

Luke 24:36b-48

Jesus himself stood among them 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.

The Gospel of the Lord

Grace and Peace to you from our Risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ – Amen.

This morning's scriptures are filled with amazing details of Christ's resurrection - and from the vantage point of Luke's gospel - it almost seems like Jesus was trying to trouble shoot any of the lingering doubts or fears his followers might have been carrying after witnessing the horrors of his crucifixion.

After all, the last time Jesus' disciples had seen him, a stone had been rolled in front of their wildest hopes of ever experiencing life and ministry with him ever again.

Death was the ending as far as they were concerned.

And Christ's death had come to end not only his time with them – but also the life of ministry they had begun together. Leaving his followers with more than enough unanswered questions and doubts to shake their faith to its core.

Which is why it was so important for Jesus to appear before them in that upper room, bringing God's peace to their troubled hearts, sharing a simple meal with his followers, all while inviting them to touch the scars of his hand and feet to truly understand that he wasn't just a spirit or some stress induced figment of their imagination.

He was real, present, and living proof of the resurrection – right there in front of them.

Proof that Christ needed his disciples to truly take in, as he was about to reveal he wasn't finished his ministry with and among them yet!

In the middle of his followers' confusion, doubt, and joy – Jesus makes it abundantly clear that he has still chosen this unlikely group of disciples to witness to the truth of his resurrection within the world.

Which has to be one of the most unexpected and yet encouraging moments of this gospel for me today – because even though his disciples have lost their way on the road of faith – or in the very least have come to experience it as some holy mixture of wonder, fear, and disbelief - Christ still chooses to call them, above anyone else, to be witnesses of his resurrection.

Which I have to say is a great relief for so many of us to hear now, because if Christ chooses and calls his followers in the height of their disbelief – he can and will certainly call us to be witnesses and people of the resurrection in the fullness of our own doubts, fears, and wonderings.

And this is where I want to focus our attention this morning, this call to be witnesses to this astonishing good news of Christ. That Jesus has called his followers throughout every age – to share our lives – in the midst of our belief and disbelief – to truly bear witnesses to what God has done and is still doing with and among us.

Okay, so having said this, I know the practice of "witnessing" can sound like the least likely activity for a non-charismatic protestant to pick up. It's not something we spend a lot of time or money working on within our congregation in the more traditional sense of the word. Truth be told we Lutherans would much rather witness through the lens of service, welcome, or acts great love than share a verbal testimony of our faith with our neighbor.

In fact, many of us would almost do anything to get out of having to complete such a task. Maybe its because we don't like the idea of directly sharing our faith because we don't want to be lumped in as one of "those Christians" whose "witness" tend to make people fear hell fire and damnation. Maybe it's because we sang "they will know we are Christian by our love" one to many times in Sunday school, or maybe we simply fear

what might happen to our relationships with our neighbors and friends if we were to openly tell them about our faith.

Whatever it is that tends to keep us from witnessing or sharing our faith – also leads us to wrongly believe that there is no way we would ever be ready or able to adequately speak to the truth of Christ’s resurrection, grace, and love with any authority.

Yet that is the very thing Jesus speaks out against in our gospel lesson today when he shares that his followers “are witnesses of the resurrection”.

Notice, Jesus doesn’t say, “you *will* be witnesses when you have learned enough” or “please consider being witnesses when you can find some time to spare.” He says that we are already witnesses of his life, death, and resurrection as followers of Christ.

As it turns out, witnessing is not simply a task we consider taking on as followers of Christ, but a calling we are each gifted with to live out in our own way – because we each have our own unique experience as people of faith.

Then again, somehow even knowing and hearing about that call doesn’t make us any more enthusiastic about launching ourselves head first into the world witnessing.

But, having said this - over the course of the last few years I have heard many of you expertly witnessing here on Sunday morning, or out at the store, at youth group, and I have even heard a few of you witnessing in your neighborhoods. Before you ask - no I haven’t been following you around– but I have heard many of you bear witness or share things that are important to both your life and your world.

We will easily bear witness to the great movies or books we've experienced and want others to enjoy. We bear witness to the accomplishments or failures of our favorite sports teams in hopes of converting others to our side. We bear witness to important events within our families or community. And we might even bear witness to the ways this congregation has shaped and formed our lives as people of faith.

We bear witness - that is, tell someone about the things that matter most to us - all the time – and the truth of the matter is, it's not really all that different when it comes to sharing about our faith. Witnessing about our life of faith does not have to mean we are trying to convert someone to our way of thinking, it’s not a statement we would memorize to replay time and time again, and you certainly don’t even have to know Apostles Creed or John 3:16 to successfully share about your faith – all witnessing requires is simply sharing with others about the hope filled life of faith we have received from God – that’s it!

So to demonstrate this point to you today – and this is where the congregation participation I spoke of earlier comes in - I thought we could practice witnessing or sharing with one another here in the safety of this sanctuary this morning in small groups.

Now before your hands get sweaty or you feel the need to make a break for the nearest exit – I want to share that if you truly don't want to participate in this exercise for any reason that is okay – just say pass when it comes to be your turn to share and we will all respect your wish to watch, listen, and learn from others as they share within your group. But I do hope in the midst of our time in conversation you might feel the tug of the Spirit to share what good news you have experienced in your life with your small group.

So this morning we will spend a short time sharing or witnessing about three questions within our groups:

1. The first one should be easy enough for us all as I will simply invite you to share about your favorite dessert.
2. The next question goes a little deeper as I will invite you to share how long you have been a part this community of faith and what brought you to Holy Spirit in the first place?
3. Lastly – I will invite you to share something about your faith – whether that is where you have sensed God at work in your lives, your school, your family, or your neighborhood – or something else you feel good about sharing.

So in a moment I will invite you to get into a small groups of 2-4 people with those around you.

As you do, turn so that you can see, hear, and speak to one another comfortably within your group.

When you are settled I'll put our first question up and invite you to share your name and then spend 30 seconds each witnessing within your group.

Okay – on your marks, get set, go!

That didn't seem so difficult – good witnessing and listening everyone!

So now that we have broken the ice – I will invite you to share for one minute within your small group how long you have been a part this community of faith and what brought you to Holy Spirit in the first place?

You really got into it that time! Great work everyone – now it's time for our final question: I'll invite you to share something about your faith – whether that is where you have sensed God at work in your lives, your school, your family, or your neighborhood – or something else you feel good about sharing.

Thanks everyone! Great witnessing and sharing! I'll invite you to return to your seats as you were before and as you do give yourself a pat on the back for trying something new and maybe even difficult today.

(wait for people to return to seats)

Now that you are settled I'd like to invite you to raise your hand if you learned something new about someone this morning.

Raise your hand if you were inspired or encouraged by something someone shared today.

Raise your hand if you were a little uncomfortable but gave sharing a try today.

Isn't that awesome - way to stretch and grow Holy Spirit!

Now do you want to hear a truly amazing thing?

Taking a rough estimate of our numbers today and the time we spent sharing (10 min) – we witnessed for a grand total of _____ minutes this morning! Pastor Trish and I would have to preach about _____ sermons to even come close to the amount of witnessing you all just shared today! And all that was accomplished in just a few minutes!

Imagine what might happen if we continued to practice sharing our experiences as followers of Christ.

What would it look like if during our time of fellowship and coffee following worship we each took a moment to check in with one person to ask how God had been at work in their life lately?

What would it look like if we started each of our congregational meetings by asking where and when we saw God at work through the witness of our church?

What would it look like if we took the time to asked our children and youth how they experienced God's love?

While I don't have the answer to these questions today – I would bet that if we did try even one of these practices out, it certainly wouldn't take long before we would all start to develop a level of comfort with this kind of sharing and witnessing - that in itself would lead to some pretty amazing opportunities to hear and see where God had been active here within our congregation!

An opportunity I hope you heard, felt, and experienced today through our time of sharing with one another – as this is the true gift of witnessing Christ has called us to this morning. That we get to have a front row seat to see, hear, and experience the ever present hope of Christ's resurrection.

As it turns out, witnessing is not simply a task we consider taking on as followers of Christ, but a calling we are each gifted with to live out in our own way – because we each have our own unique experience as people of faith. A uniqueness that makes each of our stories as followers of Christ just as important as the person sitting next to us.

So take heart Holy Spirit – as people of the resurrection and faith - you have an important witness to share with the world. A witness of God's resurrection, love, hope, and grace that you have come to know throughout your life as a child of God. A witness that may not be spoken with great confidence yet – but one that is growing within you each and every day you walk in faith with God. And that is my prayer for us today that

who knows - before long, maybe we, too, like the disciples in our gospel reading

in our joy and while disbelieving and still wondering, can hear and respond to Jesus' call to be his witnesses today.

May this be so among us – amen.