

“Witnesses of These Things”

Valley Presbyterian Church – April 25, 2021

Fourth Sunday of Easter

Psalm 47

Rev. John Wahl

Luke 24:36-49

Over the past few weeks, much of our nation, and the world, has been compelled by the testimony of witnesses. In the Chauvin murder trial, over forty people – from medical and law enforcement experts to eye-witnesses who, by chance, happened upon the scene – testified to what they saw and heard. It was apparent how painful and emotionally taxing it was for them to take the stand.

Through the horrific videos of George Floyd’s death, and other recent, deadly encounters with law enforcement, we are witnesses as well. We cannot close our eyes to these tragedies or to the painful reality of how they are disproportionately impacting African-Americans. Likewise, we have seen a rise in hate crimes against Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders; as Congress acknowledged this week. As much as we may wish it were not true, our society is infected with systemic and structural racism; sadly, we are witnesses to its painful and deadly consequences.

In Luke’s Easter Story, women go early to the tomb and find that it is empty; there they are encountered by two men – dressed in dazzling white – who ask: “why do you look for the living among the dead?” Armed with the good news that Jesus has risen, they give testimony to what they have seen and heard to the other disciples; who – understandably, not having witnessed it with their own eyes – are skeptical about the resurrection of the Lord.

We are now three weeks beyond Easter Sunday and – when viewed within the confines of this final chapter of Luke’s gospel – have come to the last of three resurrection appearances. Prior to this, Jesus had appeared to disciples on the road to and at the meal in Emmaus; and make an off-stage appearance to Simon Peter. The setting is again Jerusalem – the place where Jesus had died and his tomb had been found empty. The disciples – together again – share stories about all these amazing, perplexing things.

In our verses, the risen Jesus suddenly appears in the midst of the disciples, bidding them peace and demonstrating that he is not some sort of ghost, but had physically resurrected. He tells them to touch his hands and feet and even eats with them to prove the point. Jesus then calls attention to what he had previously said regarding the fulfillment of God's plan: telling them that they are witnesses to all they had seen. The passage closes with a promise of power descending from on high and a command to remain in the city until the promise is fulfilled.¹

Jesus does not say to the disciples, *you will be witnesses*; not, *please be witnesses*; and not *consider being witnesses if you have the time*. Jesus says, "you are witnesses of these things." Like it or not, we are witnesses.

Exactly to what we are called to be witnesses is not entirely clear. Perhaps Jesus means by "these things" that, as Easter people, we ought to be outraged any time a life is unjustly taken. Perhaps "these things" refer to repentance and forgiveness of sins; that until we, as individuals and as a people, can acknowledge and turn from the fullness of our sinfulness – including our unjust systems – reconciliation cannot be complete.

Hearing this reminder that we are witnesses does not necessarily strike us as good news. Because it can be so painful and difficult, we often close our eyes to the suffering of others, or defer the burden of testimony to others, or determine that our voice wouldn't make a difference anyway, so why bother?

When Jesus says, "we are witnesses;" it does not depend on our acceptance or approval, our readiness or responsiveness. It is just who we are. Left to our own devices, we would make up excuses to relinquish such responsibility. But witnessing is not optional, It is not something you can decide to do one day and then take the next day off. For those of us who are part of the church – the body of Christ – it is a way of life; it is who we are.²

When Jesus appears to his disciples – those who saw him die on the cross – they think that he is a spirit, a ghost. So, he shows them his hands and his feet, still bearing the scars from his crucifixion, and invites them to touch him. And then, he tells them he's hungry and eats some fish with them, to prove that, yes, his body is real. A strange story, we may think, but it begins to make sense when we realize what question Luke is seeking to address.

¹ Robert Carlson from *WorkingPreacher.com*

² Karoline Lewis, "We Are Witnesses"

The issue for the disciples – then as now – is this: when we want to find God, where do we go? Where do we find that place, that time, that situation in which we can center ourselves in the living presence of God? If Jesus is not dead, but alive, where do we turn in order to witnesses to “these things?”

Luke begins his answer to the questions with this odd story where Jesus shows his wounds to his followers and invites them to touch him, and then eats a meal with them; all to show them that the risen Jesus is not a ghost or a spirit but a living, breathing, physical being.

It is important – crucial, really – for Luke to make this point as strongly as possible because there were people in those days who believed that God did not really become a human being in the person of Jesus. They believed that the flesh was evil; thus, God would and could not become flesh and blood because the material world was inferior to the spiritual.³

It was important for Luke to reaffirm the humanity of Jesus because he was countering a popular argument that went like this: since the world and human flesh are evil and inferior, the goal of life is to rise above and escape from the world to the spiritual realm. It follows, then, that we can ignore the physical aspects of life in the world and instead focus attention on more “spiritual” matters. Therefore, the physical pain and suffering of human beings – from hunger, disease, or injustice – can be ignored by Christians. Those are not legitimate concerns for the church, the logic went. Christians must be focused on “spiritual concerns,” on the condition of the soul.

Maybe this sounds familiar. That was the theology taught by missionaries from colonizing powers; and to slaves in the south when they were allowed to go to church. *Don't worry about things here on earth; stick to spiritual issues. In the end, it will point to the heavenly home, the place of the spirit.* This may be something like what you were told in church; that what takes place here on earth pales in importance when compared to what is promised us in heaven.

Luke wants to make it clear that what is physical, earthly – flesh and blood – is important and real; valuable enough for God to be incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and the risen Christ. To give witness to the resurrection is not to claim that Jesus is taken out of the world. Luke places the risen Christ right back in

³ Stephen Montgomery, “It’s Touching Time”

the world, encouraging his disciples to see his hands and feet – his flesh and blood – and to touch him.

Luke wants his readers – then and now – to understand that the place to discover the sacred is not beyond the earth, in the material world. This is where God is active and alive. This is where God lives with, guides, and empowers people: in the flesh.

“Touch me and see,” Jesus says; encouraging them to get in touch with the physical scars, the bodily pain of humanity. When we touch the hurts of real people – people suffering from loneliness and longing, hunger and homelessness, illness and injustice – we are touching Jesus; we are witnesses to his life, his death, and his risen body.

So, this passage also reminds us that life’s true sacredness is not found in a program or in a building, but in the daily, everyday ministry of Christ’s church at work in the world. It takes place when we enter into the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual realities of people in our church, our community, and our world. It occurs as we worship and gather around the Word of God to re-discover how the living God encounters and empowers us for ministry in this world.

We are witnesses to these things: often difficult things, sometimes painful things; to real life, flesh and blood things. It’s not an option; our eyes do not lie: there is hurt and injustice in our world; we cannot pretend it does not exist. The answer is not to escape it, but to engage in it.

“Here,” Jesus says, “touch my hands and feet.” *Touch the hurts of others and you are touching me. Amen.*