



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER, YEAR B, APRIL 18, 2021
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.]

You may have noticed that during the Easter season our Sunday readings are different.

Instead of beginning with a lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures, we read from the Acts of the Apostles. In the Bible, Acts comes immediately after the gospels and tells some of the story of the early church.

It’s a theological history of sorts -- how the early Christians’ experience of the risen Christ forms their identity, their way of life, and their purpose in the world.

Because Luke’s gospel and Acts of the Apostles have the same author, Acts is essentially a sequel to the gospel of Luke. So, if you put them together as one

continuous story, you can watch how Jesus' disciples evolve from confused, fearful followers to clear-eyed and bold proclaimers of God's liberating and life-giving power. Today's readings give us a glimpse of that.

Our gospel story takes place the first night after Mary Magdalene and the women find the tomb empty. The disciples are huddled together in Jerusalem, stunned by the crucifixion and frightened that they are likely targets of Roman and temple hostility. They are also reeling with their friends' recent news of encountering Jesus on the road to Emmaus.

While they try to make sense of this, Jesus appears among them, offering his peace by tangibly showing his wounds. That peace settles on his disciples as he explains the scriptures. He doesn't minimize his suffering or the trauma the disciples have experienced, but he puts it in the context of God's creative and transformative presence in the world. It is the message of redemption and renewal that prophets proclaimed for centuries and which becomes fully known in Jesus. "You are

witnesses of these things," Jesus says to the terrified disciples. It is time for all people to return to God and begin again. "You are witnesses."

This is the first day of the resurrection. Sometime later, we don't know how long but long enough for the Holy Spirit to do her work within the community, we have the story from Acts. In the temple, Peter and John encounter a man lame from birth who begs for help. Peter replies, "we have no money, but I give you what I have: in the name of Jesus, stand up and walk." And the man does.

It is the first miracle worked by an apostle and the temple leaders stare in amazement at Peter and John. So, Peter sets them straight. "Don't look at me as if I made this happen. The Holy One known in Jesus, the one whose death you aided and abetted but who God raised, that One has made this man strong. To this we are witnesses."

Do you see what's happened? Jesus gives his disciples a new identity on Easter evening when he tells them, "You are witnesses." It doesn't seem to sink in at

that moment, but over time it takes hold so that when Peter and John enter the temple, they boldly heal in Jesus' name, calling out the corrupt, and proclaiming the good news of God just as Jesus did for them. They assert, "We are witnesses."

And through their lives, they remain steadfast in this testimony, insistent that God's peace is not the empire's peace. God's reign does not look like order from control, but justice and dignity and safety for all people, especially the most vulnerable. But because the disciples speak this truth to those whose power comes from the oppression of others, some of them face their own violent death.

Which is how the Greek word Luke uses for "witness" – *martyres* – serves as the root for the word "martyr." The disciples offered their very lives to serve as witnesses to the cruelty and destruction that sustains corrupt power and they were witnesses to God's redeeming love and call to repent in the midst of it all.

What does it mean to be a witness? In a legal context, of course, it means to give testimony about something you've

experienced first-hand. In a Christian context, it's come to mean what we see Peter and John do today. To spread the gospel, showing who Jesus revealed God to be and that resurrection is always happening. It's not about the words – it's about showing this in one's own life.

I've been wondering – who are the holy witnesses in the world today? The ones who, like the disciples, testify to the brokenness of the world while also holding hope that God can work through it all for new life?

Well, the witnesses who have been on my mind for the last three weeks are the women, men, and children who've shown up at the Hennepin County Courthouse to testify to what they have seen first-hand. The teenage girl who watched George Floyd murdered, whom she had no power to help except to record it on video. Other young people who stayed close, shouting for relief. The firefighter who attempted to help but was rebuffed by police.

These and other witnesses at the trial are now victims of death threats themselves - - for telling the truth about the cruelty and

destruction that sustains corrupt power. Whatever their religion or faith, their willingness to bear sacrificial witness to deadly racism demands change.

The news this week of Daunte Wright's shooting and gun violence in Indianapolis adds to the growing list of people who grieve innocent death and who are traumatized themselves by what they have experienced first-hand. It is heart-breaking and infuriating. This is not God's peace. God's reign does not look like order from control or threat of violence, but justice and dignity and safety for all people, especially the most vulnerable.

It feels as if our entire country is on edge, exhausted, and fearful. Each of us feels the stress, but for Black, indigenous, and people of color, it is personal and much, much worse.

Our world needs more witnesses. I so want to be one, and even though we celebrated Easter two weeks ago and creation all around us rejoices in new life, I get stuck and discouraged sometimes. Maybe you do, too.

Let us remember that when the disciples are huddling together on Easter evening, confused and afraid, Jesus is already in their midst, breathing his peace on them and calling them to turn toward God and begin again – and again and again. He doesn't deny his suffering or the disciples' pain, but he reminds them that God's creative and liberating power cannot be vanquished. "You are witnesses," he says to them.

May we also give our lives over to the work of the Holy Spirit, allowing the risen Christ to form our identity, our way of life, and our purpose in the world. May we name what is harmful and in need of redemption in ourselves and in our culture, all the while trusting in God's transforming grace and mercy.

We are witnesses.

Amen.