

Homily for Sunday, May 14, 2023



The first reading throughout the entire Easter Season, if you haven't already figured it out, is always taken from a book in the Bible called the Acts of the Apostles. They are stories, not always flattering, about how the Church began, survived, and thrived in the absence of Jesus' physical presence. In order for the Church to get out of the first century, I just have to believe there was and is a Holy Spirit, and that Spirit must have been doing double-duty in those early days. The

Early Church went from 11 cowering Apostles hiding in an upper room for fear of their lives to a half million Christians by the end of the first century. How was this possible? Well, like I said, the Spirit of the Risen Lord was central to it all. Yet, people, ordinary people like you and me, must have been open and committed to that same Spirit. Among their ranks, there were not many professional evangelists. They were all evangelists. They had few great preachers. They were all witnesses. They had few foreign missionaries. They were all missionaries.

These early witnesses felt compelled to follow Jesus' command to make disciples of all the nations, to baptize them, and to teach them to observe his command to love one another.

The reason I can believe exclusively in Jesus as the Savior of the world is because he loved so inclusively. In Luke's gospel there are no less than 11 times where Jesus is eating with people (no wonder they called him a glutton!). He has no problem sharing a meal with, and giving himself to, the shadiest of characters. In fact he is questioned, scolded, and dismissed as the Messiah precisely because of who he was hanging out with. The real Messiah surely would know better! He's always reaching out to the outsiders, the lost sheep.

During his lifetime Jesus never makes it into the city of Samaria because of protest and death threats directed at him. It was so bad, James and John wanted Jesus to send fire from heaven to burn these people up. Yet, he tells us the story of the Good Samaritan. He is driven by his Father's love, a love that gives itself to everyone and leaves no one out. The Spirit of the Risen Lord is about the same thing—massive inclusion.

In the world of Spirit there are no outsiders, no latecomers, no second-class people. The leaders of the Early Church included an evangelist Philip who goes to the Samaritans, the ones who rejected Jesus, and tells them about the love of God he has experienced in this very same Jesus. Upon hearing the news—as we were told in that first reading--the paralyzed and lame were cured and there was great joy in the city.

Obviously, the Holy Spirit was at work in Samaria and the areas of the known world that had never heard of Jesus. It's as if the Spirit went ahead and prepared the ground in order for the disciples

to do their work. Before you start a new job, ask the Spirit to go ahead of you and prepare the way for you. Before you get to the doctor's office, ask the Spirit to go ahead of you so that you will be able to accept, with faith, whatever the diagnosis will be. Before you retire, ask the Spirit to go ahead of you to prepare you, in the best way, for this new stage of your life. Before you move to a new city or a new parish, ask the Spirit to go ahead of you in order to place good, welcoming people at your destination.

While the Spirit of the Risen Lord always goes a little bit ahead of you, the Spirit is also with you. ***"In a little while,"*** says Jesus, ***"the world will not see me, but you will see me. I will never leave you orphaned. I am coming to you."*** Jesus was our first Advocate, the first one to come to our defense. He has sent another Advocate, the Holy Spirit, to speak for us, to defend us, to comfort us, and encourage us especially in our lowest moments. The story of the Spirit of the Risen Lord in our presence, is a story of an on-going divine presence that will never leave us alone. Here's one such story of God's faithfulness to us.

This is a story of an elderly couple who are, apparently to this day, both doctors in a small town in the Szechuan province in China. When they were young, they had studied together at medical school, fallen in love and married. She was a Catholic; he was not. She wanted to convince him that he should join the Church, but he did not want to be baptized. A short time later she had a child. Unfortunate for them it was 1966, the beginning of The Cultural Revolution in China, which lasted about 12 years. The goal of the Revolution was to stamp out capitalism and all forms of traditional elements in Chinese society, and to replace it with strict Communism. Under the dictator Mao, violence, chaos, and massacres were daily events.

Millions were imprisoned, tortured, and killed while the government confiscated their properties. Hundreds of women lost their husbands who were arrested and sent to labor camps along with other men. Families were broken up and women were not even allowed to write to these men who had been taken away. The separation was very hard on the wife, who had to work long hours at the hospital during the day and care for her son at night. As well as her own loneliness, she was under constant pressure from the government to divorce her husband and renounce her religion, so that she could gain political and financial advantages. But she refused. Every night after she returned home, she and her son knelt down to pray for strength from God to endure.

Twelve years later, she heard that all of the men who had been arrested in that town were to be released and allowed to come home. So she went, anxiously, with her son to meet the train at the station, wondering how much her husband must have changed after twelve long years of hard labour in the prison camp. She and her son arrived early at the station and sat down on the bare empty platform to wait. The time passed and she began to think that she must have made a mistake because the entire railway station was still completely empty, even though it was not long before the train would come. Maybe she must have got the day wrong, or the time, or the authorities had changed their minds. But she waited until the appointed time. And then suddenly, away in the distance, she heard a sound - initially, just a whisper on the tracks - and then it slowly

grew into what could only be the sound of a train. And yet still, she and her son were alone on the platform.

The sound of the train gathered and grew, and she felt her heart throbbing within her - after having waited for twelve years, it seemed unbearable to have to wait another minute. Finally, at long last, the train drew into the station and hundreds of men came off the train, tired, weary and broken. Only one of them found what he was looking for. Even as she felt herself crushed in the arms of her husband, she could see over his shoulder all the others who had returned to a place that was no longer home.

She discovered later that all – every single one – of the other men had been divorced and abandoned and forgotten by their wives and families. She alone had been faithful to the word that she had given long ago. Her husband said it was at that moment that he knew that he too must become a Christian.

The same Spirit that was in the early disciples, was in this couple. It is the Spirit given to you and me. ***“I give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.”***

Fr. Phil