

“We Are Witnesses”

Rev. Eric S. Corbin

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois

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Luke 24:36b-48

³⁶Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” ³⁷They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. ³⁸He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” ⁴⁰And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. ⁴¹While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” ⁴²They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³and he took it and ate in their presence. ⁴⁴Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” ⁴⁵Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things.

“Peace be with you.” I’ve been thinking about those words this past week. Last Sunday, Rev. Scott Paul-Bonham read from John 20, including Jesus uttering those words three times. “Peace be with you,” Jesus says when he stands in the midst of the disciples. “Peace be with you,” he says again moments later. And then a week later, when Thomas is with the others, Jesus returns and says “Peace be with you.” In Pastor Matt’s installation service last Sunday afternoon, Imam Ousmane Sawadago, brought greetings from our local interfaith alliance. He began with “As-salamu alaykum,” which is Arabic for “Peace be upon you.” Rabbi Alan Cook greeted us in written form with Psalm 133:1, “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!” Sounds quite a bit like “Shalom” or Peace. In that service, we did what we do in nearly every worship service here – we participated in the passing of the peace. Each Sunday, we greet each other with “The peace of Christ be with you” and respond with “And also with you.” And now, today’s reading from Luke 24 is before us, where Jesus appears to his disciples and again says “Peace be with you.” Peace, peace, everywhere we turn, we are hearing about peace. Meanwhile, many of us may be feeling more in line with the divine judgment the prophet Jeremiah records: “‘Peace, peace,’ they say, when there is no peace.”

If so, we are in good company. Jesus said “Peace be with you” to a group of *terrified* disciples, feeling anything but peace. They had lost their friend, their leader, the one they believed to be the Messiah. Just before today’s text is the Road to Emmaus passage, in which two disciples say of Jesus, “we *had* hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” The hope of the disciples had been dashed, and this melancholy group sat behind a locked door. *Peace, peace, there is no peace.* Suddenly, Jesus shows up and they are paralyzed with fear, believing Him to be a ghost. I can’t really blame them for that, though. After all, they *did* see Jesus crucified and placed in a tomb, and dead people don’t just show up in a room with you. Jesus did seem to go right through the door.

And there's something different about him now. Mary didn't recognize him at the empty tomb until he said her name. The disciples on the road to Emmaus walked and talked with him for a few miles and didn't recognize him until he broke bread with them. There's something mysteriously different about the resurrected body of Jesus and I think it's understandable that the disciples are fearful. Jesus seeks to calm their fears with his greeting of Peace and by allowing them to see and touch his wounds. He even casually asks them for some food and then eats it in their presence. *Do you get it now, guys? A ghost can't do these things. I'm not a ghost. I'm real.*

Jesus comes to this group of fearful disciples where there is no peace and brings them true Peace. He only then moves on to the matters at hand. When we are in that state of fear, we cannot grasp new things. Our more primal responses take over. After calming their fears, Jesus "opened their minds to understand the scriptures," just as he had done for the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Jesus explained to them what was said about him in the scriptures. He reminded them of the things he had told them many times before, but they just couldn't understand before he was crucified. They could not wrap their minds around the possibility of their Messiah suffering and dying, especially on a cross. Now, though, it had come to pass, and they had to accept it, so Jesus explains it another time to them, how the scriptures foretold his suffering, death, and resurrection. He then gets to the main point, as Luke records it in verse 47, "that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations." Remember that "repentance" is about turning around and going in a new direction. I like the way the Contemporary English Version puts this: "all people of every nation must be told in my name to turn to God." All people must be told to turn to God. It's as simple and as complex as that. He then tells them, "You are witnesses of these things."

You are witnesses. When we think of witnesses, what images come to mind? For me, one image is of a courtroom. The role of witnesses in court is to tell what they know. The role of a witness is not to draw conclusions, it is to tell what they have seen or heard or experienced. Jesus tells us that we are witnesses, so we are to proclaim the Good News of Easter near and far. I think the Contemporary English Version is again instructive. Instead of “you are witnesses,” it has “you must tell everything that has happened.” That’s our job – to go and tell.

As Paul reminds us, it is God’s job to bring what we do to fruition. In 1 Corinthians 3:6, Paul writes: “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.” So, we go forth to tell what we have seen and heard and experienced and leave the rest to God. As Christians, our witness is no ordinary witness. We witness to the story of our experience with the Creator of All, the Word of Life, the Spirit which sustains us.

As Karoline Lewis, professor of preaching at Luther Seminary, says, “Jesus’ address to the disciples is not, ‘you will be witnesses.’ Not, ‘please be witnesses.’ Not, ‘consider being witnesses if you have time.’ No, ‘you are witnesses of these things.’ We are witnesses. As it turns out, witnessing is not voluntary, but a state of being.”¹ As we go about our daily lives, we *are* witnesses. As we choose whether we will seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God, we *are* witnesses. As we do or do not take care of the least of these, we *are* witnesses. As we speak up – or remain silent – on behalf of those experiencing injustice, we *are* witnesses. As we make decisions about how to spend our time and our money, we are witnesses. As we choose a spouse or a career or a home, we are witnesses. All that we say or do (or do not say or do not do) is a witness to our experience of the divine love of God. We *are* witnesses.

¹ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5126>

As Jesus made clear to his disciples, his resurrection is in embodied form. It is not simply a spiritual matter, but a physical matter. And *we* are the embodied Christ now. We are witnesses.

St. Teresa of Ávila is generally credited with these powerful words: “Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.” (*For a video of these words set to music, visit <https://youtu.be/w7ymxW3rndk>*)

Beautiful words, reminding us *all* of our role as witnesses of Christ’s love. When Jesus said “You are witnesses,” that “You” was plural. He was saying, in my southern dialect, “*Y’all* are witnesses.” Like most matters of a life of faith, we do not go it alone. For better or worse, we witness together – how we witness is a reflection on each other and is done with the support of each other. We are to uphold each other, encourage each other, and speak the truth in love to each other. We are, indeed, the church *together*.

Finally, our witness is a reflection of Christ. If we are the embodied Christ, if we are Christ’s body – eyes, feet, hands – then we are what others see of Christ in the world.

So, what do we do? What does it mean to be a witness? Pastor Nancy Townley wrote: “Well, for one thing, you are not afraid to admit you’re a follower of Jesus. Even if people think that you are crazy. It doesn’t mean that you have to be obnoxious about it, just honored to follow the One who brings eternal life.”² We are “honored to follow the One who brings eternal life.” Followers of the Way was the name early Christians used. I think that is much more descriptive than the word “Christian.” To witness is to follow in the Way of the Christ. We follow Jesus to the

²<http://www.ministrymatters.com/worship/entry/2565/worship-connection-april-15-2018>

house of God to worship, to learn, to fellowship, but we must follow Jesus right back out of here into the world that He loves! To be Followers of the Way is to give our entire lives over to Christ, to live according to the example and instructions of Jesus, and to be identified as belonging solely to Him. To follow Christ – to witness – is to be the embodied Christ, it is to point to the love, grace, and mercy of God, it is to be strengthened and upheld by the Holy Spirit.

In a confusing and fearful world, we all are looking for Peace. We can find that peace in our Risen Lord, who comes among us all and says, “Peace be with you.” And we – we are honored to be witnesses to the peace of Christ. Thanks be to God! Amen.