

## Acts 1:6-14

Jerusalem. Jews revere it as the city of the great king David. Christians honor it as the site of the cross and the empty tomb of Jesus. Muslims embrace it as a sacred city of Islam-the site of Mohammad's ascension into heaven on a white stallion. Given that Jerusalem is sacred to the three major monotheistic religions, it's not hard to grasp that there has been fierce competition, and even bloody conflict, over this holy hunk of real estate.

A newly released movie set in 12<sup>th</sup> century Jerusalem-called interestingly enough the Kingdom of Heaven- is about a young peasant blacksmith played by Orlando Bloom of Lord of the Rings fame, who becomes an honored knight, saves a kingdom, and falls in love with a princess. It's also about the crusades- that period in western history in which the Christian response to the loss of Jerusalem was to mobilize armed forces with the goal of retaking the Holy City from the infidel for the cross of Christ-and establish a Christian kingdom there.

A crusader was so-called because he was someone who took the sign of the cross. It was often emblazoned across his shield, or his garments. In a ceremony, he knelt, and solemnly swore that he would his vows at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, or die in the attempt. He became known as a "crucesignatus," one who has taken the sign of the cross. A crusader.

Those who did make it to Jerusalem, made their way to the church, and thrust their sword into the ground, and staring at his cruciform shape-said their vows. This is also the way many of them died on the battlefield-the last image they saw was the image of the cross.

Today's scripture from Acts invites us to go back to Jerusalem, to take a look at what the first followers of Jesus were called to do. The time frame is just 40 days after the resurrection, and the apostles are sounding a bit like crusaders, in search of a victory when they ask Jesus, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" (1:6)

They want God's kingdom to be victorious. They hunger for Jesus to triumph over his enemies. They are ready to go. They've been to the cross, and didn't much like it. They're ready for a crusade.

But Jesus has another idea, and says to them, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (1:8) Then he ascends into heaven, leaving them looking up in shock and disbelief.

Jesus challenges them to be witnesses not warriors. He promises that they will receive all the power they will need to continue his work in the world, God’s kingdom building-to speak his words, to continue his healings, to provide leadership to his church. He doesn’t ask them to raise their swords but to raise his cross-a different kind of cruce signatus-crusader-as it were. Interestingly the Greek word to witness is *martyreo*- one who testifies by act or word to the truth. In Christian usage the term came to mean the testimony given by Christian witnesses to Christ and his saving power. Because much of the early witness of the church resulted in suffering, imprisonment, or even death, the Greek was transliterated to form the English word “martyr.”

How are we to witness- to lift high the cross today in our culture in our time? Our scriptures today give us two powerful insights.

- 1) Jesus has ascended to the Father. He is Lord of all. In 2005 we live in that reality. The book of Acts ends with the great word, *unhindered*. Some translate it as “without hindrance.” We are told that this God whom we serve is not confined to earth, He is *unhindered*. The Ascension reminds us that truly God is ruler of heaven and earth. Jesus, the Messiah, is its true Lord. Those first disciples stood there squinting and open-mouthed as Jesus departed from this earth. They did not understand as they gazed into the heavens. Two men, presumably angels, came and spoke to them. They were to turn their gaze from heaven to earth. They were to return to jobs and families they had left, to a world that still not believe. There would be many hindrances to their witness and work, but God would break down every barrier and leap over every wall until the kingdoms of this world become the kingdoms of the Christ. Even after all these years of the vision of an *unhindered* gospel is unfinished. We do not know-cannot control when God’s kingdom on earth will be totally and irrevocably established, but we know it will. As Christ’s followers we are to testify in our lives and in our ministries the hope for the world that emanates from this great truth. No tragedy, no oppression, no disease, no people, are beyond the reach of the One who has triumphed and reigns.

- 2) It is vitally important for our witness today to remember that the ascended Lord is precisely the one who was crucified. The transformation of suffering is the other side of Christian witness that emerges from the Ascension. The suffering that we comfortable Western Christians endure often seems small in comparison with that which our brothers and sisters still face day by day for instance in the Sudan. But there is a deep suffering, unquantifiable and hence impossible to compare, which comes from living as one who believes that the crucified Messiah is the world's true Lord, in the midst of a world that lives by the rule of force, or pleasure, or wealth. Christian witness today is thus called to be out of tune with the world's orchestra, swimming against the world's wind and tide. Dare I say it: Christian witness today is called to be counter cultural-in tune with God's hidden music, instead of the blasting tunes of secular relativism and Christian in your face evangelism that are so prevalent today

It is therefore vitally important to remember that the Ascended Lord is precisely the one who was crucified. In our scripture reading from John's gospel, crucifixion and exaltation seem to be merged together, reminding us that the Ascension, does not reveal Christ's glory any more fully than the cross itself. Without this understanding, the Ascension and our witness to the sovereignty of God and the Lordship of Christ would simply be triumphalist rant. As the New Testament writings constantly make clear, the fact that it was the crucified Jesus who was now exalted to share the throne of the one true God means that the witness of his followers the "martyria" will carry power and indeed glory, but of a different sort. It will be the power and glory of suffering love, of sacrifice, of servanthood. When Jesus speaks of the glory the Father had given to him being shared with his followers, this seems to be the witness he had in mind.

Embodying this kind of witness-the confidence and hope that comes from knowing that Jesus is Lord of all, intertwined with the humility of a ministry to those who are suffering, is a man by the name of David East. Highlighted in an article in the Washington Post this past Wednesday, East has spent the last five years, in one of Washington's most poverty stricken, violent neighborhoods; his ministry consists of walking the streets ministering to residents and to drug addicts getting high in vacant apartments. One of his clients told the post, "He walks around here everyday. You can't beat a man who walks. He knows the people, he ministers to them, he prays with them."

Shedonna Tyson, 42 a former crack addict, said she knew East for two years before asking him to take her to detox at a local hospital. A week later, he picked her up when she walked out and helped her enroll in a seven-week treatment program. “He was pretty much waiting for me to make my own decision,” she said.

East took the same approach with a woman he knew for two years before she begged him to help beat a 32 year old addiction to heroin. “I was so far down, I thought I would die an addict,” said the woman. Today she is recovering from her addiction and has a full-time job.

Many of course still struggle; with a 49 year old addict with puffy hands covered in welt like needle marks, East prayed, “Watch over her Lord, help her do right, help her not to get that urge to double dose,” gathering her into his arms. “Just be near her.”

David East is a man who has taken the sign of the cross, and lifted it high. A cruce signatus. He is a crusader for today’s world. Bearing the sign on the cross on our foreheads, we as Christ’s baptized are also called to be witnesses for the gospel according to the gifts God has given us. It is encouraging and exciting to see the many ways that witness is being lived out by so many of you in this church. Praise God for giving us the will to be His kingdom bearers for today. As the great hymn we will sing on our way out puts it, O Lord, once lifted on the glorious tree, as thou hast promised, draw the world to thee; So shall our song of triumph ever be, praise to the Crucified for victory; Lift high the Cross, the love of Christ proclaim, till all the world adore his sacred Name. Amen.