



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York**

The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, OBE, DD, *Rector*
John Scott, LVO, D. Mus., *Organist and Director of Music*
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, April 17, 2005
The Fourth Sunday of Easter

*Festal Eucharist
at 11am*

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, Rector
on
Acts 6:1-9;7:2a,51-60
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AFTER THE ACTS

[They] cast [Stephen] out of the city, and stoned him; and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

It has been a custom since the early Church to have readings from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles in the liturgy throughout the Easter season. The reason is that Acts, which is the second volume by Saint Luke the Evangelist and is paired with his Gospel, shows the power of Jesus' Resurrection and the Holy Spirit in the deeds of the first disciples.

Recently a doctor who is a churchgoing Christian told me about an experience he had while attending a meeting of one of his professional societies. Holy Week was approaching, and during one of the breaks, two of his peers – both of them somewhat lapsed Roman Catholics whose wives were Catholic believers – mocked the belief of the Church in the Resurrection of Jesus. How could a modern person, much less a scientist or physician, believe such a thing, they agreed, turning the question to our churchgoer. “You go to Church. But you don't believe *that*, do you?”

He replied, “Of course I believe the Resurrection. How else would you account for the change in the disciples?” They saw Jesus die. They saw his empty tomb. They testified, even under threat of death, that Jesus was risen and alive. They weren't a cult. They were as different from one another as people can be. Yet without force or compulsion, by witness, suffering, and good deeds, that small group of meek little people grew into a body that turned much of the Roman Empire to the faith of Christ in barely two centuries. “You're scientists,” our churchgoing doctor said. “How do you account for it?” The story ended there. Perhaps the subject was dropped.

Today's story from Acts is the martyrdom of Saint Stephen. There are several noteworthy details. One is ironic. As we heard in our reading, Stephen was one of a group of the first Deacons in the Church who were called and ordained to minister to the poor widows, so that the apostles could continue their presiding ministry of preaching. Yet Stephen wound up making a speech for Christ to his fellow Jews that cost him his life. He pulled no punches. Neither did his opponents, who seized him to stone him to death. Stephen then cried out as he saw Jesus *standing* at the right hand of God. Many writers have commented that the Lord was seen standing (rather than seated) because he identified with Stephen as his first

martyr/witness. The identification with Jesus continues, because Stephen, as he died, prayed the Lord to forgive his killers and then commended his spirit to Jesus just as the Lord had done to the Father.

One other detail is the presence of the young man who consented to Stephen's death and kept the garments of those who stoned him, the man named Saul. He is none other than Saint Paul the Apostle before his conversion. Saul had not apparently known Jesus in the flesh but was a leading persecutor of the Church. I wonder, when Saul was struck blind on the Damascus Road, when Christ revealed himself to him, if the voice of the risen Lord sounded like Stephen's: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Or perhaps like a harmony of the voices of all those Saul had hurt or imprisoned. Felix Mendelssohn's beautiful oratorio, *Paulus*, uses a female chorus for this line, perhaps reflecting Christ speaking through the whole Church as his body or bride. It has been their witness that speaks of the truth of the living Christ.

Saint Luke's Gospel ends climactically with the Ascension of Jesus into heaven. But his second volume, Acts, begins with Pentecost, with the descent of the Holy Spirit and the transformation of the disciples into the bold witnesses of Christ, and trails off after Saint Paul's imprisonment (actually house arrest) in Rome, as though there can be no conclusion because the story is still unfolding. The doctor who gave a clear reason for his faith to his peers is part of the story. So are we when we speak up for Christ.

I finish with some words about being a witness to our faith in Jesus Christ. They come from the New Testament. First, be prepared to be asked to account for your faith (as our doctor friend was). That does not mean rehearsing speeches. It means simply settling in our mind that we belong to Christ. Jesus said when we make up our minds to be his disciples, God will be able to speak through us when our time for witness comes.

Second, don't be afraid. Fear not. Or at least let us get our priorities (including our fears) in the right order. Our faith and our integrity are more important than what we fear people may think of us or say about us or do to us if we speak up for the truth. Better to be able to look straight into the mirror with a clear conscience, than to bend to the wind of imagined public opinion or social sentiment. Or as Christ put it, fear not those who, after they have killed the body, have no more that they can do; rather, fear the one who has power over the soul's destiny.

Finally, rejoice in the Lord. Our faith contains the best news there is; namely that Jesus Christ came and died to reconcile us to God and now lives and reigns as the Lord. After spending his youth being a ferocious religious legalist, Saint Paul turned and discovered that Jesus had included even him in his love. As Jesus' Apostle, Paul let the cat out of the bag on this whole matter of salvation. "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is the Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Can it be that easy? By the grace of God, yes it can, and is! Always be ready, says the Apostle, to give a reason for the hope that is in you.

To repeat and summarize: 1) Be prepared to give an account of your faith. 2) Don't be afraid to give an account of your faith. 3) And rejoice that you have the gift of faith, a gift that may be given to others. Humanly speaking, Saint Stephen (the first martyr) helped give the gift to Saul (his persecutor). Usually the sharing of the faith is gentler, as between friends, or together in church, or at home as a child on our mother's lap. But all of it is the work of the Holy Spirit and the power of Jesus' Resurrection. Here at Saint Thomas, and in a million other congregations around the globe, the story begun by Saint Luke continues.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.