

5 Easter, Year A

Acts 7:55-60

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

1 Peter 2:2-10

John 14:1-14

Today I want to teach you a new word:
Kerygma.

Kerygma is a Greek word.
It's the kind of word you've probably never heard of
but that Bible scholars near and far
have loved and used for years and years.

Preachers, pastors, and seminary professors
sit in their book-lined offices,
put on their glasses,
pull out their highlighters,
scour the gospels,
and declare under their breath
with total rapture,
"Oh, the kerygma!"
It's the kind of word that gets nerds like me excited.

So, what does kerygma mean?

At its most basic level,
kerygma simply means
"preaching" or "proclamation."
When theologians use the word kerygma,
they sometimes mean
the preaching of Jesus
or the witness of the gospels.
Quite often, though, they mean
the whole enchilada.
They're talking about
the full body of knowledge:
everything we Christians
have received and believed,
have noted and known,
have put forth and preached
as the essential message
of our faith in Jesus Christ.

Kerygma is
all the stories,

all the substance,
all the stuff we talk about when we say,
“Let’s preach about the power of God
and the risen Lord Jesus Christ.”

So from time to time,
it’s important to ask ourselves,
“What is our kerygma?”

Or, put more simply:
“What do we proclaim?”

I ask that because of what we see and hear
in scripture today:
specifically when Jesus says,
“I am the way, the truth, and the life,”¹
and assures his disciples
that if they have seen him,
they have seen the Father.
And as if that weren’t enough,
we also get the story of Stephen—
the first martyr of the Christian Church—
who stands up, speaks up,
and gives his life that same kerygma.

So, what is our kerygma?
What do we proclaim?

The Rev. Fleming Rutledge,
one of the most thought-provoking
Episcopal preachers and theologians of our time,
says she has been asking this very question lately.
As she has traveled the Church,
Rutledge has noticed something.
She has noticed that the primary message being preached—
the kerygma most readily and consistently proclaimed
across so many of our mainline churches—
is what she would call the “Jesus kerygma.”²

On the surface, that sounds great, doesn’t it?
We like Jesus,
and it follows that
we want to proclaim Jesus.

¹ John 14:6

² Rutledge, Fleming. “The Raising of the Crucified One.” 10th Annual Mockingbird Conference. Calvary-St. George’s Episcopal Church, New York. 28 April, 2017. Sermon. <<https://themockingcast.fireside.fm/89>>

The Jesus kerygma
is the kerygma that says
Jesus of Nazareth
was a great guy.
He was a phenomenal
preacher, teacher, and rabbi.

He healed the sick.
He ate with sinners.
He welcomed the poor.
Just like blesséd Julia Roberts,
he taught people to
eat, pray, love.

And as Rutledge would say,
all of that is right and true.
There's just one problem:
*it's not enough.*³

As it turns out,
the world does not need another Julia Roberts,
lovely though she is.
The world does not need just another nice guy.
The world needs a *savior*.

It is for that very reason that
we have been hearing a *different* kerygma
ever since Easter.
Have you noticed?
In the Sundays since Easter day,
during this glorious season
we call the Great Fifty Days,
we've been hearing these extraordinary and powerful stories
from the gospels and the book of Acts—
stories wherein Luke and John
are trying their hardest
to smack us over the head
and to convince us over and over
that there is something *more* going on:
that this man Jesus
was *more* than a man,
more than a teacher,
more than a preacher,
more than a healer, shaman, or guide.

³ Ibid.

Ever since Easter,
scripture has been saturating us
with what Rutledge would call
the *Christ kerygma*:⁴
the kerygma of the One
who was raised from the dead,
who conquered the grave,
who appeared to his disciples and dined among them,
who ascended to his Father in heaven.
And that same scripture has been *daring* us
to stake our very lives
on the breadth and promise
of the Christ kerygma.

“Why,” you may ask?
Why stake our lives
on the Christ kerygma,
on the proclamation
that Christ was more than a man
and has been raised from the dead?

Well, why not ask one who did just that?
Let’s talk about Stephen,
whom we encounter in Acts 7 today.

The first time I ever “met” Stephen,
I was a teenager reading my Bible,
late one night in my room.

Here I found the story
of a young deacon,
an early convert to the Christian faith,
“a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit.”⁵
But ‘round about Acts 6,
Stephen finds himself surrounded
by the religious authorities
who demand an accounting
for the faith that is in him.

What you don’t get to hear
in today’s all-too-short reading
is the impassioned speech he gives—
the sweeping sermon he preaches—

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Acts 6:5

in which he reaches back
across the span of ages
and recounts for them the story
of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,
of Moses and the deliverance of Israel,
of Solomon and the temple he built for God,
and, finally, of Christ himself,
the Righteous One, who came to fulfill all things,
and whom they themselves killed.

Of course, none of this
sits well with the authorities.
So what do they do?
They take Stephen out to the edge of town,
and they stone him to death.

As he goes down, Acts says:
“But filled with the Holy Spirit,
Stephen gazed into heaven
and saw the glory of God
and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.
‘Look,’ he said, ‘I see the heavens opened
and the Son of Man standing
at the right hand of God!’”⁶

Do you see
what Stephen was doing?
Stephen—
the first martyr of the Christian faith—
even at the moment of his death,
was *preaching!*
Stephen was *giving THE kerygma . . .*
not just the *Jesus* kerygma,
but the *Christ* kerygma.

Out of all of us—
all of us who have ever
claimed to love the Lord Jesus—
Stephen was the first . . .
the first to give his life
for the proclamation of our faith.

And here’s the truth about that:

You

⁶ Acts 7:55-56

don't
do that
when all you have
is the Jesus kerygma.

You
don't
do that
when all you have
are just some nice stories
about just another nice man.
For you see, the thing about nice men,
is that nice men die.

If all Stephen had—
if all *we* have—
is the Jesus kerygma,
then what we have is a dead man
who died years ago
hanging on a tree.
That would mean that
today is just another weekly funeral liturgy
where we come together to eulogize this man Jesus,
to remember his teachings,
and to try our best to be like he was.⁷

But brothers and sisters,
we have
so
much
more.

Ours is not just the Jesus kerygma.
Ours is the Christ kerygma,
and we proclaim a *living* savior,
a *living* faith,
a *living* word.

Jesus the Christ of God was more.
He *is* more.
He is risen,
he is alive,
he is standing at the right hand of God
offering us grace upon grace.
And out of that grace

⁷ Rutledge.

he has given us the power to proclaim
the ridiculous and saving news that
he is the way, and the truth, and the life,
and in that life we are reconciled to God.

So, say what you will about
Jesus as teacher,
Jesus as rabbi,
Jesus as prophet,
as healer,
as shaman,
as guide.

At the end of the day,
what is our kerygma?
What do we proclaim?

We proclaim that
he was more.
That he *is* more.

We proclaim
that Christ *has* died.
That Christ *is* risen.
And you can bet your boots
that Christ *will* come again.

Amen.