

“It Wasn’t Me! It Was the Holy Spirit”

Acts 3:11-21, I John 3:1-7, Luke 24:36-49; Easter 3-B, April 19, 2015

There is a human-interest story that appeared years ago in an old **READER’S DIGEST** about a woman whose **husband was an alcoholic**. I say, **“was”** an alcoholic; because at the time this story was written, her husband had died!

Unfortunately, while he was still alive, he had struck up a relationship with another woman, who lived down the street on the same street where he and his wife lived, who initially became his drinking partner, but as time passed; he became involved with her romantically too! The two of them were sometimes seen in public together at nightclubs and bars; drinking, kissing and dancing!

In fact, it was on **“just such a night,”** and in **“just such a place”** that her husband had a heart attack and died. **And this certainly came as no surprise to the deceased man’s widow. She knew her husband was killing himself! She also knew about her husband’s infidelity with that other woman!**

What was very surprising, however, is that a few weeks after her husband’s funeral, she actually took compassion on that other woman, because of her addiction to alcohol. She realized that this other woman **needed help**, so she did her best to encourage her to attend AA meetings which the other woman actually did. Eventually this “other woman” reached a state of sobriety. **What is even stranger is that over time, these two women eventually became friends!**

“How?” the man’s widow was often asked. **“How could you possibly forgive that other woman who had seduced your husband, and was actually with him on the night when he died?”**

The man’s widow was a Christian and the answer that she always gave to everyone was: **“It wasn’t me! It was the Holy Spirit!”**

And isn’t this woman’s answer, **similar to the kind of faithful response that we hear the Apostle Peter giving to the amazed people of Jerusalem, shortly after our Lord’s glorious resurrection from the dead in our first lesson from Acts 3 today?**

In the first 10 verses of chapter 3, St. Luke (the author of Acts) tells us that Peter and John were walking into the temple one day; entering through that gate that was called **“Beautiful,”** when they saw a lame man sitting there, begging for alms; a man who had been lame from birth!

First, Peter says to that poor man: **“Look at us” (Acts 3:4)!** Then secondly, Peter says to him: **“Silver and gold have I none, but that which I do have, I now give unto you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!” (v. 6)** **And Peter took him by the right hand and raised him up, and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong, and he entered with them into the temple, walking and leaping and praising God!” (v. 8)**

Quite naturally all the people who witnessed this miracle immediately wanted to give all the praise, the glory and credit to Peter and John! But Peter wouldn’t allow it!

“It wasn’t me! It was Christ!” Peter replies in no uncertain terms. Or to listen to Peter’s exact words in verse 12: **“Why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we have made this man**

walk? The God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him. But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, instead! And you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are all witnesses and—by faith in his name—God has made this formerly lame man strong whom you see and know, and the faith that is through Jesus has given the man his perfect health in the presence of you all!” (Acts 3:12-16)

And, yet friends, these ways of reacting to such situations in life, are just not natural are they? It isn't natural for a woman to befriend another woman who has seduced and slept with her husband! Nor is it ever natural, when someone wants to praise us for work well-done to divert the attention away from ourselves and say: “It wasn't me! It was God!” It is not natural to take the spotlight off ourselves and to shine it in a different direction; especially not to God!

Yet, isn't this the very thing that Jesus himself taught us as being true, on the night before he died? It was on that night when he had washed the disciples' feet, when he had celebrated the Feast of the Passover with his disciples for the last time, when he had instituted his Holy Supper, when he spoke to his disciples about the reality of heaven—that he also went on to say to them: **“I am the true Vine and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that does bear fruit, he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. Apart for me you can do nothing!” (John 15:1-5)**

In our Gospel lesson this morning, St. Luke is now giving to us his report as to what had actually taken place there in Upper Room in Jerusalem on that first Easter evening! Two weeks ago, on Easter Sunday, John told us about the encounter of the Risen Christ with the broken-hearted and bewildered Mary Magdalene there at his tomb that first Easter morning. Last week St. John told us how the Risen Christ had appeared to the disciples in that Upper Room behind locked doors! But today St. Luke is giving us his perspective on things. We should remember that Luke was not there in the room that night, but he does tell us in the opening words of his Gospel how carefully he had researched and interviewed people before writing his Gospel. One the people he most likely interviewed was Mary the Mother of Jesus. How else could Luke have share with us his beautifully telling of the events surrounding that very first Christmas?

And from St. Luke's account of our Lord's Resurrection in chapter 24, it becomes extremely clear to us—that no one else—and nothing else besides the Risen Lord Jesus Christ himself, appearing before his disciples in his glorified body, could have ever convinced his perplexed followers of the fact that he had indeed risen from the dead!”

May I say that again? **“From St. Luke's account of our Lord's Resurrection in chapter 24, it becomes extremely clear to us—that no one else—and nothing else besides the Risen Lord Jesus Christ himself, appearing before his disciples in his glorified body, could have ever convinced his perplexed followers of the fact that he had indeed risen from the dead!”**

Think about this with me this morning brothers and sisters, if you will: **Not even the testimony of angels, or the testimony of the women, or of those two disciples on the road to Emmaus, was sufficient enough to convince these first followers of Jesus that he had indeed defeated death, and that was now risen gloriously and victoriously from the dead!**

Remember hearing last Sunday, how completely impossible it was for the remaining ten disciples to convince their close, personal friend Thomas of the reality of our Savior's resurrection? Thomas said: *"Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe!"* (John 20:22-23)

BUT THEN EIGHT DAYS LATER, HIS DISCIPLES WERE INSIDE AGAIN AND THOMAS WAS WITH THEM. JESUS CAME AND STOOD AMONG THEM AND SAID, "PEACE BE WITH YOU!" THEN HE SAID TO THOMAS, "PUT YOUR FINGER HERE, AND SEE MY HANDS; AND PUT OUT YOUR HAND AND PLACE IT IN MY SIDE! DO NOT DISBELIEVE, BUT BELIEVE!" AND THOMAS ANSWERS HIM, "MY LORD AND MY GOD" (John 20:24-28).

If anyone has ever come to believe that Jesus Christ truly is the Son of God and that he lived the perfect life as a human being that none of us could ever live, and that he did so, to take our place in fulfilling the law of God completely on our behalf, and then was crucified voluntarily in taking upon himself the punishment that we deserved for our sins, and that God the Father raised him from the dead, three days later, on that first Easter morning—to assure us that God the Father has accepted the sacrifice he made on our behalf—if anyone ever comes to believe this it's not because of the convincing power of the man who is making that presentation! It is always the Holy Spirit, as St. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 12:3, *"No one can say that Jesus Christ is Lord but by the Holy Spirit!"*

St. Paul certainly won a lot of converts to the Christian faith through the many years of his faithful missionary journeys in presenting the Gospel to others as skillfully, convincingly, and clearly as he could, but Paul also confessed: *"It wasn't me! It was the Holy Spirit!"*

Listen to what Paul says in I Corinthians 15:9-11, where he writes: *"I am the very least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them,"* **then St. Paul has to back pedal just a little, when he further confesses though that:** *"It was not I, but the grace of God, that is within me. Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed!"* (I Corinthians 15:9-11)

And all of this, I hope, is leading up to another big point I was hoping to make today: WE WHO READ THE GOSPELS FROM THIS SIDE OF EASTER, WHO HAVE THE DAY PRINTED ON OUR CALENDARS, FORGET HOW HARD IT WAS FOR THE FIRST DISCIPLES TO BELIEVE!

In itself, the empty tomb did not convince them! That fact only demonstrated that Jesus' body was no longer there, not that he had risen from the dead! Convincing these skeptics would require intimate, personal encounters with the One who had been their Master for three years and over the next six weeks Jesus provided exactly that!

Friends, to better understand the miracle of Easter we have to remember exactly what the personal experience of those first followers of Jesus was during that first Holy Week!

At the risk of being **too graphic** to make my point, most of us know from our own experience with death that there is something about a dead body; the coldness of it, the stillness of it, remembering all the life that had formerly been in it; but is now drained out of it that leaves an indelible impression upon every human being! To touch the dead is to feel death, firsthand and to experience the drastic change now of the lifeless one whose life had been so much a part of ours!

To touch the dead is to come face to face with the reality that your own life is slipping away from you! We all realize that the present state of that dead person will soon be every one of us, completely still and cold also! Death doesn't just make us "feel cold," as we say when we are in this life! It "truly makes" us cold!

There, those disciples were behind locked doors in that Upper room, huddled together believing he was dead. How hard it was to believe the news that he was alive, though none of them ever questioned the report of his crucifixion and death from John and from the women at the cross there that first Good Friday! They believed immediately in the reality of his death!

Those women went with Joseph of Aramathea to the tomb, where the cold dead body of Jesus was laid, wrapped in its burial cloth, drained of its life's blood, pale and still; with pierced hands and pierced feet, whose heart had been pierced TERRIBLY ALSO not physically, but by the betrayal and all the denials of those who knew him best of ever having known him at all! Jesus body was laid to rest there inside of a tomb, on a slab as cold as the clay we all have here surrounding us on a winter's day!

When you really stop and think about it: You can hardly blame the men for doubting the women who claimed to have seen our Risen Lord alive after he was dead! Even our Lord's folded up grave clothes and the napkin that had been wrapped around Jesus' head was there, strangely enough, but his body was not there! The glorified Christ in his new body had caught up with those two disciples from Emmaus and they told the others that they had seen Jesus alive and walking and talking with them on the road, but still the others did not yet believe.

Yet, Luke tells us today, *"It was while they were talking about these things, Jesus stood among them, and said to them: "Peace be to you!"* But still, they initially, were only **startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit.** And he said to them: ***"Why are you troubled and why do doubts arise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have!"***

And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and side. And while they were still disbelieving for joy and were marveling, Jesus said to them, ***"Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate before them!"***

Of those six-weeks that followed Jesus' Resurrection, before he ascended back into heaven, a great Christian author named **Philip Yancey** writes: ***"If one may use such language, it's almost as if Jesus broke his own rules about faith! While he told Thomas, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed," Jesus continued to make***

his identity so obvious to as many of his first followers, so that those who saw him could never deny him ever again!

Jesus overwhelmed these first witnesses to his resurrection. Anyone who actually saw him alive in his glorified body following his crucifixion actually lost the freedom of choice to believe or to disbelieve. Jesus' real presence was now irrefutable! Even Jesus' biological brother **James, always a holdout, capitulated after one of these appearances** to him personally, so much so that he became a lead of the church in Jerusalem and, according to Josephus, died as one of the first Christian martyrs!

Jesus succeeded in changing a snuffing band of unreliable followers into fearless evangelists, so that at least ten of those men who had formerly deserted him at the time of his arrest now went on to become martyrs, constantly testifying to their own deep personal faith! **Still Jesus on the day of his Ascension told them to go back to Jerusalem and to patiently await the Holy Spirit's coming to them on that first Pentecost, so that they would be "clothed with power from on high!"** (Luke 24:49)!

Have you come to believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead? Do you trust in him as your personal Savior from sin, death and the grave?

If so, I am encouraging you this morning to always be willing to give the full credit to him to whom your credit is due! You have to say this morning, with me: **"It Wasn't Me! It Was the Holy Spirit!"**

I will never forget a comment a man made to me 31 years ago, when I was 29 years old and serving as pastor of St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Statesboro, Georgia! This 60 year old man had a PhD in Chemistry and was a tenured professor at Georgia Southern. This man was a devout Christian, who had unfortunately been struck with polio as a child, forced to walk with crutches and braces his whole life. Even though he was a highly educated man, he said to me: "Pastor, I just can't understand why someone would not want to believe that the miracle of Easter is true! Doesn't everyone want the story to be true? And it can be true for everyone, just as it is for you and me, if they would just stop resisting the work of the Holy Spirit when the Gospel is shared with them!"

What I heard Dr. Colvin saying to me, back there in 1984, is that God's call to believe the Gospel was now open to everyone, is the same call that the Risen Christ made to Thomas: *"Do not disbelieve but believe!"*

Stop setting up for yourself all of those unnecessary road blocks to prevent the gift of faith from coming to you: *"For if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has passed away, behold the new has come. All of this is from God, who through Christ, has reconciled us to himself, and committed to us the ministry of reconciliation!"* (2 Corinthians 5:17)!

Has God given you that faith today? Has there been much fruit borne of your life to the glory of God? To any degree that there has been are you willing to say with me again today: "It wasn't me! It was Christ! It wasn't me! It was the Holy Spirit!"? Amen