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We Are Witnesses

Not long ago I received a summons for jury duty in June. I’ve actually served on a jury twice before. Both times we, the jury, listened to witnesses, to persons who had knowledge of events related to the crime in question. Some witnesses testified to particular actions or words or situations that helped us understand what had happened. Witnesses are important.

A witness is a person who has knowledge from personal experience or observation. This week if we watched news at all, we heard the witness of political leaders, law enforcement officials, and in some cases parents or children affected by the mass shooting in Uvalde, Texas. Some of them are witnesses to what actually happened. Some are witnesses to what did not happen. And some are witnesses to what they believe about guns, mental health, and the safety or lack of safety of our children and teachers. In a sense, we are all witnesses, for we have seen the shock and grief that shattered a community, and we have grieved with them, mourning the loss of nineteen beautiful children and two caring teachers.

Today is Ascension Sunday, a day that we celebrate Jesus’ ascending into glory. We think about Jesus as King of kings and Lord of Lords, the One whose name is above all names. We rejoice in Christ’s victory over every power and authority. We celebrate the risen Christ who has power even over death itself. And yet we live with the reality that evil does happen, that Jesus has not yet returned, that there is much that is wrong in the world. Where is God while we wait for redemption? Where is God while we grieve?

In our text today, the disciples are left behind. Jesus is taken into heaven and the disciples are bereft. Things are not the same. Jesus is risen, but now he is no longer with them. They have asked if now is the time that Jesus will restore Israel. But instead, Jesus gives them these parting words, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

But in that moment, as Jesus disappears from their sight, the disciples are bereft. They stare at the sky. Jesus is gone. Are they thinking about Jesus in glory or are they grieving their own loss? Both are possible, for they, and we, experience both the hope of resurrection and the reality of loss. Even Jesus wept, at Lazarus’ tomb, even as he knew that Lazarus would come forth.

So the disciples stare at the sky. And that is when two men in white robes appear, asking the disciples, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

That question, “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?”, reminds the disciples, and us, that Jesus has given us a task, a mission. We do not just wait for Jesus’ return. We do not just passively sit back, waiting for God to put things right. Yes, we worship a risen Lord; we sing praises; we pray. But our worship is meaningless unless we also do justice and love mercy. Jesus gave us work to do. We have responsibility. Jesus said, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Somehow as I grew up, it seemed that “being witnesses” was something we were supposed to do. It meant evangelism, sharing the verses of the Romans Road to “lead someone to salvation.” It was about belief in Jesus and sharing that belief with others. But I believe that is too simplistic, too narrow, not quite what Jesus meant.

To begin with, in our text today “you will be my witnesses” is not imperative, like a command. It is declarative, in the future sense. It has as much to do with “being” as with “doing.” When we live as followers of Jesus, allowing God’s Spirit to transform our lives, we witness to Jesus. Paul put it this way in 2 Corinthians 5:17: “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”

That doesn’t mean that “doing” and “speaking” is not part of the picture. Jesus’ words are an invitation to join him in declaring God’s kingdom and living under God’s rule. This is something we work at together. As I think about it, these are some of the ways that I believe we are witnesses to Jesus.

First, we live as children of God. In Kids Club we are studying the Beatitudes. Jesus said, Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.” So we live as peacemakers, determined that the cycle of violence stops with us. We renounce weapons and coercion, choosing instead to love our enemies and practice forgiveness, as difficult as that may sometimes be. Active peacemaking requires listening and respect, sometimes standing between opposing parties, learning how to talk through issues instead of coming to blows. Sometimes it requires us to repent and change our ways, to make things right.

Witnessing to Jesus also means renouncing white nationalism. The disciples thought Jesus would restore the kingdom of Israel. They had not yet realized that Jesus came to restore all things unto himself. That doesn’t mean an elite few…that means everything and everyone. God’s love does not know borders or races or classes or genders. God’s love breaks down the walls that divide people. God’s love is for everyone. To witness to Jesus we cannot think ourselves better than others or more perfect or more elite or more chosen. God’s kingdom is bigger than “us”.

In our children’s time today we heard how much God loves us and calls us to love one another. We choose to love. Jesus said that people will know we are his followers by our love for one another. We practice love in our church by building relationships, not just with people in our early service, but with people who speak Spanish and attend our late service. We care for one another, practicing mutual aid. We also work at listening to each other with respect, even when we don’t agree. That doesn’t mean we always get things right, but with God’s help we work to put things right when we make mistakes. We share our joys and sorrows with each other. We pray for and with each other.

It also means we welcome strangers, no matter who they are. We recognize that all people are created in God’s image and life is sacred. Jesus often found persons who had been excluded from community; he restored them—tax collectors, lepers, the unclean. We, too, are called to look for those outside, those society ignores or refuses to see. God calls us to love the homeless, the trafficked, the undocumented, the mentally ill, the alienated, the other who is different from us, no matter who or what the “other” represents…to find authentic ways of sharing God’s love with these is to become the hands and feet and heart of Christ.

I don’t believe in easy answers. Following Jesus isn’t a creed that I recite or a formula of belief that gets me to heaven. I think it is glib and perhaps even disrespectful to quickly say, “Christ is the answer.” But in a deeper way, perhaps a more thoughtful way, when we as a church embody the eyes of Christ, to see each other and our neighbors as brothers and sisters in God’s family; when we embody the ears of Christ, to hear the cries of those in need, those in pain; when we embody the hands and feet of Christ to serve even the least, to comfort those in pain and work toward justice for the oppressed; when we embody Christ’s heart to carry the pain and joy of the world, loving God and all of our neighbors…then we truly are witnesses to Jesus and participants in God’s care and intention for the world.

Brain Peterson, a professor of New Testament at Lutheran Theological Seminary writes this, “Not just although, but *because* he (Jesus) ascended, we continue to encounter Jesus through the preaching of the Word and the Sacraments, through the fellowship of the church, and through ministry with the poor and the oppressed.”

May we here know Christ’s presence as together we follow Christ in life, serving with his hands and feet, and loving with his heart, weeping with those who weep and celebrating joyfully with those who laugh. We do all this in Jesus’ name. Amen