



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER, APRIL 15, 2018

ACTS 3:12-19; PSALM 4; 1 JOHN 3:1-7; LUKE 24:36b-48

WE ARE WITNESSES

Luke 24:36b-48 *[Jesus himself stood among the disciples and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look 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." And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.*

Then 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." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.]

I first attended an Easter vigil when I was 26 years old. It was at the enormous, gothic Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. I didn't know what to expect and I'll never forget it -- arriving in utter darkness, stumbling into the choir stalls and finding seats, listening by candlelight to the ancient stories of creation and liberation, and witnessing the mystery of baptism while also whispering our own intentions for a holy life.

And then, after I had become accustomed to the darkness and sense of invisibility and smallness in the vastness of that cathedral, I heard the words, "Alleluia, Christ is risen." The organ boomed, bells rang, lights came on and I was completely disoriented. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust and then I could see the beautiful flowers -- lilies, tulips, forsythia, hyacinth -- bursting from the stone niches that were empty during Lent. I was

stunned and had no idea what to make of it. But it resonated deep within, and I didn't feel invisible or alone any more.

In the 28 years since then, I have attended a lot of Easter vigils. Some were rich, spiritual experiences and others, frankly, were excruciating trials of my own impatience and frustration as I tried to wrangle three small children into believing that a 2 ½ hour late-night church service was a good idea. But each time I was aware of that disorientation when the service moved from darkness to light. Someone told me this week that when they experienced the vigil for the first time, they found themselves resisting the Alleluias. They wanted to say, "Wait a minute! Not so fast. I'm not ready!"

That sounds like how the disciples felt in the gospel reading today. It's the very end of Luke's account of Jesus' life. The disciples are gathered together, traumatized and grieving, three days after the violent death of their beloved teacher and leader. Their hopes are crushed, and their own lives feel threatened. And then there's the perplexing news that the women who went to anoint Jesus' body found the tomb empty. Maybe someone had stolen it, but the women claimed that an angelic figure said Jesus was alive. And two disciples

who had left for Emmaus returned unexpectedly with the wild story that they'd met Jesus on the road.

Into this scene of confusion and sadness, Jesus appears. The disciples are startled and terrified, but he comforts them, offering peace. They have no idea what to make of him; he's not a ghost or an animated corpse. All they know is that he is tangible to them, and in a way, they have never experienced before. And before they can ask any questions, Jesus gets to the point -- "You are witnesses," he says. "You are witnesses to all that happened. Now spread the news." They are disoriented, but they are witnesses.

Witness has more than one meaning. It can be a person who observes an event and can testify to what happened. The disciples are that kind of witness. They can attest -- and they do, for the rest of their lives -- that in Jesus, they encounter a reality more powerful than death. That reality is embodied, just as we are embodied. And it seeks relationship, calms fears, and offers peace. The disciples couldn't say much about the how or why of Jesus' presence, but because they experience for themselves, even in the midst of their grief and confusion, they can affirm it is real.

And they are also witnesses to Jesus' parting instructions: "Proclaim repentance and forgiveness to all people, beginning from where you are now." Now, "repent" is a loaded word in the Christian tradition. The Greek word it is supposed to translate is "*metanoia*," which does not mean to feel sorry for yourself for doing bad things. *Metanoia* breaks down into *meta* which means "beyond" and *noia*, which means "mind." Repentance means to go beyond, to transform our own mind, which is always limited and self-oriented, to the larger mind of God, which is expansive and perceives the connectedness of all life.

Similarly, the "forgiveness" that Jesus commands doesn't only mean seeking pardon for offenses. It is much bigger than that, and points toward reconciliation -- the desire for and return to mutual, loving relationship with God and others. In the gospel today, the disciples are reeling, but Jesus calls them out of their fear and grief to lay claim to what they have experienced -- the love of God is more powerful than death. That love draws them to a new way of living, one that seeks transformation and reconciliation for themselves and others.

And that's how they become another kind of witness. After a person has seen something with their own eyes and knows it to be true, they can bear witness to it. Become someone who embodies that truth and communicates it to others. Not with words, but with actions. Our first reading today is about just that. It is from the Acts of the Apostles, essentially a continuation of the gospel of Luke, and the story of the early church.

At the temple one afternoon, Peter and John encounter a man lame from birth. They look intently at him, and the man looks hard at them, too. Peter says to him, "I have no money, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ, stand up and walk." Peter extends his hand, and the man gets up and begins to walk. The reading today is Peter's response to the onlookers who credit him with the miracle. He's saying, "Don't look at me as the source. I am merely a witness to the reality of Jesus. I know that new life can emerge from hopelessness."

The disciples are witnesses to resurrection. They proclaim that death does not have the last word and that in places of grief and suffering, God is present in a real, tangible way. This loving presence opens their minds to view the world differently. To see that

underneath their narrative of loss and helplessness is a story of new life, not only for themselves but for all people. And that they are meant to bear witness to resurrection by giving thanks to God and blessing and healing others.

We are witnesses to resurrection, too. Death happens not only to our physical bodies, but every time we confront our illusions of how life should be. We rise from it every time we

surrender those illusions and let go to the new life that God can bring forth from tragedy and pain. We may be afraid and we may not be ready, but we are witnesses. Like Peter, we can say, “What I have, I give you.” And we can bear witness to the transforming love of God, in our own lives, and for others.

Amen.



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