

Well, it's only been a week, but what a remarkable transformation the disciple Peter has made in such a short time.

Last week, he betrayed Jesus 3 times, then he ran to the tomb on Easter morning, found it empty, and ran away and didn't tell anyone.

That could have been the end of Peter's ministry, but as we heard this morning, we know that his story continues.

Peter has had a change of heart and mind since Jesus was killed.

He went from denying him 3 times, to professing his love for Jesus 3 times at the end of the Gospel of John.

And today, in the book of Acts, we know that he gets arrested 3 times for preaching the Gospel of Jesus' life.

The story that we heard this morning is the last time he's arrested.

The text says that he and the other disciples were brought before the council to be questioned, but this was after they were brought into custody against their will.

In other words, they were arrested.

And earlier in the book of Acts, Peter and John were arrested twice for healing people in Jesus' name.

Peter, even though this is now his 3rd time getting in trouble with the authorities, he doesn't mince his words at all while he is on the stand, being questioned by the high council.

He doesn't try to gloss over or minimize what he and the other disciples were doing, in fact, he says, that "*God exalted [Jesus] at his right and as leader and savior*" (Acts 5:31).

The only people in the Roman Empire who were referred to as leaders or saviors were the ancient rulers.

So, Peter is being extra-defiant by saying, Jesus is our Leader, our Lord, our Savior, not the Roman politicians.

Peter's change of heart is inspirational for those of us who have ever strayed from the life of faith.

The testimony of his life shows us that no matter how far we've wandered, we can always make our way back.

You could say that Peter even was partially responsible for Jesus' crucifixion, and even someone with blood on his hands, cannot only find his way back but literally risk his life and his freedom in the name of Jesus' message.

He reminds us that the life of faith is tumultuous.

It's not a straight line in which everyday of our lives, we grow deeper in our commitment to Jesus and living out his message.

My life of faith on a line graph would look more like a volatile stock, way up, then way down, then up, then down, and hopefully with an increasing trend of more ups and less downs.

But the reason we find our ways back to Jesus, no matter how far we stray is because we know that our faith tradition has undeniable truths.

These truths can be denied by society and the world at large, but when we hear Jesus' radical message of loving our neighbor and serving the most vulnerable and marginalized among us, something within our gut says, "Yes!"

And if there's any part of ourselves that we should listen to, it's our instincts.

I believe these irrefutable truths are also proven because we are Jesus' followers so many years later, and this is articulated in the Gospels themselves.

Right after the story we heard this morning, in the Book of Acts, there's a story about a little-known man named Gamaliel.

Now, he's a Pharisee who is wise and respected by all the people.

And while the high priests are trying to decide what to do with Peter and the other disciples, now that they've been arrested for a third time, Gamaliel calls the high priests outside to share some wise words with them.

And once he gets the people outside, he says to them,

"Fellow-Israelites, consider carefully what you propose to do to these men."

³⁶*For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him;*

but he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and disappeared.

³⁷*After him Judas the Galilean rose up at the time of the census and got people to follow him; he also perished, and all who followed him were scattered.*

³⁸*So in the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men [Peter and the apostles] and let them alone;*

because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail;

³⁹*but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!”* (Acts 5: 35-39).

So, basically, what he's saying is that the Pharisees don't need to waste their time worrying about how to punish Peter and the others, because if their message is not in accordance with God's will, if it's of human origin, then it will fail.

But if it is of God, then we'll be fighting against God and that's not a situation anyone wants to get into.

This wisdom speaks volumes to us, even today.

If the message isn't of God, it will die off, lose steam; the followers will go astray.

But if it is of God, it will have legs and it will last and surpass life and death and generations and all efforts to sabotage it.

Well, even today, people are trying to kill Jesus' message, as evidenced by the horrible attack on Christians in Lebanon during Holy Week.

Christians have been persecuted since Jesus was crucified, if his message wasn't meant to last, it would have died by now.

But it hasn't died because we know the core kernels of truth that we all share are worth standing for, as the band The Script wrote in one of their songs, *"You've gotta stand for something or you'll fall for anything."*

Peter stood on the side of Jesus and eventually lost his life for it.

Our lives might not be at stake, but we are called to stand on the side of love, stand on the belief that every life matters, stand up to hatred and intolerance, knowing that while love looks different in different situations, it's always the better path to take.

Peter knew this, which is why he spent his time healing people, our job is to heal as well, heal our world, heal each other, offer healing to all those who suffer.

We stand on the belief that it's always better to heal than to harm.

And I am not here to say that being a spiritual person or a Jesus-follower or a Christian is easy.

It's not.

Can it make this difficult life easier? Hopefully.

I think it certainly offers us essential resources to deal with the problems we face, and Christianity brings us close to each other so that we can help and support each other through difficult times, so in that way, being part of a faith community is helpful and supportive.

But is it easy? No.

Because it's like swimming upstream, and that takes a lot of effort.

All the other messages we receive tell us to be selfish, materialistic, fearful of others, greedy, vengeful, and every time we encounter one of these messages, we have to say, "no."

No, I put my family before money.

No, I choose to love rather than to fear.

No, I choose to give rather than hoard.

And this is what Jesus' disciples did.

They said no to the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the Roman Governor and they literally said NO to human authority when they said, "*We must obey God rather than any human authority*" (Acts 5: 29).

And they suffered for being prophetic, they were literally flogged!

Now, if I were punished by flogging for doing something I wasn't supposed to do,

I think that such a severe physical punishment would dissuade me from repeating whatever earned me that punishment.

But this is why the disciples had more faith than I do, because after they were punished, they were ordered, *ordered*, not to speak in the name of Jesus.

But the text says that after they were released, *“they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonour for the sake of [Jesus] name”*

And every day in the temple and at home they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah” (Acts 5: 41-42).

They did exactly what they were told not to do.

But this is what it means to follow God.

It's not easy.

It's risky business, it means risking institutional approval and community.

It means giving up or sacrificing an easy, comfortable life. Responding to God's call might even mean oppression and alienation.

Now I know that we're familiar with the idea of martyrs as people who get killed for a cause, but the word martyr actually means, “witness,” that is, one who lives a faithful life despite the consequences.

Peter was not a martyr or faithful witness for Jesus before his crucifixion, his line graph of faithfulness would have been in the negatives.

But then he changes course, becomes a martyr, heals people, preaches Jesus as the Messiah regardless of the backlash.

But what most amazes me is that while I am sure they did talk and preach, the disciples ACTED.

After all, it's called the Books of Acts, the Acts of the Apostles.

This is what got them into trouble, their healing people, their establishment of churches, their acting, not necessarily all their talking.

If all they did was talk they probably wouldn't have drawn so much ire from the authorities.

So, too, we are called to act, which might seem refreshing because I know that most people, especially in New England, aren't jumping at the chance to talk with strangers about their faith.

We live in one of the least-religious states in the country.

Everyone minds their own business, and there's a mutual understanding that we don't try to convert each other.

Well, then how will people know you follow Jesus?

Hopefully by your actions.

If you stand on the side of love, of compassion, of forgiveness, of understanding.

This sounds warm and fuzzy, but we know it's not easy.

It's risky, it means saying 'no,' when everyone else is telling you to say 'yes,' and it means saying 'yes' to things that the rest of the world is afraid of.

But we swim against the tide because we know in our core that it's the will of our creator, made known to us through Jesus.

After all, Gamaliel told the authorities to leave Peter and the disciples alone because if their message wasn't true, it would run its course.

Well, the Pharisees and the Saducees are no more, but Jesus' message still stands, may we have the courage to stand with it.

And may we find comfort in knowing that even if we find ourselves as traitorous as Peter, we can still find our way back.

There's always a way back to the path of truth, life and love.

Amen.