

You Are Witnesses
Acts 3:12-19
Luke 24:33-49

“You are witnesses of these things....”

“Before the story can continue,” says New Testament scholar Joel Green of the disciples in the last chapter of Luke’s Gospel, “a few grave impediments have to be surmounted.” He might as well say the same of us. Before the story can continue, before the news of God’s victory over death can be proclaimed, before the gospel can be believed in the places where people are dying for want of a word, a gesture, a glimpse of God’s redeeming grace, before the church can say the word she has been given to say on behalf of the world’s future, a few grave impediments have to be surmounted. This morning we will do business with one of them!

The gravest impediment of all, Green says, is the disciples’ failure to apprehend fully the meaning of their own acclamation: “The Lord has risen indeed!” Likewise, most of us said more than we knew on Easter morning. Accompanied by trumpet, timpani, a full congregation, a glorious choir and magnificent flowers, *of course* we shouted, “He is risen indeed.” But what did we mean? Perhaps it is not so much the true believers who return to worship on the Sundays following Christmas and Easter, but those whose faith seeks understanding. We are like the various Marys of Scripture who cannot help but ask, of an occupied womb or an empty tomb, “How can this be?” We ask because we long to apprehend, if not fully then through a glass darkly, the meaning of “He is risen indeed!”; we have come to seek help with understanding what eternal life has to do with the lives we must lead in the face of death; we show up in the hope, one day, we may comprehend enough of the mystery of faith that we will finally be the witnesses Jesus says we already are.

When Jesus appears to the eleven and their companions at the end of Luke’s Gospel, they are trying to figure out for themselves the meaning of what had just happened. Two among them

had returned to Jerusalem from dinner in Emmaus and were relating a most incredible story about a stranger who came alongside them as they were walking, asking them about the events of the weekend. In response, you could say the disciples were witnesses: witnesses to the death of their friend. They, like we, were trying to make sense of a tragedy, of the untimely and violent execution of someone whose life had given them hope. What in their own experience could they draw on to help them come to terms with the fact that death foreclosed the future that they thought was possible with him? Maybe their grief would subside over time; maybe another prophet would come along who had the gumption for revolution; or maybe they were simply destined to catch fish until death came calling for them.

At this point in the story about their encounter with the risen Christ, I imagine the disciples and their companions comprehended completely what the two were telling them. The facts fit their way of knowing. Even the next part of the story is plausible. The two say that when they had finished telling what had happened over the last three days, the stranger began to offer another interpretation of the same events. Beginning with Moses and the prophets, the stranger did business with the facts the disciples had just rehearsed, tracing the story of God's redeeming purposes over the story of Jesus' suffering and dying and rising. They understood nothing. The grave impediment remained, because the stranger's understanding of the facts did not fit the finality that death had imposed on their way of knowing what they knew. I think that this is so for us too. Words about being raised from the dead and eternal life do not fit the way we know what we know.

Nevertheless, being hospitable to the stranger as torah commanded them to be, they invited him in, just as we invite his word into our lives for an hour every Sunday morning. Knowing his words alone were not sufficient to remove the impediment that kept them from

faith, the stranger took bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to them. It was at the table that the impediment fell away. This was not magic, but what the church later came to call God's means of grace. As they recognized Jesus' living presence in his act of breaking and blessing and giving them bread, their minds were opened to the meaning of his suffering, his dying and his rising on the third day, to the meaning of "He is risen indeed," to the meaning of the words and the witness embedded in Scripture. But as the witness of the two turned from death to life, the rest of the disciples stopped tracking the story.

According to Luke, a discussion ensues in the upper room. There are things that do not add up, details that do not make sense. If the stranger were Jesus, why did the two not know him immediately? What do you mean that you recognized him when he broke the bread, but not before? Then he vanished? Really? "While they were talking about this," Luke says, Jesus himself stood among them. The first word he speaks is "Peace"—the word bestows the well-being only God can give--and, in response, they are terrified. Not only do they not recognize Jesus or mistake him for a stranger: they think he is a ghost.

In response to their fear, a response that was absent on the road to Emmaus when the two thought they were talking to a stranger, Jesus offers two proofs of his materiality—that is, he begins with evidence that they can fit into their present way of knowing what they know about being alive. In order to convince them that they were not dealing with a resuscitated cadaver or an immortal, disembodied soul, but his living presence, he invites them to look, to see, to become witnesses: the hands are his own hands, the feet are his own feet. "It is I myself," he says. "Touch me and see." Luke tells us that they disbelieved for joy. That is to say, they had moved from not believing anything to believing that his living presence was too good to be true. Hence, they were still wondering as we still wonder: Could it really be so, that life does not end

with death? Can we dare to believe that those we have lost to death now live in the room God has made for them in his love? Has death's power over our lives finally been defeated? We are back to Mary's question, now awash in astonishment: "How can this be?"

Then Jesus asks for something to eat. As he did in Emmaus, he joins them at the table in Jerusalem and eats a piece of broiled fish. Still, the grave impediment remains, the facts require interpretation. Not even incontrovertible evidence is capable of producing faith, Joel Green observes. Even if we had been there to see his feet and hands and to watch him swallow, we would not know what we were seeing, *because faith is a gift that is given as the Spirit opens our minds to understand the scriptures and our lives through the lens of God's self-giving love*. Only as Jesus, who *is* God's self-giving love, "opens their minds to understand the scriptures," do the disciples become witnesses of these things, do they understand the meaning of what they have seen. The grave impediment is removed and they soon will be empowered to proclaim the gospel to all nations.

Until our minds are opened to understand the scriptures, Green says, we lack the categories for rendering the seeming tragedy of his crucifixion and the unimaginable joy of his risen presence as meaningful. Until the love that is stronger than death takes hold of our minds and hearts and lives; until the life, death and resurrection of a first century Jew becomes the lens through which we glimpse what it is to be human; until his living presence opens our eyes to see what it looks like to live in response to the love that never ends, then the faith that lends meaning to life's suffering and death as well as life's joy and gladness will escape us and the story will not continue.

"The problem of making sense of the gospel," says Lesslie Newbigin, "is that it calls for a change of mind which is as radical as the action of God becoming [hu]man and dying on a

cross. With every new fact—or alleged fact, it is always possible—indeed, it is natural—to take note of it without allowing it to change our minds in any radical way....[W]hat you call a fact [Einstein once said] depends on the theory you bring to it....[T]he simple truth,” Newbiggin says, “is that the resurrection cannot be accommodated in any way of understanding the world except one of which it is the starting point....If it is true, it has to be the starting point of a wholly new way of understanding the cosmos and the human situation in the cosmos.”

What changed their minds? The scriptures interpreted, the sacraments celebrated. They are the means of grace that parents of baptized children and newly baptized adults promise to make diligent use of. Sunday after Sunday, God’s Spirit opens our minds to understand the scriptures through the lens of God’s self-giving love in Jesus Christ; at table, we recognize his living presence among us in the breaking of bread, we see. We see what love is doing to make all things new, even us! We are witnesses, and we are witnesses not for our own sakes: we are witnesses to love’s triumph for the sake of the world in the thrall of death. Therefore it follows that “The church’s task, [the task of those who are witnesses of these things], is to *interpret*, in every mode of address, each reality in the world as an occasion of that hope which is there if Jesus lives, to treat, in words and speaking deeds,” Robert Jenson says, “each hope and fear as a hope for love’s triumph.”

My friends, the story continues with our witness, the witness of Christ’s church, of this church to the love that is stronger than death. He is risen means he will surprise us on the road to Emmaus when we have lost all hope and at table in the breaking of bread and in the upper room of our minds disbelieving for joy because we will never apprehend fully the mystery of God’s love. In a world that daily bears witness to death, see the hope that is entertainable only if Jesus lives, for you are witnesses. Thanks be to God!