

Psalm 40: 1-5, Luke 24: 36b-48

Making of Witnesses

Among the early Christian communities, there were rich traditions with shared elements about encountering the risen Christ, emerging out of their experiences of the risen Lord. Thanks to the different gospel writers Mark, Matthew, Luke and John, writing to their own communities, we have their witnesses not of the “straight historical facts of what exactly happened,” but of their experience of the reality of living God.

On Easter morning, we listened to Mark’s story of how that day dawned; how the women had prepared oil and spices early and hurried to the tomb. Their only concern was who would roll aside the great stone that had been placed at the entrance of the tomb. They had seen where Jesus’s body had been laid, so naturally, they expected to find Jesus’ lifeless body there. His death was very much the reality they lived that morning. Very sad, but it was the reality they understood.

So, imagine their reaction of amazement, terror and fear, upon learning that he’s not there. The messenger at the tomb told them Jesus had been raised and that he was going to Galilee ahead of them and they will see him there. But this “good news,” that the risen Jesus will meet them there, made them afraid, because the reality that they understood has just been shuttered and now they are thrust into the world beyond their comprehension.

Then, last Sunday, the Second Sunday of Easter, we listened to John’s story of how Jesus came to the disciples that day. It was in the evening, the disciples were huddled together in a room with the door locked, afraid for a different reason than the women in Mark. They were afraid of the authorities coming to get them, just as they did to Jesus and kill them, just as they killed Jesus. Never mind that Mary Magdalene had told them earlier that day that she had seen the Lord; her witness didn’t alter their reality. They felt they were in a clear and present danger; they feared for their lives, and that was their reality.

It is the Third Sunday of Easter, and here we are, still in the evening of that day God raised Jesus from the dead. The season compels us to slow down and pay attention to their experience, for it changed their lives and it is meant to change our lives, too. So, hear now, the

story of the resurrection of our Lord, Jesus the Christ, according to Luke, 24: 36-48. It picks up where Jesus had appeared to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, and when they returned back to Jerusalem, others were also saying that the Lord had risen.

While they were talking about this, 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.

Again, the risen Christ comes bearing peace and is met by the terrified and frightened disciples. They are still in the grip of the “reality” of his death, the “reality” of clear and present danger threatening their lives. These realities, however terrible, they understand, so that’s what they believe. They trust this terrible reality, because they get it; it’s within the realm of terrible things that can, and has happen to you.

Confronted by Jesus standing in their midst, their minds immediately go to “oh, we must be seeing a ghost,” because even a ghost, a manifestation of death, is easier to believe than Jesus who had been crucified, dead and buried, now standing in their midst, really alive. While Jesus being with them would be a wonderful thing “if true,” it just was beyond their understanding, which was limited to what they could take as familiar and hence real. Disciples were “trapped” within the scope of their notion of how the world worked. But with Jesus, something new, beyond the ways of the world as known to them has happened.

So, this is what Jesus the risen Lord had to deal with. His own disciples’ own limitation, their fear which closed their hearts and minds to the Ultimate Reality, the possibility beyond the probable, that by raising Jesus, God has defeated all forces of evil that had put Jesus on the cross and conquered death. How could Jesus get through to them that he is their Lord?

Jesus “gets down to their level,” as it were. He tells them to look at him and feel him, so they can checkoff the possibility he is a ghost, a manifestation of death. The disciples could understand only through the “bodily, this worldly” reality that they could see and touch, and so

that is the “means Jesus choses” to convey what has happened: life overcoming death. Jesus’ bodily resurrection points to something beyond bodily resurrection: Life Eternal.

And when Jesus showed them his hand and feet, a burst of joy comes upon the disciples, but they are still in disbelief and trying to put their head around it; perhaps the “too good to be true” news that he is risen is true? So, to further bolster their belief in him, Jesus asks for something to eat and eat the fish in front of them. Now, disciples are perhaps remembering all those times they ate with Jesus, when Jesus fed the multitudes, how he broke bread with them. Jesus is using what is familiar and within their understanding to point them to the Ultimate Reality that is beyond their understanding; eternal life, God’s victory over death.

With the disciples warming up a bit more and coming out of fearful state, Jesus brings out another thing that they should be very familiar with: the words Jesus spoke to them while he was still with them. Jesus had told them that everything written about him in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms would be fulfilled.

In the Call to Confession, Rose Marie recited part of a prayer of St. Augustine. His prayer goes like this. Loving God, to turn away from you is to fall. To turn towards you is to rise. To stand before you is to live forever.

That turning away from God and falling, we call sin. And that turning towards God and rising we call repentance. And that standing before God and living forever, we call salvation. And it is all the work of the grace of our living God.

When Jesus was taken away from them, because of their betrayal, as well as the scheming of the power-that-be of the world, the disciples, together with the world, turned away from God and were falling. So, Jesus himself came to them to turn them towards God, their God of the living, so they can rise again. And so rising, to stand before God and live forever.

Now they are ready for Jesus to open their hearts to understand the Scripture. Jesus said, "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.

Repentance AND forgiveness of sin, not repentance THEN forgiveness of sin. Repentance means to turn around, realizing our resistance to God’s will and turning to live by God’s will. It is that turning toward God. And to live in and by God’s will is to live a forgiven life that is not limited by our own limitations, whether in body, or mind or in Spirit. It is a life

lived in the freedom from all that negates life, even death. The resurrection of Christ is God's showing us in the way we could remotely understand the Ultimate Reality that is the destiny of all God's people.

Life lived with this conviction, is life that is alive even in the face of death, even in death. It's not avoidance or denial of our human death, but life that endures and overcomes it, life that goes through death and come out on the other side, just as Jesus has shown us. That is the life given to us by the God of the living, and we don't need to wait until we die to claim it. It's the only life God has for us.

The terror and the fear the disciples felt, maybe akin to the terror and fear we feel when our lives are threatened. We may not be living in the society that our lives are threatened because of whom we call our Lord, but we know such society has existed and exists even now on our planet. We are right to pray for persecuted Christians, and anyone who are experiencing persecution and living in fear, because that is not what God wants for us. Prayer is one thing we can do, but God also wants and needs us to be witnesses to this Ultimate Reality, no matter who or what is coming for you, God in Christ has already defeated it.

When we have just received a terminal diagnosis for ourselves or for our loved one, when we are noticing that our faculties are slipping, or whenever and wherever there is war and the people, young and old are living in hiding from the enemy, in moment of such hardship and despair, we cry out to God to rescue us. Even Jesus prayed when he was in distress because of his impending death. God knows our cries and promises us life that cannot be destroyed, even if we still bear the wounds the world leaves us. The risen Christ still bears the wounds.

And God needs witnesses, Christ needs witnesses. God needs witnesses, to proclaim the good news of the Ultimate Reality of repentance and forgiveness of sins to all the world.

And the making of such witnesses take time a while. Jesus did not come to disciples who were immediately ready. He had to remove their fears, he had to use "the reality" they could understand to believe in the ultimate reality that was beyond their understanding.

Can we be his witnesses, through our fears from which God liberates us, recalling the time when the risen Christ met us in the depth of our despair and brought us peace. Those moments we had a glimpse of the reality of the Kingdom of heaven, we are also being equipped as witnesses. We are the Easter people. Thanks be to God.