

From Pastor Marissa Becklin

First Fragments: Early Copies Of Scripture At The Chester Beatty Library In Dublin, Ireland

While on vacation after Easter, my husband and I journeyed to the UK and Ireland. When we make our way out of the country we always make it a point to explore the religious history of the place we are going, and Ireland holds specific importance to me as it is where part of my family is from, so we prioritized Irish church history while there. Beyond local church history, however, we had the opportunity to visit an exhibition at the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin with a number of papyrus fragments—a vast collection of many of the earliest copies of scripture that have ever been discovered in the world.

To attend this exhibition, peer into the glass cases, and see the handwriting on carefully preserved animal skins was a spiritual experience to say the least. While looking at these fragments I couldn't help but think of the faithfulness, dedication, and care offered by the people who wrote these manuscripts out as early as the year 300 AD. Looking at these fragments is like time traveling—returning to a time in the very early church, when Christianity was still illegal and persecuted in the Roman Empire, when Christians still worshiped in secret and read these letters and manuscripts aloud around fires and in catacombs, when the Word made flesh was only a few generations in the past. These fragments served as a reminder to me, two thousand years later, that the task of preserving this tradition and faithfully sharing the good news of Christ's life, love, and resurrection is a charge that we have had bestowed on us by our ancestors and by God Godself. We fall in a long line of witnesses, in an unbroken chain of testimony, and we are called to take that charge seriously.

A story about one of my favorite fragments:

A fragment from Acts 15 was found in 1930 in Egypt, and was dated to the 3rd century AD, Egypt. Looking closely at the fragment, an observer can see small tick marks between some Greek letters, which were a guide for someone who was reading this passage out loud—they are breath marks! At least as early as the second century we know that weekly readings were a common practice for Christians. Justin Martyr, an early Christian who lived from 100-165 AD, said “on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits.” (*The First Apology* 67.3, translation by Marcus Dods) Beyond this, we know that public readings were common in the Jewish tradition as well, as it is mentioned in Acts and in Paul's letters. I find this extremely meaningful as a Christian of the 21st century—when we hear the word read aloud in Worship on Sunday, when members of our own community stand among us and proclaim the word that was passed down to us over thousands of years, we are taking part in an ancient and holy tradition that long predates us. When we step into the liturgy on Sunday, we are embodying an ancient ritual that connects us to our forebears. What a beautiful thing to reflect on as we gather!



I have a book with many more pictures from this exhibition in my office, so if you're curious and would like to see more of these, please let me know. I'd be happy to show you!

In Christ, Pastor Marissa