

April 15, 2018: Third Sunday of Easter (Year B)
Luke 24:36-49: Can I Get a Witness?

In the weeks following Easter Sunday, during the Season of Easter, it is typical to read about the various of appearances of the risen Lord to the disciples. Last Sunday's text was a good example. The story of "doubting Thomas," and Jesus' willingness to go to great lengths to convince him to believe. It's a great passage of Scripture. I'm almost sorry I had to miss last Sunday and Ben got to preach on it. Almost.

Obviously this Sunday is no exception. This time we heard from Luke. The similarities between this story and the one from last week might make us wonder if these are two versions of the same story. And it very well may be. But something else we notice, if we compare it to the previous story of Jesus' appearance in this Gospel that precedes this one, the story of Jesus' appearance to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, is that follows the same basic pattern.

Both stories begin with a failure, on the part of the disciples, to recognize Jesus. On the road to Emmaus, the two disciples were walking along, discussing the Jesus' crucifixion the day before, and Jesus appears alongside them. He asked them what their conversation was about, and they proceeded to explain it to him. The very person they were talking about was right in front of them, and they didn't realize it.

Likewise, in this story, all the disciples are gathered together, discussing what had happened on the road to Emmaus, Jesus mysteriously appears among them, and they think they are seeing a ghost. They are terrified.

Next Jesus proceeded to provide them with proof of his identity and resurrection. On the road to Emmaus Jesus took the disciples on a journey through the Scriptures. Beginning with Moses, and moving into the prophets, he pointed out the references to him and his passion and resurrection.

Again in this story, like the one from last week, Jesus presented his nail scarred hands and feet to them as proof, not only that he was the same Jesus they had seen crucified, but that he was flesh and bones, not an apparition. For further proof, he ate a piece of broiled fish in their presence.

(If you have ever wondered what we will be like in heaven, this story makes clear that we will have real, tangible bodies. They will not be exactly like this body. Jesus was able to pass through walls and locked doors, but he could also be seen and touched. I hope they have something other than fish to eat in heaven. Or at least a fried option. I'm not a huge fan of fish.)

Then Jesus opened their eyes to fully understand the proof they had been given. On the road to Emmaus, he opened their eyes through the breaking of bread, a reminder of their last meal together, and the giving of himself on the cross. In this story he opened their eyes to understand the true message of the Scriptures.

The pattern is almost identical, but then, in today's story, there is an added element. The disciples, who have now come to believe in Jesus' identity and in his resurrection, because they have seen the proof, because Jesus has opened their eyes and enabled them to interpret that proof correctly, now have a job to do. They have been called as witnesses, to testify to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. To tell the world of his call to repentance, the forgiveness that can only be found through his death, and the new life that is possible because he lives!

In order to accomplish this seemingly impossible task they would first need to receive the promised gift of the Holy Spirit. Luke alludes to it here, but he will describe the full event in great detail in the second chapter of the book of Acts. The rest of Acts will tell the story of what happened with the disciples took seriously the responsibility to serve as witnesses.

As disciples of Jesus we too have been given this responsibility. How well are we witnessing to the truth of the resurrection?

That word “witness” is an interesting one. When I was preparing my sermon this week it really caught my eye. The first thing many of us associate with the word witness is a court-room setting. And that makes sense, because witness and the related word, “testify” or “testimony,” are certainly legal terms. I have been called into a courtroom four times. Two of those times were to serve as a witness. The other two were to stand before a judge for crimes committed, for a traffic violation, and for a series of bad decisions I made as a thirteen-year-old kid. Don’t ask.

The first time I was called to serve as a witness was when a fellow high school student stole two subwoofers out of the back of my jeep when it was parked in our school parking lot. He threatened to beat me up if I testified against him. I ended up not having to testify, because the video camera told the story. The second time I was called to serve as a witness was when I drove a school bus and was involved in an accident. The accident was not my fault, and the driver of the other vehicle eventually pled guilty, so I didn’t have to testify in that situation either.

In both cases I was relieved, because I didn’t really want to testify. But in most cases we don’t get a choice whether or not we testify. We are required, by law, to do so. I guess there was that one other time when I was called to testify against a woman charged with attempted murder. She had looks that could kill, if you know what I mean, and they nearly did. But I didn’t have to, because she was my spouse. They make an exception in cases like that.

My point is, we think of serving as a witness as something that occurs in a courtroom setting, where we on the stand, and all eyes are on us. We think of serving as a witness as something we are required to do, as an obligation. This carries over into our understanding of what it looks to serve as a witness to the truth of who Jesus was and is, and the fact of his resurrection. We don’t like to do it. And if we do, it’s only because we feel like we have to. I don’t believe that is how the original disciples viewed it. I think they considered it an honor and a privilege to be able to tell the world the truth about Jesus. Not even the threat of death could stop them.

I want to repeat my earlier question. How good of a job are we doing witnessing to the resurrection?

First of all, I want you to understand that I’m not trying to make anyone feel guilty. Convicted maybe, but not guilty. I’m pretty sure there is a distinction.

Second of all, I’m not coming from a position of superiority, as if this is something I do really well, because I don’t. I’ve told you the story before of how I once told someone about Jesus because it was a homework assignment for a Seminary class and I didn’t want to get a bad grade. Talking to Christians about Jesus is something I do well. Talking to non-believers about Jesus is a different story. It’s something I struggle with. It’s something many of us struggle with.

I think part of the reason we struggle with it is because we misunderstand what it means to be a witness. Very rarely is it like a courtroom scene, where all eyes are on us, where we are the center of attention,

where we are surrounded by perfect strangers, and our ability to testify has everything to do with the words we say.

It can be that, but more often, being a witness occurs within the context of our relationships with friends and family, not strangers. Being a witness often occurs in quiet ways, where most of the people around have no idea it's happening. Being a witness often has very little, if anything, to do with words, and everything to do with actions.

Being a witness to the truth of Jesus and his resurrection can involve things like...

- being kind to that co-worker or teammate that no one else can seem to get along with
- not participating in a certain conversation, because it is bordering on gossip or is overly negative
- reading your Bible on your lunch break instead of scrolling through facebook on your phone
- not laughing at a certain joke because it was demeaning or hurtful to someone
- acting with integrity when to do otherwise would be more beneficial
- going against society and insisting on making God a priority on Sunday
- holding on to hope in the midst of a desperate situation
- forgiving others as God in Christ has forgiven you
- loving someone that others have decided is unlovable

All these actions witness to the truth of Jesus and his resurrection because we do them because of who he is, because of what he has done for us, and because he has risen.

When someone asks you why you do these things, why you make the choices you make, why you live the way you live...then the words come in to play. God will give you the words to say. They don't have to be complex words. They can be simple words. You can go all the way back to creation if you want too. Or you can start with the story of Jesus. Or you just begin with the most profound truth of our human existence and say, "Because he lives."

Our motive for serving as a witness to the identity of Jesus and his resurrection should come from nowhere but the realization of the difference God has made in our lives. As we reflect on that, on how good God has truly been to us. Wanting to share that with someone else is a natural progression. Something we do because we want to, not because we have to. Something we do because we can't imagine not doing it. Sometimes it helps to be reminded of all that God has done for us.

This past week I shared in my semi-weekly Facebook post on our Church Facebook Page about a recent reminder I received.

Last Sunday I slept in until almost 9:00. I can't remember the last time I slept that late on any day of the week, let alone on a Sunday. But it gets worse; I didn't go to church either! Before I go any further I should tell you that I was on vacation. But even when I'm on vacation I will try to go to church somewhere, but not this time. This time, I didn't go to church anywhere!

A good night's rest was not the only benefit we received from skipping church that day. We enjoyed a leisurely breakfast of sausage, pancakes, biscuits and gravy. The kids spent the morning playing video games and watching television. It was so far removed from what we experience on a typical Sunday it was surreal, almost like a dream. But it wasn't. I remember saying to my wife, around 11:00 that morning, as we were finishing up breakfast, still in our pajamas, "This is what nearly every Sunday morning is like for people who don't go to church." She agreed. It was really nice, at least for the

moment, but only because it was a rare exception. As I imagined our lives without God in it, the dream quickly turned into a nightmare.

The difference God has made in my life and in the life of my family cannot be overstated, and I'm sure I'm only aware of the tip of the iceberg.

I am far from a perfect husband and father, but the quality of the relationships I have with my wife and children is all due to God's grace at work in my life.

What difference has God made in your life? How is your life different because of Jesus, because of his life, death and resurrection? How is your life different because he lives?

Can I get a witness?