

Unexplainable

7. Relentless

February 6-7, 2021

Welcome to the last week of our series on the book of Acts called *Unexplainable*. The church of Jesus Christ started with just a few blue-collar workers from the rural part of Israel and mushroomed into a global movement of Jesus-followers that includes you and me. That's unexplainable apart from the power of God. Luke wrote the book of Acts to tell the story of the early beginnings of that movement.

In chapter 5 of Acts, the Jesus movement was growing so much in Jerusalem that it was impossible to ignore. The apostles were teaching every day in the temple and the church was growing stronger and more confident in faith. God was using the apostles to heal throngs of people, creating a minor sensation. Then some people tried to put the brakes on the movement.

Acts 5:17-21 *Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. ¹⁸ They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. ¹⁹ But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. ²⁰ "Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people all about this new life." ²¹ At daybreak they entered the temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people.*

The Jewish leaders try to keep the apostles from talking about Jesus by throwing them in jail, but God sent an angel to release them and send them right back to telling others about Jesus. These are boomerang apostles! Try to get rid of them and they come right back! No one could shut them up!

Jesus calls us to be relentless witnesses

Just like the apostles we're called to be people that won't be quiet about what we've experienced in Jesus. Maybe one of your friends sees a movie they really like and won't stop talking about it – or maybe they bought a car or went on a trip and you hear every detail. Jesus calls us to tell other people about him.

Acts 1:8 *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*

The rest of the book is the story of God's people being his witnesses. In verse 20 the angel instructs the apostles: ***"tell the people all about this new life."*** We get to do that too – tell people that they can have a brand-new life in Jesus. That's great news, because at some point we realize that the old life doesn't work. It shows up in lots of ways: our relationships fall apart, we become dissatisfied, get addicted, face unsolvable problems. The new life Jesus brings helps us find strength in face of pain, love that endures, meaning in our days and hope for the future. And new life is great news because the old one comes to an end. Every one of us will

die. It's going to happen. Then what? The new life Jesus gives us never ends – it just goes to a higher, richer level. We get to tell others about that new life!

There are so many people around us who need to hear about that new life in Christ. There are about 60,000 in the West Hills area. There are about 2.3 million in the Pittsburgh Metro region. No one can say exactly how many people have been made alive in Christ, but if we say 1 out of 3 are active followers of Christ (which is probably generous), then it means that at least 40,000 people in the West Hills area are spiritually dead and apart from God. And in the metro area, over 1.5 million are currently apart from Christ and in danger of an eternity apart from God. 1.5 million! Think of that. That is our mission as a church. The angel opened the prison doors for the apostles and said "Go tell them!" And God will open doors for us to share about Jesus, if we will walk through them. And we need to be relentless, just like the apostles.

The apostles had been threatened not talk about Jesus... but they did anyway.

Acts 5:21-25 *When the high priest and his associates arrived, they called together the Sanhedrin—the full assembly of the elders of Israel—and sent to the jail for the apostles. ²² But on arriving at the jail, the officers did not find them there. So they went back and reported, ²³ "We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside." ²⁴ On hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were at a loss, wondering what this might lead to.²⁵ Then someone came and said, "Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people."*

Relentless! Persistent! The never gave up. They kept at it, even when they messed up or stumbled. Former figure skater Scott Hamilton won the National and World Championships in 1981 before winning a gold medal at the 1984 Olympic. Hamilton and his wife Tracie are committed followers of Christ. In one interview Hamilton said: "I calculated once how many times I fell during my skating career—41,600 times. But here's the funny thing: I got up 41,600 times. That's the muscle you have to build in your psyche—the one that reminds you to just get up." Champions are relentless – they don't give up. Relentless witnesses keep at it too.

We don't just talk to people about God, we talk to God about people. We pray for people and we don't give up. In MD1 class we teach the BLESS pattern of sharing faith, which begins with prayer. We pray for the people around us to have an openness to Jesus. One simple way Crossroaders have been doing that is by using Bless Every Home.com. This gives you a list of the names of people who live around you and gives you a daily prompt to pray for them specifically. And it keeps a dashboard of prayer activity. The dashboard earlier this week showed that Crossroaders at North Fayette prayed for 1,221 homes, cared for 39 homes, shared with 10 homes and discipled 11 homes. Way to go! That is so encouraging because persistent prayer is a first step toward spiritual awakening.

In 1899 a remarkable revival started amongst the Boers (which means "farmers") in South Africa during their war with England. Thousands of Boers were sent to prisoner-of-war

camps scattered around the world. It started when some missionaries moved to a POW camp and helped a couple guys come to faith in Christ. Those guys had been enemies, but they reconciled and started praying together for the rest of the camp. A while later, hundreds of people came to faith in Christ in that camp. Then amazingly, revival broke out simultaneously in all the camps, tens of thousands of miles apart, despite no contact between the camps. Awakening was happening in all the camps in different nations and islands where the Boer prisoners of war were being held.

What can happen in our area as we pray? Do we want revival enough to pray for it persistently? I have been so encouraged to hear that for months there have been Crossroaders praying for spiritual awakening in our region – some are praying Tuesdays at noon. Others are praying Saturday mornings via zoom. That is what relentless witnesses do!

Relentless witnesses are clear on who they listen to

The apostles received conflicting instructions. An angel came and opened their jail cell and told them to go tell others about Jesus. Hours later, the Jewish leaders ordered the apostles not to tell anyone about Jesus. Which one would you listen to; the angel or the leaders? The apostles were clear:

27 The apostles were brought in and made to appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. 28 “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,” he said. “Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood.”

29 Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than human beings!

The apostles were talking about Jesus because God told them to do so. When others told them not, they were clear who was in charge: they would obey God.

You and I will get a lot of conflicting messages when it comes to sharing Jesus. We’ll hear others tell us we shouldn’t speak about Jesus because all religions are the same and it’s arrogant. Should we listen to them? A recent poll showed that nearly half of all practicing Christian Millennials say that it is wrong to evangelize. Should we listen to them? Our fear may tell us not to talk about Jesus because of what others might think of us. Should we listen to our fears?

Relentless witnesses know who they are listening to: the Lord Jesus. To be a relentless witness we need to hear the voice of the One who said, “Follow me and I will make you fishers of people.” The One who said, ***you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses.*** Who are you listening to? When the Apostles told the leaders that they were going to listen to God instead of them, it didn’t go over well.

Acts 5:33 When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death.

But that threat didn’t stop the apostles.

Relentless witnesses accept the cost

We've all seen the ads that promise miraculous results. "See how I lost 33 pounds in 3 months without diet or exercise." "Tone your body in 5 minutes per day!" It doesn't matter if they show someone in a doctor's coat, I don't believe it. It would be great if there was a way to get into good physical condition without exercising or to lose weight without changing my lifestyle. But I know that's not possible.

I'd also like it if there was a way to witness for Jesus and be 100% certain that I'd never be uncomfortable, and that no one would ever mock me or exclude me from their next party. But there is no such thing as witnessing without a cost. The apostles paid a much higher price than any of us ever will. They not only accepted the cost, they actually rejoiced in it!

Acts 5:41 *The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.* They were high-fiving each other because they knew that if they were being persecuted it meant that other people saw them like they saw Jesus. Jesus said in **John 15:20** *Remember what I told you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also.*

Stephen Neill wrote that for the first 300 years of the Church, "Every Christian, knew that sooner or later he might have to testify to his faith at the cost of his life." For them it was a matter of maybe we'll have to die for our faith and maybe not. But there was no guarantee of safety. It's easy for us to forget that. I've noticed that sometimes the Christian community acts like whiners when someone threatens our privilege or criticizes our beliefs. We want to write our legislators and flex our political muscles. The truth is, we Christians in America are not persecuted right now, but we're just not favored like we used to be. But that is OK – the Gospel advances quite well from the margins of society. The early church did! Many of our Christian brothers and sisters around the world are being persecuted right now. Let's take a moment to pray right now for our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world.

Relentless witnesses stayed spiritually fueled

Acts 5: 42 *Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.*

If we want our lives to overflow with the love and life of Jesus, we need to stay spiritually filled up. Spiritually dry believers don't consistently share Christ. Spiritually lukewarm believers don't burn bright enough to reflect the light of Jesus. And we get that way unless we connect with other believers. The first believers gathered together not just weekly, but day after day.

They gathered as a large group and house to house as small groups. That is our model at Crossroads too: weekend worship and LifeGroups. The combination is powerful to become disciples who impact the region.

The more we experience with Jesus, the more likely we are to share him with others.

You are gathered in worship right now – which is wise! I hope you are in a LifeGroup as well. When we are in touch with the wonders of Jesus – of his amazing grace, the privilege of hearing his voice or receiving his love then we will want to tell others about him.

Verse 42 says they *never stopped* proclaiming Jesus is Messiah – they were relentless at sharing life! May it be so in our lives.