

February 26, 2017

**LET'S CELEBRATE**

Acts 1.8

Rev. Frank Breisch

Let's celebrate! That's our theme for today.  
It's a good theme, a positive theme.  
But it's a theme that raises some interesting questions  
that I'd like to consider with you.

The first question - What shall we celebrate?  
We usually celebrate our victories, don't we?  
Defeats don't really put us in a mood for celebration.  
And we celebrate our victories after they have been won.  
No team celebrates before the game begins.  
No runner celebrates before the starting pistol sounds.  
Celebrations take place after a victory has been won.  
So what shall we celebrate today?

Well, we can celebrate some goals that have been accomplished,  
some tasks that have been successfully completed.  
We'll undoubtedly do some of that today.  
But underlying those celebrations'  
providing a foundation for those celebrations,  
giving meaning and value to those celebrations  
is the one great victory on which the Christian church is built.  
That is the victory of Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection.  
That was the ultimate victory!  
There Satan was destroyed,  
the power of death was broken,  
the power of sin was shattered,  
and the kingdom of God was established.  
The King of kings and Lord of lords began his reign on earth and in heaven!

Today we celebrate that victory of victories  
because the victorious Christ has claimed us for himself.  
He has called us to be his followers.  
He has established us as part of his kingdom.  
He has brought us out of darkness into the light of God's grace.  
He has brought us out of death into the joy and peace of life eternal.  
He has made us his own - we belong to the King of kings, our Saviour and our Lord.  
That's something to celebrate, isn't it?

Another question - How shall we celebrate?

To answer that question I want to look at  
what Jesus told his disciples before he left them.  
That's what our Scripture reading this morning was about.  
Even after the resurrection, the disciples were still slow learners:  
they asked the wrong question - what's going to happen now?  
Jesus pointed them to the right question - what are we supposed to do?  
His answer: you are to be my witnesses to the whole world.  
They were no longer simply disciples; that is, followers.  
Now they were apostles; that is, sent ones!  
He sent them to celebrate his victory by sharing it with the whole world!  
He sent them out, as citizens of the kingdom of God,  
to tell the world that a new world was being born  
and that all were invited to be part of that new world.

The witness of the apostles and of those who followed them was simple:  
Jesus is Lord.  
But those three words were revolutionary,  
because the Roman empire, which ruled the Mediterranean world,  
insisted that the Emperor is Lord.  
The Roman Emperor was viewed as a god,  
who had to be worshipped once a year with a pinch of incense  
and the declaration that Caesar is Lord.  
To refuse to do that was treason!  
But the witness of the Christians was that Jesus was Lord,  
and for that witness many of them died.  
That's why the Greek word for witness (marturios) has become our English word Martyr!  
That's why Paul told the Corinthian church that  
"No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit."  
Only someone whose heart has been touched by God's grace  
would utter those words that put one's life in danger.  
But in spite of that,  
or maybe because of that,  
Christianity spread like wildfire!  
Within two centuries there were Christian churches from the Atlantic,  
both in Africa and Europe,  
across the Middle East as far as India and perhaps China.  
Their celebration of the risen Lord was a witness that changed the world.

Today, if our celebration is to be truly Christian, we too must celebrate our witness.  
We witness to the risen King by who we are, by what we do and by what we say,

and each part of that is important.

**We witness by what we are, a counter-cultural society.**

The church, by its very nature, is distinct from the world in which it lives.

The early church lived in a polytheistic society, in which many gods were worshipped.

In that society the church proclaimed the one God, the Creator,

who entered human life as Jesus of Nazareth

in order to redeem the world

and restore it to its proper relationship to God.

We also live in a polytheistic society, in which many gods are worshipped.

The most popular and most powerful gods are money, power and fame,

and the greatest of those is money.

I recall how appalled I was to hear Kevin O'Leary say on television,

"Greed is good."

Then I realized that he was saying bluntly what our society in general believes!

Today we are going to celebrate the fact that we don't believe that.

When we accept the church budget for 2017,

and in doing so commit ourselves to give what that budget requires,

we will say that God gives us money so that we can give it away,

so that the work of God may be done in this congregation.

That's just one way in which we declare to the world that we are different,

one way in which we proclaim in our society that Jesus is Lord.

**We witness by what we do, as individuals, as families, as a congregation.**

The fact that we are here this morning, in a time of corporate worship,

says that we believe that God deserves to be worshipped.

The fact that we do this Sunday after Sunday,

come rain or shine or snow or whatever,

says that worshipping God is a high priority for us.

The fact that we have a minister of congregational care

says that we are concerned that the needs of our people shall be met.

The fact that we called Jared to work with young families

says that we care about those families.

The fact that we called him to work south of Fish Creek

says that we care about our community.

The fact that we are seeking a minister of vision and direction

says that we are looking for God's leading

as we move forward into an unknown future.

The fact that our Walking Humbly team was part of the Coldest Night walk,

and that many of us supported them with our contributions

says that we care about the poor, the homeless, the marginalized.

And I could go on and on, but I don't have to.  
You read in the reports of all the programmes  
through which we show the world that the risen Lord reigns here.

**We witness by what we say.**

What is said from this pulpit declares that we belong to Jesus Christ,  
that we rejoice in God's steadfast love and faithfulness,  
that we trust in God's grace to enable us to follow our risen Lord day by day.

Next Sunday, when we celebrate Holy Communion together  
we declare our union with our Lord and with his people around the world.

When we speak unashamedly of our relationship to Christ and to his church,  
no matter what the circumstances,  
we witness to the risen Lord whose we are and whom we serve.

Now let me be honest.

I have been presenting an ideal St. Andrew's.

You know and I know that we often fall far short of that ideal.

We are not a perfect church.

My mother-in-law used to say,

"If you find a perfect church, don't join it. You'll spoil it."

She was a wise woman!

We will never reach the ideal.

We will never get to the place where we can omit the Confession of Sin from our worship!

But the ideal is still important.

The ideal tells us where we want to go, what we want to be.

The ideal gives us the vision and direction we need  
to move ahead in our service of the Lord.

The ideal gives us the ability to measure our successes,  
however large or small they may be.

And so the ideal gives us both the ability to celebrate what has been accomplished,  
and the vision we need to move ahead  
as a vital part of the church of the living God.

So let's celebrate!

The Creator God still rules over this world.

Jesus Christ is alive and is working in the world.

The Holy Spirit is here to energize us for our task.

The kingdom of God is coming and we are a part of it! Thanks be to God!