

Sermon Draft

Text: Acts 5:12–20 (21–32)

Sermon: Shadow

The early chapters of Acts give glimpses of the Early Church, especially Peter’s proclamation and powerful presence. The believers gathered around the apostles’ teaching, breaking of bread, prayer, and fellowship. A lame beggar is healed, giving Peter opportunity to call for repentance and to turn to Jesus, whom God raised from the dead.

The Jewish ruling council tries to silence the apostles, and so the predicted persecution begins. Then comes a “Wait a moment!” incident. The believers were selling their possessions and holding everything in common. But Ananias and Sapphira keep back some of the proceeds of land they sold, and both end up dead (5:1–11). A frightening moment, and some are now hesitant to join this new community.

Our text comes immediately after this shocking turn of events. Peter steps out and the miracles continue. People healed. Unclean spirits dismissed. Perhaps even Peter’s shadow brings the miraculous at least the people believe it will. Now comes the second persecution, again by the council.

But divine intervention ends the prison time (5:17–20). Nothing will stop the proclamation as this new band of followers of the Christ will obey God no matter what (5:29). More persecution would have followed, except Gamaliel calls for patient waiting to see what comes of this movement. What comes of it? **“Every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus”** (5:42).

Word Study

Sometimes one word catches your attention when studying a text. For this study, the word shadow did just that. On occasion, it just refers to a literal shadow cast: one that goes back ten steps (2 Kings 20:11), one cast by a mountain (Judges 9:36), or one providing cooling shade from a tree (Mark 4:32).

Shadow does have a negative connotation to it. The darkness of the shadow covered the land (Isaiah 9:2). Job wishes for darkness on the day of his birth (Job 3:5). David names a valley the shadow of death (Psalm 23:4).

Shadow is a striking metaphor for the brevity of life, realistically but dishearteningly: ***“Man is like a breath; his days are like a passing shadow”*** (Psalm 144:4).

But shadow also has a positive force to it. God’s protection and refuge come from hiding under his wings. Psalm 91 assures the reader that rest comes in the shadow of the Almighty (91:1). Psalm 63 associates the shadow of God’s wings with his help, and the result is singing for joy (63:7).

Later, this protection and help changes to God’s power and presence. In Luke, the power of the Most High will overshadow Mary, and she will bear the Son of God (1:35). On the Mount of Transfiguration, a cloud overshadowed the disciples, and God spoke—a scene of the Father’s overwhelming presence and a glimpse of the powerful glory of the Son of God. So when Peter casts his shadow, it brings healing, and evil spirits are dispensed. Of course, it is not Peter who brings such signs and wonders. God’s power and presence is overshadowing the people as Peter walks by.

It was a hot summer's day, and the family went to see their baseball team play the season opener. They had the best seats, right down the first base line behind their team's dugout. However, this Sunday afternoon game had us sitting right under the blazing heat of the sun. No overhang to protect us. Just a sweltering, baking oven like heat that was almost unbearable. Until some white puffy clouds drifted by. The shadow they created was a welcome relief. We were cooled off. We could watch the game. We were so happy for each cloud's shadow when it passed over us.

I want you to picture a much different scene. Jesus has risen from the dead and ascended into heaven. The Church is just getting started. The believers are jubilant and excited. They gather together in homes to have fellowship and prayer, to listen to the apostles teach them, and to eat meals together. They have sold land and belongings to form a new community called the Church. More and more have been added to their numbers. What an amazing change from the grief-filled days after Jesus had been crucified!

Peter stood tall as the leader of this growing church, along with the apostle John. The two of them had just healed a beggar who could not walk. But the religious leaders did not like what was going on and tried to get them to stop talking about Jesus. They wanted to silence their message that Jesus had risen from the dead. It did not work. Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, boldly proclaimed, ***“There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we much be saved”*** (4:12).

The apostles continued to perform incredible signs and wonders among the people. Can you picture the crowds they began to attract? People would carry the sick out to the streets. Those with unclean spirits were brought to them. Oh, if only Peter would stop and heal them, that the apostles would cast out the evil spirits. In fact, they were hoping that even Peter’s shadow would pass over them, that his shadow would make them whole once again. The scene ends with the simple statement: ***“they were all healed”*** (v 16).

Now, did Peter’s shadow heal the people? It could have! One time, Jesus was traveling in a crowd of people to heal the twelve-year-old daughter of Jairus, a synagogue ruler. She 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 just wanted to touch the hem of Jesus' garment. She stretched out her hand. She touched it and she was healed on the spot. Perhaps Peter's shadow had that same healing power and presence of God for the sick and demon-possessed.

You see, God can be powerfully present in a shadow. When the time came for Jesus to be born, the angel came to Mary to let her know she would give birth to the very Son of God. She was confused because she was a virgin.

"How can this be?" she asked. The answer: ***"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"*** (Luke 1:35). God overshadowed Mary, and she gave birth to Jesus, the Savior of the world.

Later in Jesus' life, he went up a mountain with Peter, James, and John. He was transfigured right before their eyes. Blazing white. Dazzling glory shone around him. Moses and Elijah appeared there and talked with Jesus.

Incredible! Then a cloud came and overshadowed them.

The disciples heard God's powerful voice boom out, ***"This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!"*** (Luke 9:35).

When God's shadow appears, his very presence and power are in it. Peter's shadow could have healed the people that day. Not because of any power he had. But because God was there, performing amazing signs and wonders. Even long before Peter walked by that crowd of people, 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'"*** (Psalm 91:1–2).

Now, I know the word shadow also has some negative imagery. You walk into church, and the casket is up front, just a few feet from the altar. Your dad took his last breath a few days ago. The time has come to say good-bye. The funeral service begins, and your pastor reads Psalm 23. You listen as the words strike the depths of your soul: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death" (v 4).

This time, the shadow is not God's power; this time, it is death's power over us. This time, the cloud is not the presence of healing and life; this time, the ugly presence of death hangs over you like a cloud of disease and grief. This time, the shadow is not one of joyous excitement; this time, it is one of tear-filled sorrow.

You realize just how quickly life passes by. Another psalm comes to mind: ***"Man is like a breath; his days are like a passing shadow"*** (Psalm 144:4). You've heard it said another way: ***"The grass withers, the flower fades"*** (Isaiah 40:7). Your dad or mom's last few years went by so fast, and you realize how much of your life is already gone by. Like a passing shadow, you cannot help but feel life slipping away. Now the shadow is dark and ominous. You don't want to be under this shadow. Not for long. No, you long for the shadow of God's healing presence in your life.

What changes the shadow of death into the shadow of God's presence in your life? When we stand in the shadow of the empty cross, with Jesus risen from the dead, God's powerful presence chases away the gloom of death.

Jesus' resurrection overshadows you with the very promise of life with him for all eternity. Your dad will live, and so will you. Jesus' resurrection changes everything!

Think of Thomas, the disciple who was missing from the upper room that first Easter morning. He would not believe that Jesus was alive. He heard the news from the other disciples, but not even Peter could convince him of what had happened. He needed to see it for himself.

A week later, he's with the other disciples. Perhaps the room is fairly dark, with just a few lamps for light. Suddenly, Jesus appears in his glorious, resurrected body. Thomas is awestruck. Jesus turns his attention to him. Maybe, just maybe, Jesus is standing before one of the lamps, and his shadow falls over Thomas. He tells Thomas, "Touch my hands and side. Stop your gloomy doubts; start believing again." That very moment the shadow of death turned into the shadow of life. Thomas was whole again. The very resurrected presence of Jesus made all the difference in his life.

And ours too. Now, we can't reach out and touch the nail marks in Jesus' hands and side like Thomas did. We don't have Peter's shadow passing over us with God's healing presence and power, like the crowds did. But we can reach out with our hands to take hold of the risen body of Christ in the bread at his Supper. We reach out to hold steady a cup filled with his blood, powerfully present for us once again. At our Lamb's high feast, we find Easter triumph and Easter joy, paradise opened, and light and life for all our days. The Shadow of Gloom and Death Is Changed to the Shadow of God's Power and Life with Christ's Resurrected Presence in Our Lives.

Can you see this shadow? Well, not like the people who watched Peter walk by. Not like Thomas did when Jesus appeared again. But believe it's here. Believe that God's amazing power and presence is here for you. Listen to Jesus' words to Thomas: "***Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed***" (John 20:29). Jesus is talking about you!

Amen