

Practicing Our Faith: Testimony

*A sermon preached on Acts 4:1-21 on Sunday, September 27, 2026,
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I.

It is only at one month old that scientists tell us babies begin building a vocabulary, too soon for words but tender with coos and kicks and smiles. They seem to know that something is happening when another human is with them, that in some way, a connection is being made. Watching intently, they mimic what they see, their mouths moving in the way of speech, sound spilling forth.

It will take weeks, maybe months, for these sounds to shift into discernable words. “Dada” often the first, often to the chagrin of Mama. But that comes soon after, along with “ball,” and “bye,” and “uh-oh,” and “no,” and the beloved favorite of toddlers everywhere: “mine!” From the very beginning, it seems that humans understand the power of speech, what it claims and conveys, how it defines and defies, why it matters.

But speaking is not a new creation with each generation born. Words are passed like, as Jonathan Merritt says, “the fires we carry to each other, [whose] embers do not originate with us. They were handed to us by messengers from generations past, and now we pass them on to others.”¹ In our context, “I have a dream” gives birth to “we are the ones we’ve been waiting for.” “The man in the arena” becomes the one “asking not what your country can do for you.” “All men are created equal” dances with “Ain’t I a woman?,” which gives way to “what to the slave is the 4th of July,” which midwives “a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

¹ Jonathan Merritt, *Learning to Speak God from Scratch*, p30.

Beyond words that shape our country, if you carry the throughline of speech all the way back to the very, very beginning, it is our faith tradition that stories its creation through the birthing words of God. God didn't think the world into being, or move it into being, or magic it into being, rather God breaks the silence and speaks, and the world came to be. "Let there be," our Creator said, bringing forth day and night, light and dark, seas and dry land and all the creatures who fill them, among them humans, whispered into being with a bit of dirt and spirit. Humans quickly catch on, speaking words of theological significance like Adam's "the woman gave me the fruit," to Cain's "am I my brother's keeper?" to Jacob's "I will not let you go unless you bless me," to Moses's "let my people go," to all the mighty songs of Miriam, Deborah, and Hannah.

But God still speaks, revealing divine promises and expectations: "I establish my covenant with you," the Lord says. "I will bless you to be a blessing," "I am who I am." "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul, and might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart," the Lord says of their importance. "Recite them to your children. Talk about them at home. Bind them to your body. Post them at your gates." The prophets proclaimed them, the psalmist sang them, and as the story goes, God brought them into closest proximity.

"In the beginning was the Word," the gospel of John proclaims, "and the Word became flesh and lived among us." The Word moved into the neighborhood, and grew and taught and healed and storied a world now and not yet. In him was life and liberation and love above all else. But that Word and his words threatened the status quo, the establishment, the ruling class. Though they crucified his body, the language of his spirit would rise again and

again. It would breathe new life into his followers, infusing them with vision and dreams and proclamation. Awe would come upon them, and testimony became their practice.

II.

Where today's story picks up, they'd taken that testimony right into the center of religious authority, where, after healing a man languishing at the temple gates, Peter and John were summoned as witnesses of the resurrection. Those resurrection stories were changing lives by the thousands, which was, as Acts tells us, *annoying* to the leaders trying to keep the peace. After their night in jail, Peter and John were brought before the council with a question: "by what authority did you heal that man?" And in reply, they testified. "Let it be known to all of you that this man stands here in good health by the name of Jesus." Right in the seat of power, they proclaimed the resurrected Christ, the cornerstone, the one who saves. It was undeniable, even to those who desperately wished to deny them. The authorities were amazed, recognizing their proximity to Jesus by their boldness and wringing their hands about what to do. "To keep it from spreading further among the people," the authorities said, "let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name."

Testimony can be dangerous, you know. It can threaten the status quo, imperil the establishment, disturb the peace. To the proclaimers, keepers of power often ask: who gave you authority to be doing and saying all this? If questioning or gaslighting doesn't work, often they act before they ask, keeping these dangerous ideas from spreading further by silencing the speakers, muting the press, controlling the comics, banning the books.²

² William Willimon, *Acts, Interpretation Bible Commentary*, p49.

But as the poet said, “they tried to bury us, but they didn't know we were seeds.”³ For like Peter and John before us, when there is truth to tell, “we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

III.

If you’ve ever wondered what feeling is – that urge to tell the truth, to put words to your experience of faith, to bear witness to something good and right and beautiful, it’s *testimony*. Anna Carter Florence defines testimony as “both a narration of events and a confession of belief: we tell what we have seen and heard, and we confess what we believe about it.”⁴ And Tom Long tells us why this matters to our faith, because “Christians believe that we cannot tell the truth, not the whole truth, without talking about God, and if we cannot tell the whole truth, we cannot be fully alive as human beings.”⁵

Here’s the catch: there’s no proving testimony. Unlike the courtrooms filled with sworn-in witnesses, with judges and juries deciding innocence or guilt, testimony of our faith isn’t the same as reciting belief. You don’t wait until you get it all figured out and then talk about it, rather speaking about your faith gives language to it. In today’s story from Acts, notice that Peter doesn’t say **how** or **why** God accomplishes God’s purpose in Jesus, but simply **that** it happens. That’s the alchemy of testimony. Journalist Krista Tippett once said, “I can disagree with your opinion, it turns out, but I can’t disagree with your experience. And once I have a sense of your experience, you and I are in relationship, acknowledging the complexity in each other’s position, listening less guardedly. The difference in our opinions,” she said, “will

³ A couplet from Dinos Christianopoulos, *The Body and the Wormwood*.

⁴ Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony*, pxiii.

⁵ Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, p5.

probably remain intact, but it no longer defines what is possible between us.”⁶ On testimony, novelist Leif Enger said this. “Is there a single person on whom I can press belief? No sir. All I can do is say, Here’s how it went. Here’s what I saw. I’ve been there and am going back. Make of it what you will.”⁷

IV.

I love writer Jonathan Merritt’s question: “What am I saying when I’m saying what I’m saying?”⁸ So let me ask you the same.

Think with me about the times of testimony in your life, when you couldn’t help but to tell your story and make meaning of it. Perhaps testimony has unfolded in extraordinary situations: that flash of clarity about the career path to choose or the person to marry, the change to make or the risk to take, and how God was present along the way. Maybe testimony unfolds in the most ordinary ways, when, in casual conversation with a friend, a loved one, a colleague, you share something of your life and realize as the words tumble out of your mouth or onto the page that this is how you feel, this is what you believe! For you, testimony may have erupted at inflection points in your life, when the pressure built and built and you couldn’t continue to live a half-truth any longer, and truth, liberating truth, burst forth from you, finally unconstrained and free. Your testimony may have begun in silence, as you grew still and quiet, in touch with your senses and your context to hear the truth beneath the noise. Your testimony may have begun silenced, fear its devouring enemy and ever-present trouble. Or perhaps circumstances of injustice or evil, of hope or love were so loud, like noisy gongs and clanging cymbals causing a reckoning in your soul that spilled out from your lips.

⁶ Krista Tippett, *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living*, p22.

⁷ Leif Enger, *Peace Like a River*, p311.

⁸ Merritt, p22.

I can think of these moments in my own life when testimony poured out, some like a quiet trickle of a stream, others like a mighty wave. And I could account for you today the specific sermons over these eleven years, when, after struggling with the Lord like Jacob by the Jabbok through the night, I stood in this pulpit with fear and trembling and stepped off the edge of a waterfall, trusting with all my heart the truth about which God would not let me stay silent, and hoping beyond all hope that the Spirit would catch my imperfect words and deliver them as God's good news to your generous ears. In our church's more recent history, I think of this time six years ago, when the pandemic kept us away from each other in body but present with each other in spirit. When our individual reckonings with God's leading about race, gender, and sexuality pressed us towards a communal discernment about what this meant for our community, we didn't start with particular biblical passages or Christian thought, though both would have been faithful expressions. We began with *testimony*. Story after story, witness after witness told the truth of the Spirit's awakening, the truth of God's bold love and boundless compassion. After that holy ground upon which we stood together, we couldn't keep from speaking about what we had seen and heard.

Testimony is our inheritance and our tradition. It demands no credential or authority or proof. Sometimes, we inhabit our testimonies like a well-worn coat: passed along from the closets of Moses and Mary Magdalene alike, made our own, and handed down to those who come behind us. Other times, it feels like testimony chooses us, wrestling with us until we emerge with a blessing and a limp and good news to share. When shared, our testimony can be received or rejected, ignored or overlooked, confirmed or transformed. In this day and age, I don't have to tell you that plenty of people

have plenty of good reasons not to listen to Christians, which leaves plenty of us plenty reticent to shut up about it! But if you can speak and be heard, be heartened by the truth every preacher knows, that once the words come out of your mouth, you can't control one single thing about how they're internalized, interpreted, or acted upon. For now, your work is done. You've told the truth. You've confessed what you believe. You've borne witness to life. Your words will linger, lifted by the One who makes all things new.

V.

Now hear this: don't hear these practices I offer you today as *directions* for how to testify, but rather as *direction* for how to tap into that inner truth about which you cannot keep from declaring.

Perhaps you start keeping a journal, yes, even if it feels weird. It can be anything from that gorgeous leather one gifted to you that you've had untouched for years on your shelf because you don't want to mess it up, to the Notes app or Voice Memos on your phone. You'll start by noticing, attending, paying attention. What do you see and hear? What activates a visceral reaction in you, where you're surprised by the strength of your emotion? What discomfort are you trying to ignore?

As you consider what you notice, practice finding your own words to name your own thoughts. There will be a time when you will look at a blinking cursor or blank page and feel stuck. Don't panic and borrow words from Claude or ChatGPT here. I'm so serious. Be patient, and let your own imperfect human thoughts bubble up. Don't self-censor before they get out. You can't fail at this. No one is reading over your shoulder. Just tell the truth.

Maybe your words come in the form of letters to people who matter to you. Write letters to people who have power, and tell them why it matters to

you that they should care for the hungry, the sick, the poor, the vulnerable. Write letters to people you've never met to pass along the good news that God is not done, because of what God is doing with you. Think about that one piece of the Christian faith that has never made sense to you (yes, there are many, but pick one!), or that one theological concept you've struggled your whole life to apply. Lift words off the page, find a friend, and discuss it in person, sharing why it matters to you. If this feels too scary to do out there, practice it in here. Use your fallible words to create a trail towards truth.

VI.

Barbara Brown Taylor once told a story about a day she went to her local nursing home one afternoon to celebrate communion with the guests. She knew what to expect; it was a regular practice. Upon her arrival, a dozen or so folks would have been wheeled in their wheelchairs into the television room. Many of these residents had a high level of need. Some dazed into space, others dozed with heads drooping, a few yelled. She said about the experience, "it's one of the hardest things I do because I sometimes doubt the power of the sacrament to break through their fog. I say all the comfortable words and wonder if anyone hears them. I stand there with my arms raised over bread and wine and suspect that I might as well be flying a kite."

She was warned one visit that because of the time, many medications were beginning to wear off. Folks were more awake than usual, and one resident sang "Row Row Row Your Boat" so loudly throughout, that Barbara finally had to clap her hands to get everyone's attention.

"What shall I read from the Bible this afternoon," she asked. "What part would you like to hear?"

And from somewhere in the room — she couldn't find it exactly — a woman's broken voice surfaced above the din. "Tell us a resurrection story," she said. It was as if her words settled the cacophony. "Yes, yes!," one said, and then another. "Tell us a resurrection story!"⁹

Tell us a resurrection story, friends! Amen.

⁹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, 61.