

You Are Witnesses of These Things

Psalm 100; Luke 24:44-49

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The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity began under another name 101 years ago this week. It started in Garrison, New York, and now it is observed around the world. It is an occasion for churches and denominations to not focus on the things that divide us. Now, we all know that those things do exist. The Presbyterians sprinkle infants at baptism and we immerse believers. The Catholics give to Mary a role that makes the Baptists a bit uncomfortable. The Assemblies of God practice some of the gifts of the Spirit more exuberantly than we do. So we have our differences. But today we lay those differences aside and affirm our commonality, which is far greater and far more important than the differences.

In the ten years that I have been your pastor, I have spoken at almost every church represented in our southeast clergy group. I've spoken at Good Shepherd Catholic Church, St. Thomas Episcopal, All Saints Lutheran, Aldersgate United Methodist, Hope Presbyterian, Latham United Methodist, and others. Invariably when I'm at these other churches, I run into someone who asks me, "Say, doesn't So-in-So go to your church?" And I'll say, "Why, yes he does." Then he'll say, "Well we work together at NASA" or wherever it is. Then he'll say, "Tell him I said hello."

My point is this. The other churches and denominations are not mysterious entities that we must suspect. They're just regular folks like us. They work where you work. Their kids play on the ball team with our kids. We exercise side-by-side at the YMCA. And it is good for us to understand each other's tradition and to affirm the things we share in common. That is what today is all about. Tonight at 5:30 we will gather for a community Christian Unity service at the United Church on Whitesburg Drive. Rev. Frank Broyles, whom most of you know, will be the guest preacher. I hope you will be there. I believe this is important.

Each year for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity an international body of churches is chosen to select the theme. This year Christians in

Scotland ask us to focus on Luke 24, especially these words of Jesus. They were spoken to the disciples: “You are witnesses of these things.”

Luke 24 is a chapter we would normally read during the Easter season. It begins “on the first day of the week.” Of course, that was Sunday morning, the day of the resurrection. The days leading up to this were tumultuous and ultimately heartbreaking. You may remember that Jesus was taken before Pilate, the governor of the region, and King Herod. They demanded that Jesus answer to charges that he had claimed to be King of the Jews. To satisfy angry mobs, Pilate sentence Jesus to death. They took Jesus and two others to a place “which is called The Skull,” Golgotha. I think I saw this place when I visited Jerusalem a couple of years ago. It was just outside the city of Jerusalem. It was on the other side of a busy road leading to and from Jerusalem. Likely it was on this hill with all the people traffic passing—people gawking, shouting vulgar comments—it was there that they crucified Jesus and the two others.

After an agonizing period, Luke says that darkness covered the land. The curtain inside the temple was torn in two and Jesus cried out, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit!” And he died. A soldier standing nearby realized what had happened, and he confessed, “Certainly this man was innocent.” A man named Joseph from a town call Aramathea took Jesus’ body and buried it in Joseph’s own tomb.

That was Friday, the Sabbath, day one. Saturday was day two. Sunday, then, was the third day. That is where Luke 24 picks up. You remember what happened. Mary Magdalene and other women went to Jesus’ tomb early in the morning. Their intention was to give Jesus a proper burial. But when they got there they discovered that the huge stone guarding the entrance to the tomb was moved and that the tomb was empty. Two men “in dazzling apparel” told the women that Jesus was not there, that he had been resurrected. The women then ran quickly and told the eleven apostles what they had discovered.

Later that same day two disciples walked to Emmaus, about seven to eight miles away. As they walked Jesus joined them, but they didn’t recognize him. The text says that “they were kept from” recognizing him. At the end of the day, these two disciples invited “the stranger,” Jesus, to eat with them. Here’s what the text says: “he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.” That is the formula we use for the Lord’s Supper.

When Jesus said those words, those two disciples suddenly recognized that the man eating with them was no stranger. It was Jesus, their living Lord.

These two disciples immediately turned around and went back to Jerusalem, found the eleven apostles, and told them what they had just experienced. And suddenly there was Jesus, right before them. They, of course, all were startled and frightened. He showed them his hands and feet. Then, interestingly, he asked for something to eat, and they got it for him.

Now here's where our text for this morning starts. Luke says that Jesus began to teach them from the scriptures, meaning from the Old Testament. That was their scriptures, since the New Testament didn't yet exist. He told them that the Christ, the Messiah, would suffer and on the third day rise from the dead. He told them that repentance and forgiveness would be preached in his name to all nations, beginning right there in Jerusalem. That was when he said the thing we can all embrace. Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran, we all must carry out this charge: "You are witnesses of these things." All the things that had just happened—the trial with Pilate and Herod, the crucifixion at The Skull, the curtain in the Temple being torn in two, Joseph of Aramathea, the women who discovered the empty tomb, the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. We are to be witnesses of these things.

So the question for today is—how do we do that? Each from his or her own tradition, how do we give a witness to these things? If we take our clues from these texts, we can begin by noticing that each person in these stories was radically changed. This was no civil religion. No domesticated dogma here. These people's lives were radically altered by what happened with Jesus of Nazareth. That is an experience we all can share in common.

Let me tell you about a friend of mine. We worked on our doctorates at the same time. He was Baptist but since has become a United Methodist. One day in one of our doctoral seminars, he told us about his family's farm in south Alabama. His father was a hard man and ran the farm like an old south plantation. My friend grew up in this environment and then went off to college. After college the family farm was on hard times, so he returned to help run the farm. He told us about an incident that changed his life. One of the workers, a black man, did something wrong. My friend's father was enraged. He had the worker tied up. He had someone remove the man's

shoes, and with a tool of some kind cut off some of the man's toes. That was his punishment.

My friend watched as his father cut off some of the toes of another human being. My friend eventually went to seminary and began to study the life and teachings of Jesus. He was haunted by the memory of what had happened that day back on the farm. He began to realize how wrong his father was and how wrong some of his own beliefs had been. He told our small class, "I could have been just like my father. There was only one thing to save me from being just like him: Jesus." Then he said, "I know what it means to be 'saved.'"

Many of us do, don't we? Like Mary Magdalene, the disciples on the road to Emmaus, and my friend, we have been radically changed. That is what we all can share in common. Catholics and Baptists. Assemblies of God and Presbyterians. We can bear witness of these things by the radical reorientation of our lives by the power and message of Jesus.

And here's another clue from our text. Notice that they weren't all alike. No two bore witness in the same way. The women who discovered the empty tomb bore witness in their own way. They went and told someone. Joseph of Aramathea, on the other hand, bore witness in a different way. He had a tomb and made it available. Different ways—each needed.

I don't think Jesus ever expected that we would all be alike. Remember, he prayed that we would be "one," not alike. So your way of bearing witness of these things may be to teach a children's Bible class. Here's my word to you: you do that to the best of your ability. You may bear witness by working for justice for some oppressed people group. Do it to the best of your ability. You may bear witness by singing, building houses, visiting the sick, cooking for others, giving your financial resources, taking in foster children, helping youth, writing notes, teaching English, or other ways that matter to you. We don't all have to do it alike. But whatever we do, let us do it to the best of our ability.

That is the challenge of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. We all are witnesses of these things in our own unique way. The Catholics don't have to do it our way. We don't have to do it like the Assemblies of God. Under the leadership of God's Spirit, we each must find our way. And then by the power of the resurrected Christ, we each must do it well.

Closing Prayer

Resurrected Lord, be alive in the Body of Christ. Shine through us that your light may illumine this dark world. Amen.