

Acts 2:14a, 22-32 Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: ²²“Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. ²³This man was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. ²⁴But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. ²⁵David said about him: “I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. ²⁶Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest in hope, ²⁷because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, you will not let your holy one see decay. ²⁸You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.” ²⁹“Fellow Israelites, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. ³⁰But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. ³¹Seeing what was to come, he spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did his body see decay. ³²God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it.

Dear friends in Christ our Savior,

For soldiers or marines who have been deployed into combat zones, being in garrison (or being back at home) can present some challenges. Soldiers who were actively on the front lines in combat zones can miss the intensity and purpose that deployments bring to their lives. While they may enjoy the peace, life in garrison can be a little boring. The days can be slow. Commanders who were active in directing strikes against the enemy are now relegated to navigating garrison bureaucracy — submitting ammo requests, coordinating weapons ranges and conducting inventories. An army in garrison may be well trained, but they aren’t using their skills to help anyone. They lose focus and intensity for their mission. It is hard to keep the edge so they become lax. Armies that don’t fight aren’t very useful. They want to do their training, but they want to put that training to use.

Why do I bring this up? I’ve had a lot of people say to me recently, “It must be really hard to preach to an empty church.” I understand the sentiment and appreciate their compassion on the situation. But that comment misunderstands the word “church”. Too often we are focused on the building when we talk about the church. When using the word “church” they think only of the building they gather in once a week. We get into the rut of thinking that ministry takes place “at church”. These last few weeks have given us the opportunity to seriously rethink not only our concept of the word “church” but what ministry through the church looks like. I think this is good. It challenges us to see things from a different light. I would argue today, it challenges us to see things from the correct light. The word church doesn’t refer to the building or to the institution. The word “church” refers to the people. You are the church. I might be preaching to an empty sanctuary, but I’m not preaching to an empty church. I’m preaching to each and every one of you every single week. Even though you can’t be here, you are still the church. I’m still preaching to the church. What’s the difference? The church is no longer in garrison. The church is deployed. We’re forced to think about being the church outside the walls of these buildings. We are forced to think about the mission we all collectively and individually have as the people of God and how we carry that out in our individual circumstances. While we tend to focus our attention on the negatives that come from times like these, let’s take some time to focus on the positives. One of those positives is to see ourselves as the church deployed. We are no longer in garrison where we find ourselves comfortable and at peace. We are now deployed among the enemy with a mission to carry out—being witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus. Let’s not focus our attention on the sanctuary being empty. **The church isn’t empty...it’s deployed.**

This text is part of Peter’s speech to the Jews who were gathered at the Temple on Pentecost. While they knew the story of what had happened with Jesus, they didn’t understand why it happened and what it meant for them. So to help them understand, Peter offered them many proofs that this not only happened but that it was exactly what God had intended to happen all along. To help them see this, Peter pointed to facts that they would know and understand. First, he helped them to see that this Jesus of Nazareth was no ordinary man who had come to them of his own accord. The miracles, wonders and signs which Jesus did were God’s certification that Jesus was what he claimed to be, namely the Son of God and the Savior or Redeemer of sinners. The Jewish people could not deny the reality of Jesus’ miracles. Even the enemies of Jesus admitted that he was doing many miracles. Had it been one miracle or two, these could have easily been explained away. But the multitude of miracles Jesus did gave testimony to the fact that he was more than a man or a great teacher. Only God could do what Jesus was doing. Jesus had been sent by God himself as the Messiah to do God’s work.

What happened to Jesus when he was maliciously handed over by the Jewish leaders was not a tragic happenstance. This was God’s plan for him from the beginning. God’s plan to defeat the devil meant Jesus had to die in the place of sinners to satisfy God’s justice against sin. So when Jesus died and it seemed as if death had won, it had not. God showed this was part of his plan by raising Jesus from the dead. To help the Jews understand, Peter went all the way back to the prophecy from David in Psalm 16 which is quoted in our text. In that prophecy, David had said, “*My body also will rest in hope, ²⁷because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, you will not let your holy one see decay.*” David couldn’t possibly have been talking about himself, because he died and was buried. He was prophesying about the Messiah. What happened to Jesus when he came back from the dead is not only in line with Scripture but is exactly what David had prophesied and what God had planned. Jesus was the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament whom God had sent to rescue the world from sin. The God who had the power to do these miraculous signs also had the power to raise himself from the dead. “*God has raised this Jesus to life*” was the heart of the message which the apostles preached in all the world and which they recorded in the pages of the NT. It is the heart of the Gospel message.

Peter was an eyewitness to this. We heard in the Gospel lesson about how Jesus appeared to his disciples. It’s amazing note the way Jesus reacted to his disciples when he appeared before them. He wasn’t mad that they didn’t understand what had to happen to him even though he had explained it multiple times. He didn’t chastise them for their fear of hiding behind locked

doors. He didn't stop their questioning or the doubts that ran through their minds. Jesus calmly and patiently allowed them to do what they needed to do to be able to know for certain that they weren't seeing things but that he was definitely alive. Jesus not only showed himself to them, but he ate with them and drank with them. He let them touch his flesh and bones. He not only showed them his wounds but allowed them to put their fingers in the holes to see for themselves. He gave them every opportunity to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was really alive. He did that not just so that they could know for themselves, but because he had a special purpose for them. They were to be his witnesses. They were to be the witnesses of the bodily resurrection of Christ for all ages. God allowed them the proofs they needed to know that he was alive so they could pass this information along to us.

Peter didn't soft pedal the law when he preached to the Jewish people. He preached it in its bluntness. "*This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.*" The purpose of the law is to crush the unconverted with the painful consciousness of their great sin and guilt. While all of this was God's plan, the people would not simply be excused for their actions. He needed to call them to repentance. Calling them to repentance would help them to see the need they had for Jesus as their Savior and better know the peace he came to bring. While we can point to no specific sin that caused this virus and these problems we are facing today, we can say without reservation they are the results and consequences of sinful people living in a sinful world. From that standpoint, these issues are our fault. They come because we are sinners. Even worse, because of our sin we are guilty and responsible for putting Jesus on the cross. That's a very blunt truth that cuts us to the heart...but it is the truth. God may be using these challenges to bring some great blessings to us, but that doesn't excuse our sin. The first and biggest blessing we have during this time is to be reminded of our sinfulness so that we can fall on our knees before our Savior and plead for his mercy. When we do this, Peter brings great peace and joy to our hearts when he says, "*But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.*" Because Jesus died untouched, uncontaminated by sin, corruption or decay could not touch him. He fulfilled the prophecy! God accepted the sacrifice Jesus made for our sins and gave proof by raising Jesus from the dead. Our sin is forgiven. Heaven is ours and eternal life awaits! Peter and more than 500 were witnesses to this resurrection. God has given us all the proof we need to know that this really happened!

This proof is what gives us peace as we face the challenges and trials of life. The resurrection of Jesus is the foundation of the Christian faith and the heartbeat of Christianity. All that we believe about salvation hinge on the fact of the resurrection and Jesus coming back to life after his death. When we keep our eyes on the God of free and faithful grace who defeated sin and death for us, we can be confident that God will help us in every situation and keep us steadfast. This fills us with hope and joy and makes us confident that God will always watch over us and protect us. We worship a living Savior! God has given us proof of this. We can be certain that Jesus who was raised from the dead continues to watch over us and protect us as we face the trials and challenges of this life. You can be at peace, knowing that even through the uncertainty of today, God loves you, forgives you, has heaven waiting for you and will watch over and protect you until he takes you there.

Jesus shared this message with you for two reasons—first, to give you proof of his resurrection to give you peace in these uncertain times. But he also shares this proof and peace with you so that you can be his witnesses to the world. Now you are the witnesses Jesus sends out into the world. The church isn't in quarantine. The church isn't empty. You are the church! You are deployed as God's witnesses in the circles in which he has placed you. God fills you with his peace so you can witness the faith and trust you have in Jesus and his resurrection to neighbors, family, friends, the limited people you come into contact with. You are now deployed to carry out that mission and be the witnesses God has called you to be. God has even put before you a marvelous challenge to give even greater witness to your faith and trust in him as your Savior. Being a witness can be nothing more than sharing the trust you have with neighbors that God will continue to watch over you and protect you during this time. When they ask how you can be calm and have such peace during a time like this, you can simply witness: "God raised Jesus from the dead to rescue me from my sin. I know and trust he has the power to keep us safe from this and provide for us. Even if we do contract this virus, and even if I face death, I'm confident God still loves me and will take me to heaven." What an opportunity God has given to his church at a time like this! You have the peace that passes understanding. You have the peace only God can give. And there are so many people who need to know about it. God has deployed you for this very purpose. He's placed you where you are at in your neighborhood, in your family, at work, so that you can witness to the resurrection of Jesus and share your peace with them.

For that reason, I'm actually glad we are deployed and forced to think about these things. It's easy for us to sit in garrison. It's comfortable. But it's also easy to lose sight of what the mission is all about. Being God's people, being the church, isn't about being comfortable. It's about being witnesses. Staying in garrison focuses our attention on our buildings and on minor issues that cloud our judgment and cause us to lose focus. We get lazy and focus on the problems and issues around us that causes fear and anxiety. Soldiers and Marines involved in combat every day don't have time to focus on the minor issues or be afraid. They steel themselves against the challenges and go about their work boldly and confidently to carry out the mission they have been given. This is what we have the opportunity to do also. Rather than complain about our circumstances, let's make the best of them. Let's look for the opportunities that can be had and find situations where we can be witnesses of the resurrection.

I appreciate the comments of sympathy and compassion about preaching to an empty sanctuary. I really do. I know that you are only trying to empathize with a completely different and difficult situation. But know this for a fact. I'm still preaching to the church. You might not be here with me, but I'm still preaching to the church. The sanctuary might be empty. But the church isn't empty...it's just deployed. Amen.