

April 24, 2022 – Acts 5:12-32

I do not like being in the sun. It is one of my least favorite feelings in the whole world. I sweat a ton. My hands swell. I get sunburned easily. It's just really unpleasant. And being hot makes my entire attitude sour and disagreeable. In fact, my wife jokes often that the secret to being married to me consists of just two things: keeping me cool and well-fed.

And so, when I am outside during the summer, I am pretty much in a constant state of searching. Searching for shade. A tree, a porch, a cloud. Whatever it takes to get out of the sun. Whatever it takes to enjoy the cool relief of a simple shadow.

In today's First Reading, we hear about another group of people searching for a shadow. But it's not just any shadow that they are seeking. It's one shadow: Peter's shadow. No, not Peter Pan's shadow, like in the children's story. Peter the Apostle's shadow. Why are they seeking Peter's shadow?

Well, let's back up a little bit. Jesus has risen from the dead and ascended into heaven. The Church is just getting started. The believers are overjoyed and excited. They gather together in homes to have fellowship and prayer, to listen to the apostles teach them, and to receive the sacrament together.

They have sold land and belongings to form a new community. They are followers of the Way. More and more have been added to their numbers. In a matter of a few weeks, they have gone from grief-filled disciples huddled in an upper room, to openly, boldly proclaiming that Jesus is risen from the dead.

And leading the charge are two men: Peter and John. Who are not only preaching like Jesus preached, but are doing miracles like Jesus did miracles. When a beggar who is unable to walk sees them on the street, Peter doesn't give him silver or gold. He heals him in the name of Jesus.

Which, of course, catches the attention of the Jewish leaders. The same ones who thought they could silence the message of Jesus by killing him. That obviously didn't work. They try the same threats on Peter and John. It doesn't work on them either.

Why would it? They have seen Jesus rise from the dead. They know that death has no power over God's children anymore. And so Peter spells it out for them, *"We must obey God rather than men."*

And so the Apostles continue to do more and more signs and wonders among the people. Continue to gather larger and larger crowds of people. So that when they are near, people begin carrying the sick out to the streets. Hoping that Peter will stop and heal them like he healed that beggar. Hoping that even Peter's shadow will pass over them and make them whole once again. What happens? According to verse 16, "they were all healed."

Healed by a shadow. Which isn't as crazy as it sounds. After all, remember the time that Jesus was traveling in a crowd of people to heal the twelve-year-old daughter of Jairus, who was dying. Along the way, a woman crept up to Jesus. She had had a discharge of blood for twelve years, and no doctor could help her. She thought if she could just touch the hem of Jesus' garment, she would be healed. And guess what? She was. If God could use a piece of cloth to heal her, why couldn't he use a shadow as well.

In fact, this isn't even the first time God has shown up in a shadow. What did the angel Gabriel say to Mary? *"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God."* God cast his shadow over Mary, and she gave birth to Jesus.

A similar thing happened later in Jesus' life. He goes up on a mountain with Peter, James, and John. And he's transfigured before their eyes. Blazing white. Dazzling glory shining all around him. Moses and Elijah appear and talk with Jesus. And then a cloud comes and overshadows them. And the disciples hear the voice of the Father from within it, *"This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!"*

It's a special thing when God's shadow appears. His very presence and power are in it. And so Peter's shadow healed people that day. Not because of any power he had. But because God was there, performing amazing signs and wonders through the apostles.

Long before Peter ever walked through that crowd, the writer of Psalm 91 knew the wonderful gift of God's shadow: *"He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say to the Lord, 'My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust'".*

What's kind of ironic about all this, though, is that the word "shadow" so often also has a negative connotation in the church. We go to a funeral. We gather with friends and family who are weeping and mourning. And, what is one of the scriptures we almost always hear? Psalm 23: *"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death"*.

That shadow is not God's power. That shadow is death's power over us. That shadow is not the cloud of God's presence bringing healing and life. That shadow is the ugly presence of death hanging over a room. That shadow is not the shadow of joyful excitement. That shadow is the shadow of tears and sorrow.

It's the shadow of realizing just how quickly life passes by. Which is another way that the Psalms use the word 'shadow'. We read in Psalm 144, *"Man is like a breath; his days are like a passing shadow."*

Like a cloud racing across the sky, you can't help but feel life slipping away. Which just makes the shadow feel a lot more dark and ominous, doesn't. We don't like to be under these shadows. No there's no relief from the discomfort of life in the shadow of death. In the shadow of mortality.

And yet, we're not the only ones who have stood in that shadow. On the day Jesus was crucified, another shadow was cast. Matthew, Mark, and Luke's Gospels all recount that when Jesus was crucified, darkness covered the whole land from noon till 3PM. A shadow was cast over them. Over Jesus. Over the disciples. Over the Roman soldiers. Over the Jews who had shouted "Crucify him!"

I have no doubt that it was a frightening experience for those who were in the midst of it. Darkness in the middle of the afternoon. A shadow blocking all light from the land. It probably made them think of their mortality. Of death.

And it was a symbol mortality and death. But not their mortality. Not their death. That shadow was the shadow of the cross. The shadow of God's Son dying to rescue us from death. Giving up his spirit to give us his spirit. Forsaking his life that we may live.

When we stand in the shadow of the cross, we see the shadow of mortality and death *become* the shadow of God's presence. His eternal presence. His life giving presence. So that after he exchanged our death for his, he would overcome death altogether. In the shadow of the cross we feel the cool relief of knowing that death is swallowed up in victory.

And now Christ stands with us, like he stood with those disciples Easter evening. Like he stood before Thomas a week later. We stand in the shadow of his presence. Knowing that he is our Lord and our God. He is God's Son, His Chosen One. And we need only listen to him.

We need only cling to his cross to have life in his name. We need only stay in the shadow of the Apostles and Prophets, hearing their testimony of Jesus – crucified and risen for us – and find the healing we need. Not the healing of weak limbs like that beggar on the street, but the healing of weak souls in need of strength and life from the Word of God itself.

In the shadow of the cross, our searching is over. We don't need to run away from the shadow of death anymore. We don't need to run toward the fleeting relief of sinful temptation and vice. We have a different kind of shadow over us.

For as John will tell us later in Revelation, those who stand before the throne of God have his tent spread over them. The sun will not beat down upon them, nor any scorching heat. Because God is our shadow. And the resurrection is our eternal relief. Amen.