

Bearing Witness  
Luke 24:36b–48  
Sunday, April 18, 2021 (Easter 3)

Back in 2005, Nike launched an ad campaign featuring basketball player LeBron James. He was just starting out in the NBA, but he was already one of the best players in the league. The ads would show a large black and white image of James playing basketball, and printed on it were the words, “We are all witnesses.” The idea was that LeBron James was on his way to becoming the greatest basketball player of this generation – maybe *ever* – and we are all here to see it happen. We are here watching him at this moment in time. We are witnesses to his greatness. When you talk about a witness like that, you’re talking about someone who sees something happening; someone who simply *observes* something. A witness to a crime is someone who sees the crime happen. If you are a witness on a marriage license or a notarized document, then you have seen this legal event take place. That’s one way of being a *witness*.

But if you see a crime or an accident take place, and you are called into court as a witness, it’s not just that you *observed* something, that you *saw* it. You now have to *talk* about it. You have to *tell what happened*. You have to *recount* the event and offer your *testimony*. That’s *another* way of being a witness – someone who *tells others* what they saw. Someone who can vouch for the authenticity of an event and affirm the *truth* of it. It would be like saying, “Hey, I was *around* to see LeBron James play basketball,” and then you tell someone how great he was.

At the end of our scripture reading, Jesus says to his disciples, “You are witnesses of these things.” Of *what* things? Of the Messiah suffering and dying and rising from the dead on the third day. They *saw* that happen. Of repentance and the forgiveness of sins. They saw *that* happen during Jesus’ life and ministry. Of the scriptures being fulfilled. It says that Jesus opened their minds to understand the scriptures so that they *saw* it, they *got* it, they *understood*

how this whole story was working. They have *seen* his hands and his feet and the wounds of crucifixion. They have *seen* him eat a piece of boiled fish, proving that he wasn't just a ghost or a spirit. They are *witnesses* to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. They saw it all happen.

And *because* they saw it all happen, they can *tell others* about it. They can vouch for the authenticity of it and affirm the truth of it. They can offer their *testimony*. They can say, "Hey, I was *there!* Here's what I saw." And that is what Jesus calls them to do – to proclaim these things to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. They are *witnesses* of these things, and they are called to *bear witness* to them; to tell others so that *they* might believe.

But the *question* that this story leaves me with is, "What about *us?*" Jesus says, "You are witnesses of these things," but *we* were *not*. We were not there to see the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. We did *not* see the wounds in his hands and his side. We did *not* see him eat the fish. We have *heard* these stories in scripture, from the people who *did* witness them. Or we have heard them from people who heard them from the people who witnessed them.

The Apostle Paul never met Jesus during his life on earth. He was not one of the original disciples. He only *heard* about what Jesus did *from* those disciples; from those who *were* there to witness it. And yet Paul wrote *half* of the New Testament; half of the texts that bear witness to Christ and what it means to follow him. And the way that Paul addressed this was to say to the Corinthians, "I handed on to you what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive,

though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.”

Paul was not there to witness the miracles of Christ, the teachings of Christ, the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, and yet he became one of the greatest witnesses to Christ.

But if we went to court as a witness and said, “Well, I didn’t actually *see* the car accident happen, but Bill *did* and he *told me* that it happened,” our testimony could be thrown out, disregarded as hearsay. Is that the only testimony that we have to offer the world? Hearsay? “I didn’t see Jesus rise from the dead, but Peter did, and he told Paul, and Paul wrote about it, and my pastor read me what Paul wrote.” I mean, this is one of the most common challenges to our faith. People will say, “Yeah, but how do you *know*? It was 2,000 years ago. You weren’t *there*. You didn’t *see* it. You can’t *prove* it.”

How are *we* called to be witnesses of these things, if we did not actually *witness* them? What testimony do *we* have to offer the world?

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We’ve talked about these different ways of being a witness. You can *see* something and be a witness in the *historical* sense, that you saw an event take place. You can see it and *tell what happened* and be a witness in a *legal* sense, offering your testimony. But this word that Luke uses for *witness* offers us another way of understanding it. When Jesus says, “You are witnesses of these things,” that word *witnesses* is the Greek word *marture*. It means *witness* in the *historical* sense and in the *legal* sense – someone who sees something take place and can attest to it. But this word *marture* is also where we get the word *martyr* – someone who is *killed* for their faith.

Now, just to be clear, I don't think that Jesus is calling us all to go out and be martyrs and die for our faith. Jesus says that sometimes that is the unfortunate outcome of following him, and we certainly see that in people like Stephen and Peter and Paul and others throughout scripture and the history of the church. But it is not something Jesus calls us to *seek out*. Christ calls us to *live* for him. It reminds me of the line from the musical *Hamilton*, where Alexander Hamilton is so eager to go out and find glory by being killed on the battlefield, but George Washington says to him, "Dying is easy, young man. Living is harder." Christ calls us to do the hard work of living lives that bear witness to his glory. And if we all became martyrs, then there wouldn't be anyone left to *do that*.

But what this word *marture* implies (and what being a *martyr* implies) is that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ makes a tangible difference in how you live your life. So there is an aspect of being a *witness* that is not just about *observing* or *telling*, but it is also about *living*. It's like St. Francis of Assisi famously said, "Preach the gospel at all times, and when necessary, use words." Our *lives* – our words *and* our actions – bear witness to the glory of God in Jesus Christ. If you *really believe* something, you can't just keep it inside. It is going to affect the way you *live*. It's going to *shape* how you live. And other people are going to *see* the way you live, they're going to see this change that has been affected in you, and they're going to know something about what you *believe*.

Paul sums it up this way in his words to the Philippians, he tells them to "keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you." There is something about Paul's life, not just what they have heard and learned from him about Jesus, but about what they have *seen* in him that bears witness to the glory of God in

Jesus Christ. Paul wasn't there, but he has heard the stories of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus from those who *did* witness it, and their witness has made a difference in his life; it has affected the way he lives. And he's saying now to all these other people, "I can't offer you firsthand testimony. I wasn't there. I was not a witness to these things. All I can offer you is what has been given to me and the difference that it has made in my life."

And so for us, who were not there and did not witness these things, the best testimony that we can offer is our own lives. We witness the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in scripture, we receive what has been handed on to us by faithful witnesses throughout the centuries, and we say, "Here is the difference that all of this has made in my life. Here is the change it has affected in me. If you look at the way in which I live my life, then you can witness something about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ."

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And when we look back at this scripture reading, we can see some of the ways in which our lives can bear witness to Christ. We can witness in our *wounds*. Just as Christ showed the disciples the wounds of crucifixion in his hands and his side, so *we* can point to the wounds that *we* have experienced in our lives and the way that God has brought about healing or used those wounds to transform us. Whether those wounds are physical, mental, or emotional. Whether they are the result of sickness, addiction, or abuse. The loss of someone we love. Our wounds can be used to bear witness to the presence and love of God with us during the darkest times and the healing, resurrecting power of God that brings about life in the midst of death.

We can witness in our *eating* and our *meals*. Just as Jesus ate with his disciples to open their eyes to his living presence, *we* can approach every meal we eat as an act of fellowship and communion with the risen Christ. When we are mindful of the ways that God provides the food

we eat and of the ways that God nourishes and sustains our lives. When we sit down to a meal and picture Christ sitting at that table with us. It changes the way we eat, and every meal can become a sacred act of communion with God and with each other.

We can witness in our *doubts*. When Jesus appears to his disciples, he asks them, “Why do doubts arise in your hearts?” Then he shows them his wounds to prove that it’s him, and it says that “in their joy they were disbelieving and wondering.” They are there to *see* all of this, and they *still* have doubts about how it could be happening and whether it’s real. But they still had *joy* in the midst of their doubts. And so for us to be honest about *our* doubts, to leave room in our lives and faith for those doubts, *we* can say, “I wasn’t there. I can’t prove this to you. And sometimes I have my doubts about how any of this could be possible. But there is something in this that resonates with me. I *trust* even though I can’t *prove*. And I try to live in ways that bear witness to that trust.”

We can witness in our *forgiveness*. As Jesus tells his disciples that they are witnesses to the repentance and forgiveness of sins that is in him, and they are called to share that with everyone, when *we* extend forgiveness to others or repent and *seek* forgiveness from those we have hurt, we are bearing witness to the reconciling love of God in Jesus Christ.

We can witness in our words that give peace. The first thing Jesus says to his disciples here is, “Peace be with you.” He seeks to give them peace in the midst of their fear and conflict. And so when *we* speak and act in ways that give peace to others and to the world around us rather than creating more conflict and division, we are bearing witness to the peace of Christ in our lives.

We can witness through prayer and the reading of scripture, through our spiritual practices, having our minds opened and illuminated by Christ, as the disciples did.

There are so many more ways that our lives can bear witness to the glory of God in Jesus Christ. But the point is that we can't *prove* what happened 2,000 years ago, because we weren't there to witness it. All we can do is offer up our lives as testimony and say, "Here is the difference that the resurrection of Jesus Christ has made in my life. It has made me *this* kind of person. A more patient person. A more loving person. A more forgiving person. A more generous person. A person who works to bring about peace and justice in the world around me." If our words and our actions and our way of being bear witness to the love and grace and peace and presence and power and healing and forgiveness of God in Jesus Christ, *that* is the best proof that we can offer.