

TRUST THE CAPTAIN, TRUST THE CREW
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Readings: John 20:1-10
Acts 10:34-43

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John 20:1-10 *note the prominent role the apostle Peter plays in the resurrection narrative.*

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.² So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."³ Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb.⁴ The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.⁵ He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in.⁶ Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there,⁷ and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.⁸ Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed;⁹ for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.¹⁰ Then the disciples returned to their homes.

Acts 10:34-43

³⁴Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. ³⁷That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: ³⁸how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; ⁴⁰but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, ⁴¹not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴²He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

Among the contemporary Christian writers who speak to me is Anne Lamott. She can be deeply spiritual one breath, and take your breath away with the saltiest of language the next. She has profound insight into faith and the human condition. For example, she writes this about loss and grief:

"You will lose someone you can't live without, and your heart will be badly broken, and the bad news is that you never completely get over the loss of your beloved. But this is also the good news. They live forever in your broken heart that doesn't seal back up. And you come through. It's like having a broken leg

that never heals perfectly — that still hurts when the weather gets cold, but you learn to dance with the limp."

Or about grace, she writes, "I do not at all understand the mystery of grace - only that it meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us." Anne Lamott can also pierce us with her words, as when she observes, "You can safely assume that you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do."

Well, a couple of years ago I had a chance to hear Anne Lamott in person. It was a grand night of spiritual nourishment. But among all the stories she told that night, and the quips she quipped, six of her words have stayed with me more than all the others: *trust the captain, trust the crew*.

Trust the captain, trust the crew. By Anne Lamott's own admission, those words are not hers. The phrase is the title of an episode of that hit TV series of several years back, *The West Wing*. The episode had something to do with a US Navy submarine that was in trouble in North Korean waters. The US President was stuck with a political dilemma: if he did nothing, the boat might provoke an international incident when its presence was discovered. Lives might be lost. On the other hand, if he radioed the submarine to ascertain the situation, the boat would be discovered at once and for sure an international incident would follow, and again, the likelihood of lives being lost was very real.

Ultimately the President decides the best thing to do is let *the captain and the crew* handle the situation on their own. Confident of the wisdom of the captain and the loyalty, discipline, and competence of the crew, the President opts to *trust the captain, trust the crew*.

Anne Lamott is a quite intentional Christian writer who writes out of her Christian experience as well as her human experience. So the expression *trust the captain, trust the crew* carries particular *Christian* meaning for her. So much so that she has those six words tattooed on her ankle. For Anne Lamott *trust the captain, trust the crew* is short hand for what it means to live in faith. What it means to live in the community of the church. How it is that we grow in grace, and how in grace we grow in our witness to the good news of God being revealed in Jesus Christ. What do Christians do? We entrust our lives to Jesus Christ, the captain of our souls, and we trust the crew of Christ's church to be faithful witnesses to the loving activity of God.

Trust the captain, trust the crew. As much as "Christ is risen", these words could be the refrain of the Easter season.

For we are here today because in some fashion we claim – or at least WANT to claim – that Jesus is risen. And we are here today because we trust the witness of some other person to be faithful and true.

Now, it is hard to say which comes first, the faith or the witness. In the gospels, the women go to the tomb on that first Easter morning, and they are the first to experience Jesus as risen. But somehow, *that* Jesus is risen does not mean much until they *give their witness* that Jesus is risen. It is through their witness that the disciples believe, and it is through the witness of the disciples that OTHERS come to believe, and it is only when others come to believe that Jesus is risen that the church is born.

We are here today because we have come to a new understanding of ourselves through the life and teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are here because, like those first followers of Jesus, and like Christians in all times and from all places, our lives are changed through the risen Christ.

We are here because we find the witness to life given by Jesus Christ to be so compelling we are prepared to stake OUR lives on that witness. We are here, because in Jesus Christ we see God's new day dawning. We are here because we want to be here to see it what that new day dawns.

We are here because Christ is risen! We are here because of the witness of those whose lives have been changed and are being changed through a risen Christ. We are here because of the witness of followers of Jesus whom we find persuasive and trustworthy. We believe through the belief of others.

The Church is often portrayed as a ship, as a vessel that transports the faithful people of God through the stormy seas of life. Like all ships, the ship of the church has but one captain. There are many and varied members of the crew, ranging from the lowliest cabin boy to the executive officer. The crew works together. And the crew obeys the captain. The crew trusts the captain to lead them on the right and proper course. The captain trusts the crew to do his bidding. And the crew trusts the captain with their very lives.

The 20th century biblical scholar Rudolph Bultmann, whose writings have long guided me in my biblical study and in my own faith formation, said, “Jesus rose into the preaching of the church.” That is, the faith and witness of the church preserve the memory of who Jesus was and what he did. This sounds like we are DEPENDENT on those first witnesses to the life and teachings of Jesus, that we have to take THEIR WORD for what Jesus was all about. And in a very real sense we ARE dependent on those first witnesses.

But more to the point, those first witnesses to the life and work of Jesus present us with a GIFT. For how would we discover Jesus apart from faithful witnesses? If the women had not gone to the tomb on Easter morning, then what? If the women had not told the disciples that Jesus is risen, then what? If those first followers of Jesus had not believed and had not given witness to what they believed, where would we be today? Certainly not in church proclaiming

some obscure first century Palestinian rabbi rose from the grave. And probably not trying to live a life of sacrificial service to others because of what he taught.

Consider the apostle Peter. He is always portrayed in the gospels as the first witness and the most important of the apostles. It is Peter to whom the women report that Jesus is risen, and it is only after Peter goes to the empty tomb that the other disciples believe Jesus really is risen. Peter is the first to have Easter faith. If anyone in the New Testament has Easter faith, it is Peter. But what kind of faith did Peter have?

As we read in that sermon of Peter's preserved in Acts, it appears that Peter has it all together. By the time he gives this sermon Peter is able to affirm, "God shows no partiality. Any and everyone who believes in God and does what is right is acceptable to him."

Peter believes (rightly) that God's grace and God's love is for ALL. But Peter didn't have that faith on Easter day. For the longest time, Peter believed the good news of Jesus was for Jews only. It was only through the witness of Paul and the witness of the Roman soldier Cornelius that Peter comes to the realization that God's love is not bound by tribe or creed. Peter was not dependent on the witness of others for his Easter faith – he went to the tomb himself. *But Peter's faith was COMPLETED by the witness of others.*

In a very real sense Peter's life was changed TWICE: first by Jesus, and then by the followers of Jesus, by fellow witnesses to God's grace. Peter trusted the captain; Peter *learned* to also trust the crew.

Like Peter, so also for us, that first dose of Easter faith is not likely to fix us up for good. For sure, in baptism we are bathed in God's grace and cemented to Christ. But that doesn't mean we will never have to bathe again! If Peter's faith was incomplete on that first Easter morning, can we reasonably expect our faith to be complete apart from a second and third and fourth and fifth helping of gracious faith as shared with us by faithful witnesses?

Maybe "being born again" doesn't so much refer to a once for all time coming to Jesus kind of experience. Maybe being born again and again and again is the *first* pattern of the Christian life.

And the *second* pattern of the Christian life is to *tell the good news of what it means* to be born again and again and again. To bear witness to the mighty grace of God. Having *heard* a faithful witness, to then *become* a faithful witness.

Friends: *Trust the Captain, trust the crew: serve the Captain, join the crew.*
Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia. AMEN.