

You Are Witnesses
Luke 24:13-48
Third Sunday of Easter
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church
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We've all seen them. It's a beautiful Saturday morning, the kids are content, the weather is not too cool, not too warm. We're lingering over a second cup of coffee and that long article in *The Atlantic* or next chapter in a novel we've been waiting all week to read. No one's in a hurry, and everyone is still in pajamas.

Then, just as you get settled in that favorite Saturday morning spot, you happen to glance out the window and see them. It's a group of 12 older church ladies, all dressed nicely with pocketbooks hanging just so over their bent elbows, and they are dispersing small stacks of Watchtower literature. You hope for a moment that they'll move in the opposite direction of your house, but the group begins to travel—two by two—and you know a pair is heading your way. They're the Witnesses.

This scene played out in our last neighborhood so frequently that I grew weary of playing nice. "Oh, how kind of you to stop by. We're actually in the middle of something right now. Sure, we'd be glad to read this. No, we're very happy in our current church...where I'm a pastor. Yes, thank you. Thanks for stopping by." Close the door with the kind, very persistent pair hoping I'll change my mind. So I finally made a sign for the front window that read: No Soliciting: Business, Fundraising, or Religious. In other words, No Witnesses.

sigh We know we don't want to be these people. We want our moderately warm religious fervor to be sensed by those near us without words. We wait for others to follow us to church one day without invitation. We might be a lot of things, but Witnesses we are NOT.

At the conclusion of today's text, when Jesus tells the disciples "you are witnesses of these things," we aren't certain we want to take him seriously...or at least not literally. Maybe we don't want to include ourselves in the plural "you" since he was addressing that small group all those years ago. "They" were witnesses, but we're just readers. "They" were called and equipped and sent out, but we process and ponder and carefully consider...quietly...in a reasonable fashion.

Well...let's look at this "we" and "they" for a while and decide how we are included.

As with John's resurrection account from two weeks ago, the disciples do not recognize Jesus as he appears before them. But in Luke, their lack of recognition is not entirely their fault. Something is keeping them from fully understanding what is happening as they walk. Their unseeing eyes allow them to tell the truth as they travel in a way that their joy and amazement over seeing Jesus would have precluded. So it is they confess easily and candidly: we are disappointed with God. "We had hoped..."

More than one disciple had hoped Jesus might do or be something that was never part of God's plan or part of Christ's nature. They had hoped that Jesus might do things he never promised and be someone he never purported to be. So they abandon Jerusalem and begin to travel. They are traumatized and fleeing the city as they pass through Emmaus, a town known in the early 1st century as the scene of great defeat.¹ They have retreated to a place where they can sit with their grief and their stories.

But their inability to see who is with them suddenly lifts, and they come to *know* God's presence in Christ as he breaks bread for them. *This is my body, broken for you...* All those times of lingering at the table, listening to his stories, asking more questions, passing the bread—it's all there in that moment. There is knowledge at the table. Enough that night that they leave in darkness to return to Jerusalem and tell the others.

There's plenty of mystery to go around in this text as Jesus appears, disappears, reappears. The disciples learn from him again—this time more ravenous to retain what he is saying. They pay attention as they eat together. They are witnesses to all these things—the despair, the disappointment, the revelation, the presence of God, the mystery of Christ, the way it all swirls together. As whole beings, just as they are in that moment, they are called to tell the story they know of their lives and of God.

Jesus calls them witnesses even when they've fled the city and gone in the wrong direction. Even when hope is dashed and disbelief is high, he knows they are storytellers of a divine sort, and he calls them back to their true selves. When they remember who he is, they remember who they are. These moments of revelation, Barbara Rossing writes, open "our eyes to recognize Jesus' presence in our midst, walking with us."²

¹ "Emmaus was burned by the Romans in punishment for participating in the revolts of 4 B.C.E. following the death of Herod...along with the memories of crucifixion (two thousand rebels were crucified by the Romans in 4 B.C.E.). Emmaus was a place of trauma and defeat." Barbara R. Rossing, *New Proclamation*, p. 31

² Rossing, p. 31

We know disappointment and despair. We know what it is to want God to intervene in the brokenness of life and relationships and make it all better. And then God doesn't act in those ways, and we are crushed. We're left holding broken pieces of life and faith. Maybe God is not God after all. Maybe I'm a fool to have hoped for any other way. How can life go on after what I've just experienced? Maybe our best days are behind us.

But somehow, in continuing to walk alongside one another—even in our disappointment—we discover Christ walking the road with us. Even when the road we are taking is in the wrong direction and our disbelief is greater than our hope. In that truthful place—where we are not pretending to have life and faith figured out but really naming what we know—Jesus calls us witnesses. Put it all together. Grab the fragments of faith, the stories of scripture, the doubting and disappointment, the glimpses of remembering at the table. Tell that story. Tell it well.

In his *Daybook of Wisdom and Faith*, Henri Nouwen writes, “We have to trust that our stories deserve to be told. We may discover that the better we tell our stories the better we will want to live them.”³

You have a story to tell. It's the story of your life. The story of when you have felt the most disconnected and the most alive. The story of when you have felt farthest from faith and most firmly in the palm of God's hand. The story of when you were heartbroken, just as the disciples were, that God did not do what you expected God would do. But we had hoped Jesus was the one, they said. We had hoped that God would act in the precise way that we expected and wanted—that God would listen to our prayers and hand us the very things we requested. But instead, we are surprised by a meal, a phrase, a lingering presence. We are surprised by the stories God continues to write in this place and in our lives. And those stories need to be told.

We have a story as individuals but as a congregation, too. It's long, it's interesting, it's full of names that makes us proud. But parts of our story are bruised. We might be tempted to redact a few recent years and tell a cleaner, less painful version. But the disciples had fled Jerusalem, were running off with their hurt to another place. And Jesus met them there. The work was unfinished. He reminded them of the beauty in their story. He never chastised them for their pain, their disbelief, their mistakes. He simply broke the bread and held it up to them like a mirror.

So we tell the whole story. The whole truth. We sit with it and let God work through it.

³ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey: A Daybook of Wisdom and Faith*, April 29

Some of you still aren't sold. This whole idea of being witnesses is tacky, not us, too pushy. Well, I'm not talking about wandering the streets with the Gospel According to St. Charles in your hands. But if you ARE excited about the emerging story of this place, whether you are a member or a faithful attender and good neighbor, tell people. Share the story of your life like you do the story of your favorite restaurant. What happens in this town? "Oh, you haven't been to Clancy's? You simply must have their lemon ice box pie. How have you not discovered High Hat's pimento cheese grits? I'll take you. When can I pick you up?" When we have experienced and savored the goodness around us, we welcome others to experience it for themselves. Not aggressively and door-to-door pamphlet dropping but organically, naturally, as conversation flows out of us, we tell the story of our lives.

When do you see God at work in your life? When do you experience God here? Focus on these things and take delight in them. Let them remind you to return to your truest self. Share the story.

Most recently, I felt it on Maundy Thursday—Darla, Flora, Deanne, Jean were giddy preparing a meal to remind us of the kind of meal Jesus may have shared with his disciples just before he was arrested. They shopped and sliced and prepared, they researched and told us about the bread, the fish, the wine, the cheese. We lingered around the table by candlelight and were restored by each other's company. Then Lynn, Mark, Tom, and the choir carried us into worship. We dipped our hands into the water, remembering the servant Christ who washed his disciples' feet; we sang and read and prayed; we broke bread once more and shared it.

I felt it months ago during Deacon Ordination—a time of blessing, affirming but also weeping. There is power in laying your hands gently on another person and speaking goodness over them. In that exchange, we are pulled to the bruise of our story—the most fragile parts of ourselves that we avoid. When we speak peace and grace over each other, much can be forgotten and forgiven in that act. Hope and belief can be restored.

I dare not begin to list all of the moments, but I trust you are cataloging your own just as I am—like when I see you planting and weeding the campus gardens, washing bricks and stabilizing steps, thinking of this church at 7 in the morning and 10 at night as you leave a voicemail in the office because something was on your mind. I see you taking pictures to save that moment forever, delighting in a growing crowd, watching your child discover this space, watching guests and new members discover this place for the first time.

And the stories are not limited to those who are members of this congregation. I am deeply encouraged and affirmed by our neighbors who show up again and again with smiles and listening ears, words of blessing and grace of presence to bear witness to something new and

good that is being born here; the next chapter of a story being written. They let me know that they see beauty here.

Like the disciples first traveling on the road, we also carry the disappointment of what we had hoped. In all of the excitement and the healing, many had hoped a few others would return to take part in our joy. Some had hoped that reconciliation and restoration would happen quickly and spread broadly. Instead, we hold a little empty space and choose to fill it with blessing of what was and blessing for what will be.

God surprises us with grace and healing. Jesus calls us to remember and live faithfully. And our tale is still unfolding. Even our disappointment becomes part of the story we tell. We keep telling of what we are discovering in ourselves and in this place. We bless those who moved on from this fellowship, and we thank God for those who are here today. We name our gratitude for what we have experienced and know is real—the healing, the forgiveness, the reconciliation, the peace, the hope, the energy and enthusiasm, the laughter, the tears. I will tell the story from up here, but it is not mine alone to tell. You must also tell from where you sit, where you live, where you work and shop and go to school. Like a good piece of lemon ice box pie, there is something breaking out here that is sweet and good and rich. It simply must be shared. We are witnesses to these things.