

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
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Sermon by Pastor Bart Brauer
The risen Christ makes for confident Christians

—Acts 6:1-9; 7:2a,51-60

The past two weeks we heard Peter preach at Pentecost. The same Peter who, on the night of Jesus' arrest, denied having any connection to Jesus whatsoever was now preaching Jesus Christ less than two months later. What happened? Christ died and rose again from the dead. That's what happened! The risen and ascended Christ filled Peter and John and the other apostles with confidence. The apostles attempted to bring the Jews of Jerusalem to acknowledge their sin and desire God's forgiveness. The apostles told them multiple times: "You killed Jesus Christ, but God raised him from the dead. God provides salvation only in the name of Jesus. There is forgiveness of sins to all." Preaching that message came at a cost. The apostles were jailed by the authorities, reprimanded, threatened, beaten, and whipped. But the higher the danger, the more the confidence of the apostles rose. And the more the number of believers grew. Three thousand to five thousand and more and more. All these things are happening in Acts chapters 2,3,4,5, and into 6. Then in chapter 7, the killing starts. But it's not an apostle. It's a Christian man, a Christian confessor, named Stephen. When faced with death, what becomes of Christian confidence then?

Before we talk about dying, let's talk about living. Living with confidence. Are you living with confidence?

If you are not living with confidence, you may be living with carelessness. "I don't really care. The tasks in front of me seem blah. They are unimportant to me because nobody else seems to care much about them either. What's the point?" So you go through the motions. You fill the minutes of the hours and you fill the hours of the day, with one day blandly blending into another. That's not a lot of confidence in living, is it? That's pretty careless.

There is a lot of talk these days about essential jobs and essential personnel. Along with that, the word "hero" gets tagged on people. Grocery workers are suddenly "heroes." Medical professionals and care workers are "heroes." While it is very good for our communities and very good for us to acknowledge people and what they do, and to be grateful to people when gratitude is due, we Christians also know something else. You don't have to be called essential by anybody else for your living to matter. You don't have to be called a hero by other people to care about what you are doing with your life. The roles and responsibilities you have in your life—some of which may have been drastically changed in the past two months—are there because God has put them into your life, and that's why they matter. You are not living for other people's thanks and praise. You are not even living for yourself. It's the Lord Christ you are serving. He cared about you. He cared about your life now, and he cared about your life forever. Christ died for you and me. His love for us compels us. So we don't live for ourselves, but we live for him who died for us and was raised again. We are living for a risen Christ. That's confidence!

If you are not living with confidence, it's possible you are living with something else. I am hesitant to even use the word because it's terrible to accuse anyone of this. But it does need to be mentioned. There's a verse in the Bible that haunts me. It's frightening. Toward the very end of the Bible, God is talking about who is going to inherit eternal life, and on the flip side, who is going to die a second eternal death in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. As for those who end up in hell, God mentions the murderers, the sexually immoral, occultists, idolaters, and liars. But at the head of that list, even before unbelievers, are cowards. Those guilty of cowardice, who are paralyzed by fear and have no Christian confidence in living or in dying. We may secretly think, "You know, if I am ever put in an uncomfortable or even dangerous situation, can't I just evade and then come back and repent?" Well, in addition to Jesus' saying, "If you deny me before men, I will also deny you before my Father in heaven," you also have God's mentioning cowardice as a reason why people end up in hell. We should not deceive ourselves into thinking, "I'll act like a coward, but then I'll get my confidence back." We are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved. We have a confident Savior who lived for us and died for us. He went to the cross knowing he was going to die for sin, but also knowing he was going to come back to life. And he did. He did that for us to save us from our sins of weakness and fear. That's the Christ we live for. We live for him confidently.

Stephen was a gifted and blessed man. He had Christian faith, which as we heard last week, is a miracle of God in and of itself. He is also described as *full of faith and the Holy Spirit, full of grace and power, and full of wisdom*. He lived confidently in Christ, together with the other six men chosen by the church to take care of a pressing need: providing for the fair daily distribution of food and supplies to the Christian widows, both Greek and Hebrew, in Jerusalem. Stephen and his fellow servants took up that task diligently, and they took care of the matter for the sake of the widows and for the sake of God, while the apostles gave primary attention to prayer and to serving the Christian community with the word of God. As all these Christians confidently and diligently carried out their tasks, God blessed the effort. *So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.* How about that? God graciously blesses the effort as his people devote themselves to the tasks he has put in front of them.

Stephen even had the ability to do miracles, and that put in front of him an opportunity to speak. When Stephen spoke, he spoke with confidence. When he spoke with Christian confidence, he got opposed by those who wanted to silence him. Jews primarily from North Africa and Asia Minor. They had Stephen arrested and falsely accused him of two things: "Stephen blasphemes Moses and God; Stephen speaks against the holy temple and the law of God." Interestingly, those are basically the same things Jesus was accused of and crucified for. When Jesus had been asked by the Jewish authorities if he was the Christ, Jesus said "Yes" and added, "You will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One." Remember those words for just a bit later.

In his speech, Stephen is doing more than defending himself. He is giving a truthful testimony to the men in front of him. Stephen puts the emphasis on God and what God did for his people. God appeared. God spoke. God promised. God fulfilled. God was with them. God heard. God sent. God rescued and set free. God directed. God showed favor. Stephen contrasts that with what the people did. The people rejected Moses as the ruler and judge sent by God. The people refused to obey Moses. The people turned away from God. The people made an idol, their own god, and they sacrificed and celebrated with their idol. They even worshiped the heavenly bodies. God gave them a tabernacle to worship at. God gave them a temple. But God isn't quarantined at the temple. He is not in isolation at a man-made house. Heaven is God's throne, and the earth is his footstool.

Stephen equates the men in front of him with those rebellious people of the past: "*You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One.*" [That's a great description for Jesus, the righteous one who died for all of us, the unrighteous ones, to bring us to God]. Then Stephen accuses them of murder: "*Now you have betrayed and murdered him—you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it.*"

Stephen's words are met with fury and with rage, and now the killing is about to start. When faced with death, what becomes of Christian confidence then? How confidently Stephen faces death! I don't know that many or any of us will face a martyr's death for our Christian faith. The Lord only knows. But whatever kind of death we may face—it's doesn't matter what kind of death it may be—we can face it with the same kind of confidence that Stephen did.

Look what the risen Christ did specifically for Stephen. Moments before the stoning began, heaven opened for Stephen so he could see the glory of God. Stephen saw Jesus Christ alive and standing at the right of God. As Stephen was being stoned, as he was dying a violent death, look at the prayers that the risen Christ produced from Stephen's lips. They are truly Christ-like prayers, very similar to the prayers that Jesus himself prayed on the cross. "*Lord Jesus, receive my spirit,*" Stephen prayed, just as Jesus had prayed, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." "*Lord, do not hold this sin against them,*" Stephen prayed, just as Jesus had prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And look what the risen Christ finally did for Stephen. Here he was, dying a violent, brutal and painful death, and yet *when he had said this, he fell asleep*. How peaceful. How comforting. That is the way Jesus always spoke about death when it intruded into the lives of his people. "The twelve-year-old girl is not dead, but asleep." "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep." That's what happened to Stephen. His body fell asleep. His soul was received by Jesus. To this day, Stephen's body somewhere over in Jerusalem is asleep, awaiting the resurrection on the last day.

Christian brothers and sisters, we can die with confidence, too. Difficult thought it is. Sad as it may be. We can die with confidence. As we think about dying, it can make us feel alone. To go away from people we love and people who love us is hard. It can even make God seem far away. But he is not far away. We just need the eyes to see him. Like a good shepherd, the risen Christ is standing right there all the time. Standing at the right of God and standing right by our side at the same time to comfort us, to strengthen us, to receive us. I don't know whether you or I will see Jesus with our eyes before we die the way Stephen saw him. Jesus is certainly capable of making that happen if he thinks that is best for us. But either way, the transition from the green pastures and the quiet waters through the valley of the shadow of death to the house of the LORD is not as long and scary as it may seem to our limited vision. The transition from this life to being with the risen Christ is not far. He is right there, and he will receive us, as he received Stephen. We will be with Christ. Our soul will be with Christ. Our body will sleep, waiting for the resurrection on the last day.

God grant us to live, to serve, to speak, and to die with the confidence that he granted Stephen. That is the power and the love of the risen Christ in our life. The risen Christ makes for confident Christians. Amen.