

**Giving Witness**  
**By Reverend Litton Logan**  
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**Scriptures:**

15 In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred and twenty people) and said, <sup>16</sup>Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus— <sup>17</sup>for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.

<sup>21</sup>So one of the men who have accompanied us throughout the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, <sup>22</sup>beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.’ <sup>23</sup>So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. <sup>24</sup>Then they prayed and said, ‘Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen <sup>25</sup>to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.’ <sup>26</sup>And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles. Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

**Sermon:**

A reader of the Gospel of Luke-Acts soon becomes aware that he or she is reading a travelogue of sorts. However, as Jesus moves from Galilee to Jerusalem with the Good News, and later the Apostles and some of the early deacons go throughout the traditional territories of ancient Israel, and Paul throughout the Western Roman Empire, they all go to various people of the Israelite faith. In these places, they give witness in word and deed to God’s coming restoration of Israel in and through Jesus, the resurrected Messiah. Israel’s divine kingdom or theocracy was understood to be a kingdom among kingdoms; however, the kingdoms of the world and their rulers would pay great homage and honor to God’s kingdom and its people in Jerusalem. For Luke and his Israelite audiences, living 15-20 years after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, it would be a new and improved Jerusalem for sure.

In the opening verses of Acts, the author tells his patron, Theophilus, that in his first book he detailed the works and teachings of Jesus so that he might know with certainty the who and what of Jesus as the Christ of God. Now, in the book of Acts, the author will take up the work of God’s Holy Spirit in and through the acts of the Apostles, particularly Peter, various disciples turned deacons, and later the Apostle Paul.

Just prior to Jesus withdrawing and being taken up into heaven, he enlightened about everything written in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms, regarding the Messiah’s suffering, death, and resurrection, all of which had been fulfilled in him. It was time then to call God’s people to repent; that is, turn from the old ways of relating to God and one another that alienated and dishonored. In turning around, they would be made right with God and one’s fellow Israelites, regardless of where they were or their expressions of the Israelite faith. The disciples were instructed to go to Jerusalem and wait there for a special empowerment of the Holy Spirit before they began their work of witnessing in earnest and en mass.

However, before the author of Acts gets into much detail, he tells about the replacement of Judas, the betrayer. Replacing Judas keeps Jesus' model of the original 12 intact along with its historical reference to Israel's original 12 tribes. The 12 disciples were initially Jesus' intimate collaborators and fellow change agents but were soon to be Jesus' witnesses among God's people living among the nations. However, in the restored kingdom, each disciple would serve as a judge or ruler over one of the restored tribes.

Peter, in our text today, acting as the group's leader gave instructions for selecting Judas' replacement through the casting of lots. The criterion was that they must have been members of the Jesus group from the time of John's baptism to Jesus' resurrection and his being taken up. In other words, eye witnesses to all that Jesus said and did from the beginning.

Casting lots and using chance to make certain decisions was common in the Old Testament. We find evidence to support casting lots for everything from allocating the newly conquered holy land, detecting the guilt of a person suspected of having broken a taboo, selecting the proper goat to use as a sin offering in the Ritual Day of Atonement, and the resolving of certain political and labor issues. As an example, the priest in the Old Testament often used the Urim and Thummin to discern God's will in matters for the king, the high court, or someone serving a need of the community<sup>1</sup>. I add that the first King of Israel, Saul, was selected by the casting of lots.

Imagine if you will, a church searching for a new pastor. They have two final candidates. They are equally matched and the pulpit committee is evenly split on the candidates, so an elder on the search committee suggests flipping a coin or drawing a name out of a hat to select the new minister. I am sure that this has happened but the implications are that if the winner turns out to be a loser, the pulpit committee is off the hook because they can blame God as lord of chance for making a poor choice or not doing further due diligence.

Suffice it to say that casting lots in the Old Testament was understood as a human action that brought about a divine "decision" since God controls all the forces of nature. This reminds me of an Old Testament gambling story.

*An archaeologist was digging in the Negev Desert in Israel and came upon a casket containing a mummy. After examining it, the archaeologist called the curator of a prestigious natural history museum. "I've just discovered a 3,000-year-old mummy of a man who died of heart failure!" he exclaimed.*

*To which the curator replied, "Bring him in. We'll check it out."*

*A week later, the amazed curator called the archaeologist. "You were right about the mummy's age and cause of death. How in the world did you know?"*

*"Easy," explained the archeologist, "There was a little clay tablet clutched in his hand that said, '100,000 Shekels on Goliath'."*

Anyway, in the New Testament, the drawing or casting lots for a divine decision in the Christian community is mentioned only once and it is here in our scriptures today.

Thus, let us just say that chancing chance in some form or the other has been around for a long, long time. No matter how we feel about using chance in decision-making, the fact remains that by relying on chance people often abdicate their responsibility for well-researched and truly informed choices. This does not seem to be the case in our text today however.

In our culture, with all the legalized gambling, playing with chance often does decide peoples' futures. Many people will let the role of the dice, the spin of the wheel, or the lay of the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-urim-and-thummim>

cards decide not only their fate for richer or poorer but also that of their families and their communities. So, I can't help but share a story about the social costs of gambling upon one marriage.

*A woman rushes into her house one day and yells to her husband, "Sam, Sam, pack up your things. I just won the California lottery!"*

*Sam replies in delight, "Shall I pack for warm weather or cold?"*

*His wife responds, "I don't care, just as long as you're packed and out of the house by noon!"*

After Matthias' selection, we don't hear about him or Barsabbas, the other candidate again. We may safely assume that Matthias along with the other 11, as eye witnesses to the resurrection, stood as authoritative witnesses to Jesus being the fulfillment of Messianic expectations.

Let's look at this word *witness* a bit. A witness is someone who can personally attest through his or her senses to a fact or an event. However, there are hearsay witnesses who testify to what someone else said or wrote. An expert witness is someone who has specialized knowledge relevant to a matter of interest. And, finally there is a reputation witness who testifies to or about the reputation or credibility of a person, group, or other entity.<sup>2</sup>

In the book of Acts, I think we see most of the forms of witnesses in the telling of the resurrected Christ. The author tells Theophilus, et al, that he is a hearsay witness as well as a reputational witness, who reports what he has been told by people and from sources whom he believes are reputable. The author retells the testimonies of those who saw the risen Christ and those like Stephen and Paul, who had visions of the risen Christ. In the ancient world, both men and their visions would have been understood as valid. For the author of Luke-Acts, Paul, as a learned Pharisee, could be possibly be classified as an expert witness to Jesus as the Christ. However, I feel I should make a distinction here about the testimonies of witnesses, who are so far removed from the times and events that they simply become confessors or professors of Jesus as the Christ of God, not hearsay witnesses.

That distinction lies in the confessor or professor trusting the testimony of hearsay witnesses to the point that they live by or make life decisions based upon the substance of the various witnesses' statements.

This testimony, however, is not idle belief or wishful thinking. It must meet certain criteria of reasonableness, facticity, veracity, and a preponderance of supporting witnesses to be believed as true. And, that brings me to us.

Unlike Peter and those 12 disciples gathered together in our text, we cannot and obviously Luke's community of faith could not, give eye witness accounts to a resurrected Jesus - we weren't there, we didn't see him, nor did they. However, we may have our professions of faith in God and in God's truths in Jesus' teachings and witness validated through their effects in our lives and in the life of the world. We do this while standing in a long chain of affirmed and validated believers over two millennia, who have found moral, social, and spiritual merit and power in the testimonies of our Christian Gospels. In short, if the substance of the Gospels work to make us, society, and the world a more life affirming, healing, and a healthier place for all life, then it is not only of the truth, but it is of the divine truth of the Creator/Sustainer of all life, this world, and the universe. And, the Gospel, I believe, does this and has done this despite all the downsides of Christian

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<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia contributors. "Witness." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 16 Apr. 2018. Web. 12 May. 2018.

sectarianism and militarism across the ages, but especially in the hearts and minds of those who are true seekers of righteousness and holiness.

The Gospel works for good because its truths bring comfort and assurances to the human mind and spirit, which is often riddled with anxiety and uncertainty. It quiets the human spirit despite everything that is wrong or uncertain. It works, because contained in its message are time honored and proved Truths that we can trust and order our lives and our world around.

No, I didn't see the resurrected Jesus. I don't know anyone who did. What I know is that when I am in the world as Jesus taught and was, trusting God's revealed moral and spiritual will, I too can face the uncertainties of life with the confidence that this is not all there is and what is yet to be is vouched safe in my Creator/Sustainer. To this, I can, you can, and we can give firsthand witness, not to a crucified and resurrected Jesus, but to the living Christ of God, who guides, comforts, and encourages us to be the very best we can be all things considered by an indwelling of the Holy Spirit. This Holy Spirit will vouch safe our faith in Christ against that day when we stand as eye witnesses and know beyond any shadow of doubt.

As the Apostle Paul so beautifully said, "For now, we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." (1 Cor. 13:12, NIV)

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