



Sermon by Pastor Tim O'Brien

April 23, 2017

New Testament Lesson

Acts 4: 8-13

Gospel Lesson

John 20: 19-23

Open Book

“I can read you like an open book” Has someone ever said that to you? I remember when I was in college and the guys in my dorm would always want me to play cards with them. I always thought they invited me just because we were friends, which I was, until one of them said to me, “Playing with you is easy money. Your face gives away everything, we can read you like a book and know just what kind of hand you have.”

Well, besides reading people during cards games, there is another movement that has loftier goals. This is the Human Library project. It started in 2006 in Denmark and ran for four days with more than a 1,000 people showing up stunning the organizers.

And the principle is simple. You show up to a conference center as a reader. You pick a category that you want to know more about like Muslim, bipolar, autistic, PTSD survivor, being a British butler, or refugee for example. For each topic there is a human book who sits down with you as the borrower for 30 minutes to share their story and let you ask them any question you want with no restrictions. These events have become hugely popular and are now being hosted all over the world.

The basic foundation of this project is to build a positive framework for conversations that challenge stereotypes and prejudices through dialogue where real people are on loan to readers. A place where difficult questions are expected, appreciated and answered. In short it is a place to be an open book being a witness in sharing your story and touching another person's life.

In our reading today we hear from Peter whose life with Jesus had been an open book of faith and fear competing in his heart. In fact the story of his book

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would be about how faith that can push back the fear and even use it for greater things.

After all, Peter had faith — “This shall never happen to you!” he says to Jesus who had said he was about to die. And he had fear — “Woman, I don’t know him,” he said in his denial of Christ.

However, the post-Resurrection Peter told a very different story with his life. In our reading today, we hear of a pretty scary event. Peter has been hauled before the judge because he was involved in the healing of a lame man. A huge crowd soon gathered to witness what was going on, and Peter used the opportunity to preach. With the beggar still holding on to him he told the startled crowds that Jesus was alive. At this point, the authorities stopped him, and hauled him off to jail.

So Peter, faith muzzling fear, now reviews these facts for his accusers. He boldly proclaims, "It is by the name of Jesus Christ ... that this man stands before you."

With the very next verse we see the key to this passage, "When they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were ordinary and uneducated men, they were amazed."

What happened to make him so bold now? He was no more educated than he was before the crucifixion. His social status and his status in the religious community had not changed since before the crucifixion. He was just everyday people. What changed Peter?

What gave him this new-found boldness? The resurrection happened. Jesus whose life had been an open book of love and forgiveness had risen from the dead. In our Gospel lesson we find the disciples who were cowering in fear after Jesus’ crucifixion – afraid of everything and everyone. And then, “Jesus came and stood among them and said, “peace be with you”. Jesus came to the frightened exhausted disciples saying to them, “this has been a long road we have traveled and now it is time to be renewed.” And so he breathed upon them and filled them with the Holy Spirit, he filled them with new life, he filled them with courage, with conviction,

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with strength to see them through the days ahead. And he said, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

In other words, Jesus is sending them and us out as human books to let the world read us through how we act and speak what faith really means, what forgiveness looks like, what grace can do to transform a person's life.

"You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts" (2 Corinthians 3:2-3).

We are to be open books - witnessing and telling the larger story of Jesus with our lives. We're sent to bring the good news to the people. And it is good news. Good News of a savior who cares for us. Good News of abundant life. Good News of eternal life. Good News of healing and wholeness. Good News of peace and purpose. Good News of grace and forgiveness. Good News of love and lives transformed. Sometimes it's the only good news among the empty news and the bad news everybody gets every day. But it is not just a matter of bringing the good news; it's a matter of being and living the good news.

You see, in scripture we are never called "to" witness but "be" witnesses. And there is a difference – to witness means we do it to other people – to be a witness means it is part of our faith life and so being a witness means we have a relationship.

So, when we go out into our week and we run into that person who bugs us, annoys us, confuses us, angers us, frustrates us – stop and consider there may be more going on than what we can see. To do that we have to be in relationship with people – in ministry with people. We have to care and extend the love of Christ. We have to follow the advice of scripture found in James to be "quick to listen, slow to anger and be doers of the word showing others through our words and our actions what our relationship with Christ is all about." Because we never know how our life will touch another, when we are willing to read another person's story and be open books of God's love to them.

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There is a story told by Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, pioneer psychologist of death and dying, about visiting terminally-ill patients in a hospital, interviewing them and noting their outlook on life. One ward in particular seemed filled with patients who were relentlessly sunny, upbeat, positive about their condition -- even though their medical prognoses were no better than anyone else's. After much investigation, Kübler-Ross managed to identify the single common denominator, the one factor those hopeful patients shared in common. It was one particular cleaning woman. "What are you doing with my patients?" Kübler-Ross demanded to know, once she'd caught up with her.

Initially the woman was hesitant to answer. She was sure she'd done something wrong. After the doctor reassured her, she revealed that she took extra time to sit with the patients and hold their hands. Often, she shared with them the story of how she had held her own dying child on her lap, and how death no longer held any fear for her. She prayed with them if that helped, but mostly she just listened or sang to them. "But you see, doctor," she explained, "the dying patients are just like old acquaintances to me, and I'm not afraid to touch them, to talk with them, to offer them hope. I just made sure they were noticed and important."

And that is the point. This woman was willing to take the time hear another person's story and be an open book letting them read through her of God's compassion and love for them. There is a practice in spiritual discipline known as Intentional Empathy that captures this. Basically empathy is a deep appreciation for another's situation and point of view. And the way it is lived out is through a respectful understanding of what others are experiencing. Sensing others' feelings and perspective, and taking an active interest in their concerns. Wanting the best for all others, unconditionally. Sharing another's perspective and specific distress. The capacity to think and feel oneself into the inner life of another person. Understanding and entering into another person's feelings. Changing places with another person. In other words it is all about being willing to read and listen and truly hear another person's story as we fully share ourselves with them.

This is what Jesus meant as he breathed on his disciples and sent them forth to be a witness – it isn't about just the words we say, although that is so important,

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but about how we care for others, truly see others and make God's love real. To do this we need to be open books of our faith as we balance being doers and hearers of the word – because the more our words and actions are in sync the more we live out our faith. Use our faith. Study our faith. Grow in our faith. The closer we are drawn to the heart of God where we realize and see and feel the power of faith has in our lives. In other words, the more we live it, the more it lives through us for everyone to see and read and feel.

Because if we have truly felt the power and presence of God moving through our lives. If we have been touched and moved by the needs of this broken world, then we have to live into our mission of being open books of God's love, instruments of God's grace, witnesses of God's peace, proclaimers of God's forgiveness, and channels of God's hope. Because if we know what God's love flowing through us can do, why keep quiet? If we know how hurts can be healed, hearts touched and lives transformed through our faith, why keep that a secret? That is what it means to be a witness – to let ourselves be checked out as we tell and share how we have experienced God moving in our lives.

In scripture we hear these words - “Anyone who sets themselves up as “religious” by talking a good game is self-deceived. This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air. Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight and guard against corruption from the world”

How different would our world be if we as disciple of Christ – those who have been sent forth with his peace and hope and grace went out to being those open books – not to judge – but to listen – truly listen to others stories – to build understanding through dialogue as we hear their story of life – hear of their struggles and hurts and joys and everything that makes them who they are behind the color of their skin or the labels we think up to put on them. And then we share our faith story as living books sharing what healing and hope in a resurrected savior looks and feels and sounds like.

The fact is we are being checked out every day and we need to be open books that are easily accessible and easy to read. There is an old African-American

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spiritual, that says, *If you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot pray like Paul, Just tell the love of Jesus and say he died for all.* And that's our calling this day. To leave here to go out into the fields and streets and byways and alleys of this world as books of faith ready to share our story – the story of hope – the love of Jesus for our whole world. Ready to be living examples of and witnesses to God's transforming love in this world. Amen.