



August 23, 2026

"Who Do You Say I Am?"

Pastor Liz Radtke

Part of my duties as a pastor includes a lot of writing, more than I ever expected. And I never really considered myself to be a strong writer. I mean, back in college, yes, I'd write the English, history, and psychology papers that I would have to write, but a majority of the things that I wrote in college were analysis on data.

And then I go to seminary, and all I do is write. Long, really long essay-type things. And then I marry a guy who not only loves writing these long, really long essay-type things, he loves writing *everything*. Ryan was an English and Spanish major with music and math minors in college. And over our almost 22 years of marriage, I have appreciated his English degree. He is a great editor and proofer, and he has taught me a thing or two.

In his one creative writing class, he learned and then passed on to me the advice that you don't *tell* something when you can *show* it.

I looked up some author blogs for some explanation and examples of how this works, and it boils down to: when you show rather than tell, you make the readers part of the experience. They become immersed in the story, in the scene. They get to participate as opposed to having some dry narrator just tell them stuff.

For example, you could say: "Mary was tall." Or you could say: "Mary came through next, ducking to clear the doorway."

Telling would be: "The temperature fell and the ice reflected the sun." Showing would be: "Jack's nose burned in the frigid air as he squinted against the sun reflecting on the street."

Telling: "It was late fall." Showing: "The leaves crunched beneath their feet."

This one was fun—Telling: "She was a plumber and asked where the bathroom was."

Showing: "She wore coveralls, carried a plunger and a metal toolbox with wrenches of various sizes hanging from a leather belt. 'Point me to the head,' she says."

We just heard Jesus ask some "telling" questions. He asks, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" The disciples tell him what the people are saying. Then he asks, "But who do *you* say that I am?" And Simon says, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

And Jesus blesses him for this answer, elevating him by giving him the new name Peter, which comes from the word for "rock" in Greek. Jesus says that the church will be built on this rock, on Peter, and that Peter will be given the keys to the kingdom of heaven.

And then Jesus does something really weird. After this exchange—this promise, this commission—Matthew tells us that Jesus *sternly* orders the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Jesus issues this order many times in the Gospels, but why? Why send the disciples out two by two to proclaim that the kingdom of heaven is near, and then turn around and tell them not to tell anyone that he's the Messiah, the one who is the embodiment of this kingdom of heaven? Why spend so much time in the synagogues and on the shorelines, and on the hillsides and mountains and plains, preaching and teaching, but then tell the disciples not to preach and teach about Jesus, the living Son of God?

I kind of think that the answer might come from that creative writing class, that advice that you don't tell when you can show. It isn't he sternly ordered the disciples *not* to tell anyone; it is he sternly ordered them not to *tell* anyone.

I mean, you can watch a movie about falling in love, but it's not the same as having the experience of falling in love. I can read a book where one character really messes up and hurts someone that they care about, but it's not the same as experiencing that heavy weight of guilt in my own gut when I'm the one who did the hurting. Recently, I was watching TV and there was a quick pan that showed the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, Turkey. And I could tell you about this church, I could tell you about this building—it has been a church, it has been a mosque, it is now a museum with artifacts from all of its different phases of its existence.

But in that quick pan of the city and that quick scene change, I was immediately taken back there. Seeing that quick glimpse brought the *whole* experience back: what it felt like to be traveling during the J-term of our final year of seminary; to walk through the huge bazaar, getting lost and getting found again; to the Whirling Dervish ceremony where we watched men reach up to God while staying planted and connected to Moses and the earth; to the underground churches in the cities with the frescoes that were drawn and painted on the walls that also had their eyes scratched out when they were discovered; to even a seaside restaurant where an errant pomegranate seed being shot across a table caused laughter that brought the whole group together, brought tears, brought the restaurant to a stop as the waitstaff joined in our laughter, so much so that they could not get anything done and had to go outside.

That experience, with all that my senses took in, with all of the emotions I felt, the memories that had been filed away—it all came back from that quick cutaway scene on the TV.

And oh my, the door it opened in my heart and mind. Experiences are powerful. They stay with you.

Telling is good, it is important. I can tell my kids that I love them; that's important and necessary that they hear me say that. But I also need to *show* them that I love them—occasionally in big ways, but consistently in the mundane ways. Telling is important; showing tends to create experiences.

I realized this week as I sat with this Gospel story that Simon wasn't renamed Peter by Jesus, wasn't told that he'd be the rock upon which Jesus's church would be built, wasn't given the keys to the kingdom of heaven *because* Peter gave the right answer to Jesus's question, because he *told* Jesus the right thing.

No. Peter gives the answer: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus says, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." Peter was christened Peter because he was affected by his *experiences* with Jesus. Peter was the rock because he was open to seeing and experiencing who Jesus was, who the Messiah is. The truth of who Jesus was and is was revealed to Peter by the Father in heaven. And because the rock was open to this revelation, Jesus then gave him the keys to the kingdom of heaven. And with those keys comes a declaration: whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

Now typically this is usually understood as being about forgiving of sins, or not. But I heard it differently this time. Whatever you bind on earth—the covenants that you make, the love that you nurture, the experiences that you create in God's name—those, too, will be bound in heaven, never forgotten. And whatever you loose on earth—the sins you forgive, the ones bound by disease or demon and burden that you unbind, the hungry that you feed, the prisoner you set free, the poor that you bring good news to, the forgotten ones that you walk with—they will be loosed, set free also in heaven.

The keys weren't about giving Peter or the church the absolute authority that belongs to God only, which is the forgiveness of sins. The keys to the kingdom of heaven were about that revelation that was given by the Father in heaven.

When you go out binding and loosing, be open to revelation. Be open to experiences. Be open to God. When someone is crying out in the bondage of this world—in pain, in anguish, in addiction, or past mistakes, of oppression—be open to experience and receive revelation. Go beyond just putting yourself in their shoes and let their personal experiences tell and *show* you just which Gospel key you need to use to let them loose. Let the Holy Spirit *show* you which Gospel key you need to bind God's love to them in their time of need.

When we carry on Peter's task to bind and loose, let us be open to revelation. Don't just *tell* people that God loves them—show them. Be the revelation of forgiveness. Create experiences of grace.

Isaiah tells a people in exile to remember Abraham and Sarah. Abraham and Sarah were just one household, but from them, God made many. To a people who felt cut off, God says: remember your collective experience, passed down through the generations, that God keeps covenants. Trust again now. The Lord will comfort Zion,

he will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord. Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song.

Be open to revelation.

But then God also says: a teaching will go out from me, and my justice for a light to the peoples. The revelation is also for others to be witnesses to the teaching, to live out justice, to show God's might and mercy and love.

In our other reading, we see Paul, who writes a lot and tells a lot, and has a lot of theory and theology and abstract, but he—he too—still comes back to experiences. That's why he talks about the body of Christ and having its many members together, each member gifted according to the grace given. "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."

It might be spiritual worship, but it's *lived out* in bodies as a living sacrifice—God's love and grace embodied in *you* and *your* gifts, so that others may experience them through you. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Be open to revelation.

And honestly, Lutherans are probably better known for our telling than our showing—preaching and writing more than being caught up in spirits and the like. But there is a reason that we receive communion every single week: bread *in* your hands, crumbs that you brush, a splash of wine on your tongue, Jesus's body in, with, and under. A baby's surprised yelp when water splashes on them at the baptismal font. Peace shared, embraces, handshakes, waves, hello, greetings rising to the high ceilings in the commons as one enters and is welcomed and is fully seen. Laughter and stories shared around a table at a Bible study, at a meal, at a service project. We come here open to experience, receptive to revelation. The revelation comes in the telling, yes, like this very long sermon, but it also comes in the experiences—the tangible rocks on which faith is built, trust is nurtured, grace embodied.

And as we *go* from here, our bodies as living sacrifices, the stories planted in us, light to the nations, ready to bind and loose and be receptive to revelation out there, too—I want you to know, to experience, to receive from God the revelation that Jesus *is* the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

And when you go, hear this: don't tell anyone about it. *Show* them.

Amen.