

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Today is the second Sunday of Easter. What's the big deal about Easter? It's the day we celebrate the *fact* that Jesus Christ, after he was put to death on a Roman cross, did not remain dead and in the grave as every other person in the world had. On the third day, he rose again from the dead, just as he said he would. Because Christ is risen, you can absolutely believe that he is who he said he was, and he accomplished what he claimed to accomplish. He is true God. His payment for your sins is complete. The heavenly Father has adopted you into his family. Heaven is your eternal home.

So starting with last week and continuing another 5 weeks, we will look at the impact for us today of this fact that Christ is risen, he is risen indeed.

Today, the message is called: "True and reasonable faith. Proclaim it!"

I think all of us here today know that God wants us to share our faith and not hide it. God wants us to tell the message of Jesus to everyone we know. God wants all people to be saved, and the only way to be saved is to know and believe the good news of Jesus, and the only way to believe that good news is if a person hears it, and friends, God has called you to be the one who speaks it!

The problem is, we don't always know how to share our faith. Most of us could name some examples of times we tried to share our faith, or wanted to, but it didn't go so well. The most difficult group of people to witness to is the educated unbeliever. By this I mean the unbeliever who has been to college where he has been educated about the foolishness of Christianity. In many college classrooms today, the teachers ask in one of the first classes, "Who here is a Christian?" They get that question out of the way so they know who to target. Whether the class is philosophy, biology, sociology, or any number of others, the professor picks out the Christians so he can pick on the Christians throughout the course.

And almost inevitably, the attack on the Christians takes on the form of ridicule because of how unreasonable the Christian faith is... how unscientific it is... how untrue it is. If you have been on the receiving end of a few of those attacks, it can cause you to question your faith. It can also easily cause you to be silent about your faith.

Today, we want to look at a time when the apostle Paul witnessed his faith. Listen carefully today because we will learn that our faith is true. It is reasonable. And even if you're persecuted for it, God calls on you to proclaim it.

We pick up our story with Paul giving a defense of himself... and really a defense of the Christian faith... before a couple of prominent rulers. We don't have time for the whole story. But it really is a fascinating story. To get the whole background, you would really need to go all the way back to Acts 21 and start reading from there. Maybe you could do that at home today. It's a great story and easy reading. But the immediate background is this:

Paul was arrested, essentially for preaching about Jesus. Our story takes place in Caesarea which was north of Jerusalem, near the Mediterranean, still in Palestine. He is being held before being transported to Rome where a higher court will hear his case. Festus was the governor of the area, and had recently come into power. King Agrippa was a puppet king in Jerusalem. His only

real power was over the temple there and the temple taxes. He came to Caesarea to pay his respects to Festus, the new governor. Festus thought this might be a good opportunity to have him hear Paul, because Festus didn't fully understand why he was imprisoned. He needed to send him to Rome for a trial, but Festus didn't even know how to explain the case to those who would try him there. So Festus calls Paul to speak in front of him and Agrippa.

Paul begins by telling Agrippa his personal history. A Pharisee who first persecuted Christians. But then on the road to Damascus, Jesus appeared to him and he became a follower of Jesus. Just before the verses we're about to read, Paul reported what Jesus said to him: **"I am sending you to the Gentiles to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me."**

And we continue with the text before us today in Acts 26:19:

19 "So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. 20 First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and then to the Gentiles, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds.

Isn't this cool what Paul does here? He's relating his personal story. He's supposedly offering a defense for himself before these rulers. But he sneaks in the gospel message, doesn't he? "So, what I've been preaching everywhere I go is **that they should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds.** And if you called me to preach to you today, most excellent rulers, that's what I would preach to you too. Repent! Turn to God! Demonstrate your repentance by your deeds! Of course, you didn't call on me to preach today, but it's important that you know the content of my preaching." Awesome!

²¹That is why [because of this message] some Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me. ²²But God has helped me to this very day; so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen— ²³that the Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles."

- 1) Why did they seize him? Paul is making it clear that it is not because of any crimes he committed, but simply because he proclaimed the truth of God.
- 2) Paul claims his message is the same as that of Moses and the prophets. They proclaimed what would happen. He proclaimed what did happen. O.T. prophecies like these: Genesis 3:15, Psalm 22, Isaiah 53, Daniel, Zechariah. Paul is simultaneously showing them that he doesn't have a new, insurrectionist message that's stirring up the people. But at the same time trying to convince them that this ancient message is God's message.
- 3) And the basic message he (and the prophets) taught was this: that the Messiah would suffer, and be the first to rise. The message of light was proclaimed to the Jews then the Gentiles.

²⁴ At this point Festus interrupted Paul's defense. "You are out of your mind, Paul!" he shouted. "Your great learning is driving you insane."

Insane: to think or reason in a completely irrational manner. This, friends, is what many of you have been accused of. Lots of people out there believe that the Christian faith requires that its adherents think and reason in a completely irrational manner. Paul has a good answer.

²⁵ "I am not insane, most excellent Festus," Paul replied. "What I am saying is true and reasonable. ²⁶ The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. [King Agrippa should have been familiar with the Old Testament, and with the Christian teachings as well. How much he really *was* familiar with those teachings is an open question.] I am convinced

that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. ²⁷King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.”

Paul is making the claim that the Christian faith he was proclaiming was true and reasonable. And what was the basis for his claim? The king was familiar with these things. In other words, Paul was stating facts and history, not fantasy and make-believe. And King Agrippa, being in Jerusalem and ruler over the temple, surely knew of all of these stories personally. People were still alive who had heard Jesus and seen his miracles; the empty tomb could still be seen; the Christian message was turning the world upside down. If Festus had any doubt as to the verity of what Paul said, he could ask Agrippa who knew these things about Jesus were true. And if he still had doubts, he could conduct his own research and find out they were true. And since they were true, then they were also reasonable. Even if they were fantastic and incredible with eternal implications, because this message of Jesus: his suffering, death and resurrection, were rooted in historical facts, then what Paul said is both true and reasonable.

²⁸ **Then Agrippa said to Paul, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?”** ²⁹ **Paul replied, “Short time or long—I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.”**

Agrippa seems to think that Paul is delivering a sales pitch. Paul, do you think you can “sell” me on this religion in such a short time? Paul, though, makes it clear that he is selling nothing. He just wants to make Agrippa what he is: a disciple of Jesus. He’s not selling anything. He’s just interested in connecting Agrippa with the most important person who ever walked the planet: Jesus Christ. Then he would be who Paul is: A redeemed child of God, forgiven, loved and living for God and his glory. Of course the chains weren’t all that pleasant, so Paul wasn’t wishing the “prisoner” part of his current identity on Agrippa.

What a bold witness Paul gave that day! Friends, God is calling you to boldly witness your faith as well. What does this story teach us about witnessing?

- 1) **You must obey “God’s vision.”** While Paul literally got a vision from heaven and felt compelled to follow it, in just as real a sense, you have gotten a vision from God about the reality of this world. You have “seen” things now the way God sees them. You see sin for what it is. The world does not. You see this decaying world as something temporary. The world does not. You see God’s anger over our disobedience. You see God’s loving solution in Christ Jesus. You see life with God for eternity is our true goal. You see that that your life is meaningful and has a purpose now. This “vision” God has given you now compels you. Share it!
- 2) **Speak about Christ by telling your story** of your connection to Christ. Why tell your story?
 - 1) Everyone likes a personal story.
 - 2) No one can argue with what you have experienced. But most importantly, God tells you to: 1 Pet. 3:15--**“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that is in you.”**
- 3) **Paul shows us what to say.** Here’s the twist. Although it’s your personal story, don’t make the story about you. Make it about God. Be sure to throw a lot of Jesus into the story! Paul preached: **“Repent. Turn to God. Demonstrate repentance by deeds.”** It’s all about God’s greatness, not yours. Christianity isn’t about our feelings. Christianity is about fact: especially the fact that Christ is risen! Yet this story is personal for you. It does bring you peace, purpose and perseverance. You *can* share your story as to why he’s *your* Lord. But finally most important is who he is and what he’s done. Remember that as you share your story.

So here’s how you can do this: “Yeah, I go to church because there I hear the truth of God

that speaks to my heart. I hear about the danger of disobedience to God. I hear the promise of God: turn to him for his forgiveness in Christ Jesus, and I truly am forgiven. I'm encouraged to live a life that gives glory to my God. I never get sick of hearing this truth of God. It gives me peace and hope for my daily life." The story is about you and your experience... but it's really not, is it? It's about God and what he's done for you. This is how Paul "snuck" in the good news of Jesus. You can do the same.

- 4) **Just tell the truth and be sincere.** Don't exaggerate or make up things so you have a more convincing story. Speak from the heart. Many of you probably don't have a "conversion story." So you can talk about how you quietly came to faith and were strengthened in it through baptism and a life time of nurturing and church going. This is also a fascinating story of God's grace!
- 5) **Speak with absolute confidence** and peace. What you believe isn't a pink unicorn or a flying spaghetti monster. What you believe is true and reasonable. You believe in the historical facts of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, and that this three-fold truth changes life for everyone who believes. So speak about your faith in the exact same way you speak about all true and reasonable things. For example, if someone else caused an accident that you were in, you would tell the officer your account with confidence because you know it's true. Do the same about your faith in Jesus.
- 6) **Remember that you are not selling anything.** You are simply trying to connect people to Jesus, just like you are. You want other people to be what you are... you're not trying to get them to buy in to your religion. When you share your faith, **calm, gentle sincerity** should describe your manner of sharing the truth, just as it described Paul's.

Friends, our Christian faith is true and it's reasonable. That means it changes and saves lives now and for eternity. Are you proclaiming it to others? Could you make it your goal this week to share with someone your personal story of your connection with Christ? You have the words that bring eternal life. Love God and your neighbor enough to share it! Speak with confidence, friends, because this is God's power truth, it is so needed, and God will be with you as you share it. Proclaim it! Amen.