seen, what you heard, what you experienced.

When asked how they had done this, Peter says that it was through the name of Jesus this man has been healed. But the Greek word he uses here is *sozo*, it is often translated "saved." This man was not just healed, he was saved from a lifetime of sitting and begging; saved for a life the way God intended. Peter reminds us that the "name of Jesus" is not a secret passcode that gets us into heaven, but the power for the ongoing healing of every sort of human brokenness.

Believing in the resurrection of Jesus is not, at its heart, believing that God did something to a corpse two thousand years ago. To affirm resurrection is to proclaim the greatest annoyance that any life-taking power on earth might hear. It says that ultimate power over the earth is still not power to control the end of a person's story.³

There are many who want to control our story—many people, institutions, traditions. Many times they are well meaning. They live in fear of the unknown, what will happen if we go a different way, if we go the way of love.

And many times, far too many times we are resistant. I know. This week I have been reading the daily meditations from Richard Rohr, the Catholic priest-mystic-writer-guru-wise person. There are weeks when what he writes stirs something in my soul. There are other weeks, like this one, when he just agitates me. He says something that really goes against what I have grown up with, how I feel, what I believe.

He did that this week as he celebrated Earth Day/Week.⁴ He was writing about how we need to care for the earth because the earth is always proclaiming the goodness of God. It was good stuff, but.... At times Rohr smacks of panentheism, which just makes me uncomfortable. I am not sure I agree.

³ J.R. Daniel Kirk. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-easter-2/commentary-on-acts-45-12-4>

⁴ <https://cac.org/god-is-not-only-over-there-2021-04-18/>

But as he wrote, I read not just the words, but the love with which they were written; love for the earth, love for his readers. As I did, I felt the hardened earth of my soul just begin to crack open a bit. Just a bit, but maybe that is how new growth begins in us all.

That was the spirit in which Peter spoke to his accusers that day. It wasn't a defense. He was just filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke out of his experience.

As we heard last week, the authorities told them not to preach anymore and released them. But being filled with the Spirit, they disobeyed, and pretty soon they were back before the authorities. This time the authorities were ready to kill them! But Gamaliel, a respected teacher slowed them down and urging them to consider carefully what they were about to do. He said they didn't know enough, they couldn't see the future. Then he said, *"Let them alone. If this program or this work is merely human, it will fall apart, but if it is of God, there is nothing you can do about it—and you better not be found fighting against God!"*⁵

Peter's words had cracked open something in Gamaliel, a place for grace to grow.

Are we willing to be so filled with the Holy Spirit that we are willing to make a bold witness for the life giving grace of God? How often do we have that opportunity? In times when a joke is told that demeans another, that draws on ancient prejudices? Do we say something, or just laugh along?

When we see policies that discriminate due to race, ethnic origin, sex, sexual orientation, physical ability, do we just go along?

When we see people being abused, either physically, emotionally, spiritually, do we offer a counter word, an act of grace? What if it is our world that is being abused? Do we remain silent, ensconced in the way we have always done things?

And if and when we do speak out, do we do so with a spirit of moral superiority, or the openness to the leading of God like Gamaliel?

It takes courage to speak.

It takes courage to be open to change.

Darnella Frazier wasn't looking to be a hero. She was just taking her cousin to get a snack. But she saw something that wasn't right, that shook her sense of right and wrong, her moral core. And so she hit record.

And then she shared it.

And then through her tears she testified in a court.

And the world saw.

And we hope, we pray it will be changed.

It took courage. Maybe even the Holy Spirit.

⁵ Acts 5:38-39. *The Message*.

May we be filled with that loving courageous spirit as we seek to be Easter people.
Amen.