

Date: April 26, 2026 (Easter 4)

1. Texts: Acts 2:42-47; Ps. 23; 1 Peter 2:18-25; John 10:1-10.
2. Subject: evangelism.
3. Topic: living evangelistically.
4. Aim: encourage, guide.
5. Proposition: "We can't change people's freewill, but we certainly can do something about our own."

CHOOSING THE GOSPEL WAY

"And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved."¹ Heck, the last count was three thousand!²

So, why can't the Lord add thirty to our number? Is that too much to ask?

Well, there are at least three barriers to even such a tiny miracle as thirty new believers.

First of all, we have 2000 years of Church history behind us. That's two thousand years worth of ministry, mistakes, good deeds and spiritual neglect. Two thousand years of faith and faithlessness are actually working against us. We have two thousand years of cooperation and conflicts with governments and nations. We have earned a very complicated reputation and that doesn't help us.

The second barrier is the quality and nature of our proclamation in word and deed. For centuries we've taken it for granted that people will somehow automatically come to Church. We've relied on our power and position far too much. We assumed that just baptizing babies will produce genuine Christians. Christian education was reduced to weekly sermons and Sunday School classes. We acted as if the mere presence of a church building would attract new believers.

The third barrier to a miraculous increase in participation is our freewill. God always gives everyone the freedom to choose the faith. Faith that is compelled or coerced—as in the forced conversion of Jews in the Middle Ages—is not faith at all. If Jesus were to stand before us this morning, we would have to

¹ Acts 2:47b.

² Acts 2:41.

accept his reality as the resurrected Christ, just as St. Thomas did. Every human being has the God-given freedom to choose or to reject the Christian faith.

These three barriers—

1. our own Christian history and culture,
2. our neglect of effective evangelism, and
3. our basic human freewill—

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make the miracle of the multiplication of the faithful nearly impossible.

We can do nothing about human freewill in others. We can only exercise our own freewill on God's behalf, according to his will and the example of Christ.

We can do nothing about our own history, except to acknowledge and accept it. We are who we have become. We should own up to our failures, including our role in residential schools and in our too close cooperation with political institutions.

However, we can do something about our neglect of effective evangelism.

Let's start by changing some of our assumptions.

Christians are not "born". They are raised Christians. Just because someone had Christian parents does not mean that the children are Christians. Faith is not automatic. It is caught, like a virus passed from one person to another. It is taught, by word and deed.

This means that Christian education can not focus on content. The Christian faith is not a topic to be mastered or a set of rules to be learned by rote. However easy it may be, you do not encourage someone to join the faith by handing them a Bible. Faith is not a subject. Faith is a relationship, and so it is established by experience. Our proclamation cannot come in the form of essays or even cleverly worded sermons. Our proclamation comes from interacting with Jesus in the presence of others. Our proclamation pours out from our experience of Jesus into the lives of those around us.

But, this experience does not occur by happenstance. It's not by accident that our proclamation occurs. Our proclamation must be the result of our own freewill. We have to choose to act evangelistically. We cannot control how others receive our experience of Jesus—that's up to them, and to the exercise of their own freewill. But we have to plan to live evangelistically. We have to look for opportunities for our proclamation. We don't just hope that something will provide an open door for Jesus. We have to be the ones who open the door.

So, when someone invites you out for a Sunday morning brunch, you say, "Can we schedule it for after my Church service? I kind of need that time with my community." Such a request establishes not only your relationship within the Christian community, but also sets boundaries for interference with that relationship.

Or perhaps someone shares with you news of a death in the community. You can say, "I don't know how I'd cope without my faith. The fact that I can pray and can rely on God knowing my experience of loss is a great support to me."

Maybe in your book club or quilting group, you could say, "I learned something from God the other day that just about blew my mind."

We can't wait to be asked, because fewer and fewer North Americans trust the Church, and fewer and fewer North Americans actually believe in a God who is active in the world. We have to take opportunities to share our relationship with God. We look for opportunities for God to get a word in edgewise through us.

We also look for opportunities to demonstrate our faith. Yes, we do that with setting our budget for offerings to the Church. But we also have to look for opportunities to serve other people, such as through support for the unhoused and the abused. We look for chances to fulfill what Jesus said:

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me

clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’³

Of course, as we carry out such acts of loving service, we make it clear to ourselves and to all who will listen that our desire to serve stems from the relationship with God through Jesus.

Just as it has taken generations to build up the barriers that inhibit our evangelism, it will likely take generations to effectively tear them down. But we have to do something—not just because the future of the institutional Church is threatened, but because growth in membership and in effective evangelism belongs to the core of the Christian faith. A former Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, is credited with saying, “The Church exists primarily for the sake of those who are still outside it.” The Church ministers not *to* its own members, but *through* them. True, we have to learn the faith and learn how to practice it, but we do so for the sake of others.

So, the Lord could miraculously add 30 people to our congregation—but they’d have to be open to the gospel and willing to be added. This will require that they see the gospel of Jesus lived out in word and deed in front of them. Such a public revelation will demand courage, commitment and action from us who are already in the Church. It’s all very complicated and may seem to some to be impossible. But, according to the archangel Gabriel, “Nothing will be impossible with God.” To which Mary then said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”⁴ May we find the courage to say the same.

AMEN.

³ Matthew 25:34-40.

⁴ Luke 1:37-38.