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Peace, Sun Prairie
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Sermon Text: Acts 12:1-19
Easter 3

YOU WILL BE MY WITNESSES... CHRIST WILL SEE TO IT.

Aside from a few references to “the Lord,” the reading from Acts chapter 12 about Peter in prison does not make a specific mention of the name Jesus Christ. Yet this reading is all about Jesus.

You see, on the night of His resurrection, Jesus appeared to the disciples in the Upper Room and told them, *Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in [Christ’s] name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.* Forty days later, at His Ascension into heaven Jesus repeated to His disciples, *You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.* They would be His witnesses. This was not a suggestion. Jesus did not say you *should be* my witnesses. This was a declaration of fact. You will be my witnesses. And Christ Himself would see to it. The entire book of Acts is the unfolding of how the risen and ascended Christ governed and guided and worked through His Church on earth to be His witnesses. The same Christ who said, *Go and make disciples of all nations* also declared, *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me,* and He promised, *Surely I will be with you always.* It is Christ’s plan to reveal the message of salvation to the world through His Church. And He will see to it.

He saw to it with the death of James. Acts 12 says, *It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword.* Do not take this to mean that Christ had lost control or that He had abandoned the fledgling Church to fend for itself. Jesus was still in control of all things, even what happened to James. He had told His disciples during His earthly ministry, *The time will come when anyone who kills you will think they are offering a service to God.* James was one of the Twelve, a known and powerful preacher of the Gospel and a witness for Christ. He witnessed to his faith in the resurrection with his blood. Before him were John the Baptist and Stephen. Their reward is with Christ and a glorious resurrection they will receive. But think of it. Their witness did not die with them. What they died for was widely known then and is still known and talked about by us today. Christ has seen to it.

You and I may not experience so dramatic a death. But your death will still give glory to Christ. He will see to it. For He has given us victory over death. Have you ever given any deliberate thought to how you could serve as a witness for Christ in your death? Picture yourself in a hospital or nursing home. What kinds of things will you say to those around you? Will you tell them the peace that Jesus gives you? Will you ask your loved ones to bring you a hymnal, or to read to you from the Bible – that would speak as powerful a sermon to them as to you. Upon your death will people know what you were all about – that you were all about Jesus Christ? Will you make sure ahead of time that your funeral will be Christ-centered and filled with the Word? Perhaps a hymn verse could be engraved on your headstone. Just like James, even by your death you will be a witness for Christ. Christ will see to it.

Secondly, we’ll note from Acts 12 that Christ saw to it to preserve Peter as His witness. Tradition has it that Peter would later be martyred also, that he would be crucified upside down in Rome. But not just yet. Jesus had more work for Peter to do here on earth as His witness first. And look at how marvelously Jesus preserved Peter in spite of such heavy security with Peter chained to two guards! Christ even remembered the details. He sent His angel to make sure Peter didn’t forget his coat or sandals for his feet. The chains fell off and the iron gates opened for him. Consider also how fiercely and zealously Christ sees to His purposes for the Church. At the cost of the lives of 16 guards Jesus set Peter free so that Peter could continue spreading the Gospel. Later,

the Lord would strike Herod himself dead in a most gruesome way. When the powers of the world set themselves against Christ's purposes, the Bible says, *The One enthroned in heaven laughs.*

There is comfort for us as a congregation of believers as we endeavor to be witnesses for Christ in an uncertain and ever-changing landscape. A history professor I had in college made the observation that people will give up their freedoms in exchange for security. To some degree, haven't we seen that happen with the advent of a pandemic? Combine that with elected officials becoming ever more openly hostile to the Church and there's no telling what obstacles or threats we will face for bearing the name of Christ.

But Christ said, "You will be my witnesses." Not, "You should be my witnesses." You will. And He will see to it. Already we have seen an uptick – and other congregations have made the same observation – we have seen an uptick in opportunities to share the Gospel with people who have been stirred by recent events. We can work together with confidence that Christ will use us to bring salvation to His elect. His purposes will prevail. He has blessed us with the privilege to be part of it and we will gladly be His channel in whatever way and for as long as He chooses to employ us. But the world will not stop Him.

Thirdly, we see in Acts chapter 12 that Christ sees to it to employ our prayers for the sake of His witness. To me this is a very endearing part of this account. Let's hear it again: *Peter went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!" "You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel." But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison.*

Isn't that great? They are praying together *for Peter* and when Rhoda tells them Peter's at the door, they respond, "Nah, can't be!" So human! Don't be sidetracked by their comment that it must be his angel. They knew as we do that God's holy angels are attending us. But aren't we so often like them? For starters, perhaps we break the Second Commandment by not praying much at all. And then when we do pray, perhaps we doubt that anything is really going to happen from it. How must this seem to Christ? "You mean, I've promised to hear your prayers and to answer them in a more wonderful way than you can imagine, and you doubt me? You dismiss me? What do you think I am? A two-bit used car salesman?" You'd think that Christ would dismiss us instead. But we see just the opposite in Acts 12. We see James and Peter and now this house full of believers under an umbrella of grace and forgiveness. We see Christ treating them and working with them as colleagues and associates and friends. We see Christ regarding their prayers so highly that He answers them in such a remarkable way for Peter's rescue. We see Christ using their prayers so that the witness of the Gospel to the world through the Church may continue.

You and I are under that same umbrella of grace and forgiveness. Christ is not holding our sins against us. He lives among us and regards us as His coworkers and friends too. I am reminded of a woman at a congregation I served on Long Island in the 90s. Her name was Evelyn. She was in her late 60s and was diagnosed with ALS or Lou Gehrig's disease. She had been a mother to the whole congregation, one of those individuals who would see a visitor come through the doors and make a bee-line to them and welcome them to our church. Our tiny congregation was struggling as one of its pillar members had moved away. The future of the congregation looked bleak. Would we have to close our doors? One time when I was visiting Evelyn she shared with me something weighing heavily on her heart. "Why does the Lord still have me here, Pastor? I can no longer walk. My arms are useless. Why am I even here?"

I thought about it and I replied, "Evelyn, one thing I know about you is that you love to pray." "Oh, I do, Pastor!" she replied. "I pray for you and I pray for Jennifer, and I pray that God would bless our dear little church." I told her, "Evelyn, when you pray, you are doing us a powerful service because you are praying to a powerful God. I think that is why He still has you here."

That spring, Evelyn was called home to heaven. About one month later a man walked into the church and introduced himself to me as Ed. Ed wanted to check us out because he had grown up on Long Island and had been Lutheran all his life, but it didn't seem he could find a Lutheran church that was faithful to the Bible anymore. Soon, Ed brought his wife. Then they brought their daughter. And then another daughter. Then another daughter and her husband. Eventually, they'd bring a fourth daughter with her family, and then his wife's sister and her family and then his wife's mother. You can probably tell where this is going. Long story short, Grace of God Lutheran Church is still there on Long Island today. Ed and his family are still members there, along with Evelyn's son, Bob. And they must be doing alright because I saw on a recent WELS Call report that they are currently calling for a WELS pastor to serve them. Thank you for praying, Evelyn. And thank you, Lord Jesus, for answering her prayers.

Christ says, "You will be my witnesses." The spring and summer as we pick up the pieces after the Covid disaster, as we plan and budget and worship and pray and even drink coffee together may our hearts be encouraged that we will be Christ's witnesses, and Christ will see to it.