

Sermon preached at St Aidan's in the combined service with Global Mission, 20 April 2025
God of life, your Spirit raised Jesus from the dead. Your Spirit inspired the prophets and writers of Scripture. Your Spirit draws us to Christ and helps us acknowledge him as Lord. We ask that you send your Spirit now to give us deeper insight, encouragement, faith, and hope through the proclamation of the Easter gospel. Amen.

Luke 24:1-12

Witnesses to Easter - are you one of them?

A movie titled *Bonhoeffer* is on at cinemas in Auckland and worldwide. Have you watched it? The movie's full title is *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Spy, Assassin*, which gives people a rough idea about who he was even if they don't know about him. Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor, theologian, and anti-Nazi dissident. He is best known for his resistance to Hitler's regime and his role in the Confessing Church against the German Christians Movement that aligned with Nazi ideology, including antisemitism and racial purity. But he lived as a witness to Easter and faith in Christ that cost him his life. So today, we'll think about Easter from the witnesses' perspectives to Easter and why it is crucial.

Witnesses

The word – witnesses ¹ is not an ordinary word as it became the origin of the English word martyr. The Greek word μάρτυς (martus: MAR-toos) originally meant 'witness'—someone who gives testimony, particularly in a legal or public setting. In the New Testament, this word is often used for those who bear witness to Christ, sometimes at significant personal cost.² Over time, μάρτυς (MAR-toos) took on a new meaning as many early Christian witnesses were persecuted and killed for their testimony about Jesus. One of the well-known examples is Stephen – the first Christian Martyr.³ Stephen, one of the first deacons, boldly preaches about Jesus before the Jewish Sanhedrin. His speech enrages the council, and they stone him to death. As he is dying, he prays for his persecutors, echoing Jesus' words on the cross: "Lord, do not

¹ The Greek word for "witness" is μάρτυς (martus), pronounced MAR-toos. The plural form, "witnesses", is μαρτύρων (martyrōn), pronounced MAR-tee-ron

² Acts 1:8, Revelation 2:13

³ Acts 7:54-60

hold this sin against them!”⁴ Later, Paul refers to Stephen as ‘your witness (μάρτυς) Stephen,’⁵ showing the early connection between witnessing and dying for one’s faith.

Another example is the martyrdom of Polycarp⁶, who was the bishop of Smyrna and an elderly disciple of John the Apostle. When Roman officials ordered him to renounce Christ, he famously responded: “Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?”⁷ Refusing to worship Caesar, he was burned at the stake and then stabbed when the flames didn’t consume him. We can only assume that their faith in Christ Jesus had made them do such fearless acts before their imminent death. But the first-ever witnesses to Easter Day were women. But these didn’t tell us what made them become such witnesses, even to lose their lives. N T Wright – a New Testament scholar - wrote what made Easter extraordinary. Among them, women were the first witnesses, and the resurrection of Christ transformed the disciples.

Women – the first witnesses

When the women told the disciples about the empty tomb, they didn’t believe the women’s words. These women’s initial reactions to the empty tomb weren’t different either. They come to the tomb to anoint his body – a proper respect for the dead, and they encounter unexpected things - the rolled stone and the empty tomb. Alarmed and frustrated, they couldn’t even remember what Jesus told them about his suffering, death and resurrection. Another extraordinary thing happens: They were told that Jesus had risen by two men in dazzling clothes standing beside them. They helped women remember what Jesus told them. After an initial shock, they go to tell the eleven disciples and others about it. Women’s testimony was not considered legally reliable in the first-century Jewish and Greco-Roman world. Naturally, the disciples disregard their words. Even so, Peter ran to the tomb to see what happened. Then he went home amazed. The reading ends there. Had the Easter story ended there, there would have been no Christianity or Church. However, church history shows how these sceptical disciples became witnesses even to death and how these women witnesses played crucial roles in the early church.⁸ These early church witnesses and Bonhoeffer connected because something happened to them deeply enough to overcome their limitations bound by social and historical contexts. Are we one of them?

⁴ Acts:7:60

⁵ Acts 22:20

⁶ 155AD

⁷ The Martyrdom of Polycarp, 9:3)

⁸ Mary Magdalene, Priscilla (Acts 18), Lydia and Phoebe (romans 16:1-2), etc.

A Life of Witnesses

We began this reflection with Bonhoeffer, so let me continue more about his life and theology. As a Jesus follower, he deeply contemplated the role of the church in the world and what Christians' response to the social absurdity far from God's love. Dietrich Bonhoeffer thought that it was not alright for the Church to be silent about the total absurdity where God's grace and love were missing. His thought can be found in the notion of '*Cheap Grace*.'

He says that *Cheap Grace* is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. Costly grace, on the other hand, is the treasure hidden in the field; for its sake, a man will sell all he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy, and the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye that causes him to stumble; it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.⁹ His life becomes food for thought in which how the Church lives makes its life courageous integration of faith and action, and what discussion on discipleship, ethics, and the church's role in society.

While writing this sermon, I couldn't help but reflect on what our church – the Onewa Christian Community, has been doing. As a parish of PCANZ (Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa, New Zealand), we share the master missional goals of PCANZ. They are *Proclaiming the gospel, Teaching and Nurturing People in the Christian Faith: Loving Service, Responding to Human Need, Seeking to Transform Society, and Caring for God's Creation*. Based on these national missional goals, OCC has four values: *Community* by focusing on people, *Diversity and Inclusion*, *Open heart and mind*, and *a living faith*.

As a small church with a lack of young families, we don't have many human resources. While worshipping and gathering as a faith community is one of our priorities, we try to stretch ourselves to deliver Jesus' salvific work in our capacity. We reflect on what we missed in the past and how we refocus on such things. On the one hand, to raise awareness of social justice and compassion, we have been doing a series of workshops in collaboration with other community organisations that are open to the community. The feedback from the community

⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*

is very positive. We are mindful of respecting Te Tiriti and Maori culture together with other cultures and religions, and we can do these things with our own truthful intentions. The wider community positively receives these things. But when our faith conflicts with the community's interests, it is a real challenge and a test of our faith. For example, in front of our church, there is a bench donated by a church member. The bench is a place loved by the locals. However, the problem occurred when the homeless began to drink on the church bench. We often received calls or complaints from the police and neighbours who were showing discomfort. Parents who were concerned for their children's safety expected our Church to take decisive action. We also talked a lot with these homeless people who were drinking. The problem was that they were also our neighbours. This issue has made us reflect deeply on how we should respond to it as witnesses of Easter.

Our choice of solution was to communicate with the drinking homeless, the community members, the church council, etc. It doesn't seem to be a quick and permanent solution, and we are still dealing with it. How can we deliver the Easter message of life in the eternal with these two groups while showing the third way to life, which we couldn't have thought of? We prayerfully ask God about it.

Global Mission may also have a different dilemma regarding living by faith in action. Global Mission Church has missional goals, namely 3N (Healing the Nation)¹⁰ and 3G (Transforming the World)¹¹. Is that right? Since Global Mission Church is not based in Korea but in Auckland, New Zealand, how can you adapt your missional work to your goals? How is this healing mission happening in your context in Birkenhead, Auckland? How this transforming work is happening? We want to learn from you.

Are You a Witness?

Throughout history, Easter witnesses have come in many forms. Some lost their lives, others quietly held onto faith, and many simply lived with hope and courage...the list may continue. We became witnesses to Easter when we confessed our sins and were baptised in Jesus' name. In one of his books, Bonhoeffer insisted that Jesus Christ is the centre of both the church and reality, emphasising a 'religionless Christianity' where faith is lived actively in the world rather than confined to religious rituals.

But we must be honest. Sometimes, we gather in church and forget Christ. We neglect our

¹⁰ North Korea, Next Generation, and New family

¹¹ Great Commission, Global Church, and Godly Leaders

hurting neighbours, act selfishly, and lose sight of the awe and wonder of Easter and the life of all those witnesses. So today, we pray: Lord, help us live as Easter witnesses. May our lives point to the empty tomb, the love that conquers death, and the hope that never ends. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen