

## **SERMON – APRIL 24, 2022 – EASTER 2 – “FLOWERING YOUR FAITH: WITNESS”**

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ, Amen. We look forward to this day and to the five other Sundays that make up the rest of the Easter season, through April and May. Our overall theme for these Sundays is “The Flowering of Our Faith,” and I have asked someone who knows a lot about how to make plants grow and flower to help provide me metaphors for the growth of our faith over the next weeks. Our faith will flower if we utilize every means of growth that God provides, just as plants grow and flower if they have everything they need to grow.

One of the first things any gardener needs to grow something – inside or outside, is a PLACE, AN AREA for the plants to be and to start to grow. Often that means providing a POT full of soil for the plant to be “potted” in. One of the things I have learned about growing REAL plants from my friend is this: “Don’t skimp on the container size.” What does that mean? Well, take this pot for instance. [Show Pot.] Does it hold enough soil for the plant to grow, or not? Let’s hear this bit of advice: “One of the biggest mistakes gardeners make when growing in containers [pots and such] is selecting a pot that is too small. The more soil a vessel can hold, the better the results will be.”

What does it mean as we live the Christian life if our lives are too small; that we have allowed ourselves to live in “too small a pot,” so to speak? Are we locking our doors and hiding away from life out there because it seems too scary? How can we be witnesses to the faith if we do not go about and live among the people? You know, that’s what the disciples refused to do right after Jesus was crucified and entombed. They hid away out of fear. As we read in the gospel of John today, “When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the

doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews....”

When it comes to one of our Christian purposes in life, the purpose of witnessing to the faith, notice the great contrast between the eleven disciples hidden and locked up those first few days versus the very same disciples, led by Peter, standing before the Jerusalem council in our first lesson. In that lesson the disciples, now apostles, are being questioned by the High Priest and being told by the Council to go back to their hiding place and SHUT UP ABOUT THIS JESUS! In other words they were told, “Stop witnessing!”

Notice later in this passage, after these disciples of Jesus were flogged and permitted to leave, how the apostles conversed with one another. Luke writes, “As they left the council, they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the Name.” Notice how the soil of their lives was being enriched greatly by the suffering and persecution they were enduring on account of witnessing for Jesus Christ. And notice as well that, even as they had been told yet again to stop preaching Jesus, they kept at it: “And every day in the temple and at home they did NOT cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah.”

The apostles had begun already growing in a bigger faith pot, so to speak. Soon we would see them go outside Jerusalem. One in the book of Acts, Philip, witnessed to a visiting Ethiopian, baptized the man, who probably spread Christianity to Ethiopia, a place which we now know was one of the first places the faith spread. Then we see the growth of a witness to Samaritans, then to non-Jewish Gentiles (first in Israel and then out to the whole Roman world), even to people who were our ancestors in northern Europe! We should be mighty glad that the Church never said to itself, “Well, we’re done reaching out to those other

people.” They kept faith with the original commandment from Jesus in the Great Commission, “Go and make disciples of ALL nations.” They kept making the pot in which their faith was planted bigger and bigger and bigger, knowing that they would always be nourished in their witness by the Holy Spirit pouring His love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, generosity and hope into whatever new situation the Body of Christ encountered! The same should be true for us! Why? Well, you and me at King of Glory are, by our motto, “a church without walls,” a set of people not imprisoned in a permanent pot!

I recall when Jesus was criticized for reaching out to the outcasts, to lepers and tax collectors and prostitutes and just all around “sinners,” as the Pharisees called them. His challengers asked Jesus why He did things differently; after all the Pharisees, when they made a new disciple here and there, they made that new recruit prove they were good enough before the Pharisees accepted them. That was their unloving witness to the world. Well, anyway, Jesus replied to them, “No one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.” We are called to live our lives ever larger in love as witnesses to Christ. We are called to put the wine of our witness into fresh wineskins, wineskins able to stretch our faith and lengthen our love and understanding for the new people God wants us to serve. God wants us to build a bigger pot for the flowering of our faith if the life we had been leading was too constricted. We should never put ourselves in a position where we feel unable to do what God has called us to do!

Mary Magdalene is a great example for us in this regard, as we read in our gospel today. We see her approach the empty tomb with trepidation. She cried in

despair because, in her mind, it was out of the question that Jesus had risen from the dead. Even after the angels sought to change her mind, she remained disturbed: “They have taken away my Lord,” she said, “and I do not know where they have laid Him.” Even after seeing Jesus standing there and saying something to her, Mary Magdalene asked Him, “Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away.” Was the pot that contained her faith – Christ was still her Lord, she said – still, at that moment, going to remain small and limited in its understanding of what God can do? Would her witness thus remain as small? (“ Oh, I once was taught by this man Jesus, who was cruelly killed. I still try to do as He wanted me to.”) No, the second time Jesus talked to her, and said, “Mary,” she recognized His voice and enlarged her faith to the point where she went to the disciples and GAVE WITNESS to what she had seen: “I have seen the Lord.” John writes also that she “told them that Jesus had said these things to her.”

Thomas as well, after the other disciples declared that THEY had seen Jesus, laid down the law about how limited HIS faith was: “Unless I see the mark of the nails in His hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in His side, I will not believe.” He was just being “realistic” you understand. As too many Christians generally do, like Thomas they look only at the “practicalities” of what can be done with their life of faith. Their pot remains too small. But give Thomas a little credit. When Jesus appeared before Thomas, exactly mimicking what Thomas had said to the others a week earlier, Thomas opened up. He realized Jesus was supernatural; Thomas called Christ not only “My Lord” but also “My God.” He is said to have preached the gospel in India.

But Jesus had challenged not only Thomas but the rest of humanity that day. Jesus said to Thomas, "Have you believed because You have seen Me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Though we may not have seen Jesus arisen in the flesh, let me call to your heart and mind those times when God HAS done great things in your life. Just as Peter witnessed to what he had seen, so can we. One of my favorite passages in the book of Acts recounts what Peter said just before his arrest that is in our account today. Before that, Peter heals someone and then tells the crowd, "You Israelites, why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made this man walk? The God of our ancestors has glorified His servant Jesus, whom you handed over to Pilate, though Pilate had decided to release Jesus. But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the Author of Life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses."

"To this we are witnesses." You can say of your own life in Christ, "To this I am a witness." We all have a story we can tell of what blessings God has bestowed on us – not only obvious blessings but the not so obvious ways that God gets us through the hard times. It takes "4 R's" to do that: reflect, rejoice, retell, and renew. We first can "reflect" on what has already happened in our lives, and how, now that we come to think about it, God WAS helping us in different ways. Realizing this, we then rejoice at what God did. We then retell this story to others, making sure to let people know how the Spirit has revealed to us the ways God has intervened in our lives. And then, by witnessing, we renew our faith, now that we are even more realizing just how loved we are by God. Now we want others to know how loved THEY are by the God who created them.

The song we are about to sing, “I Love to Tell the Story,” really illuminates this process – this way to remember our own Christian story, to re-plant our hopes in God, and to restore our lives through witnessing to God and witnessing to our faith in God. “I love to tell the story of unseen things above; of Jesus and His glory; of Jesus and His love. I love to tell the story, because I know it’s true; it satisfies my longings as nothing else would do. I love to tell the story, how pleasant to repeat, what seems each time I tell it, more wonderfully sweet! I love to tell the story, for some have never heard the message of salvation from God’s own holy word. I love to tell the story: ‘twill be my theme in glory to tell the old, old story of Jesus and His love.”

Telling the “old, old story” of Jesus is always most important. But almost as important, for so many people outside the church today, is telling YOUR faith story, and telling it before you die. Your story will plant seeds of faith in their lives, and it will strengthen you as you grow your faith like a plant does.

But let me leave you with one thing when it comes to flowering your faith through “witnessing.” Mary Magdalene may have mistaken Jesus for “the gardener” today, but she wasn’t really wrong, for Jesus really IS our gardener. He has taken us, His beloved plantings, and put them not just in little pots and let us be. Like any good gardener, He watches us grow and calls us to bigger things and replants us in bigger pots and still bigger pots so that we may not only grow our faith, but reach out and provide branches and shade to other plants, other people. So please listen, O Planting of Christ, for Christ’s call; listen in the Spirit; listen and be ready for further growth through further service and further witness. Let Christ’s new wine be placed in fresh wineskins in your life. Continue to let the Holy Spirit challenge you to flower your faith in new ways. Amen!