

St. Timothy's Lutheran Church
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Luke 24:44-53

You Are My Witnesses

Have you ever known someone who had a personality that was larger than life? They are a rare find, and they are special. They are *magnets* who draw in people far and near, and repel only a few who can't handle the *largess* of their personalities.

My Uncle Gerry was one of those people. He had a loud, raspy voice, and red hair to match his big personality. He would drive my dad *crazy*, because without fail, he would use my dad's *vacation* time as opportunities for free pulpit supply. My dad would go to Uncle Gerry's for vacation, and Uncle Gerry would welcome him with open arms by telling him that he was preaching for him on Sunday. (This pattern trained my dad to carry a sermon in his back pocket when heading down to Uncle Gerry's.)

Uncle Gerry was *bold*, and I *truly* think he was unafraid of *anyone* and *anything*. Before coming up to visit us, he would get a clerk at his local gas station to print off *hundreds* of tickets with information of our church service times. And he would get him to do it for *free*. He would then hand them around town, inviting everyone to the church my dad pastored.

I have this vivid memory of just having moved to the Central Valley and my Uncle Gerry coming for a visit. I was a sophomore in high school and really wanted to find a way to seem cool, even though that had never been a reality for me in the past.

Uncle Gerry told my sister and me to come along with him, because we were going to go downtown. And of *course* we came with him, because it was going to be

fun! He handed us a stack of tickets and told us to hand them out. But we didn't want to do *that*; we wanted to have *fun*! We followed him into a bakery, where he told the owner, "Give these tickets to your five best-looking customers." We followed him outside, where he told us to put a ticket on a really nice sports car. We were *so* embarrassed, and perhaps *equally* amazed that he was completely *unembarrassed*; he was having *fun*!

To this day, my dad will say that Uncle Gerry was one of his *favorite* people. He could make him *madder* than anyone, but he could also make him laugh *harder* than anyone. He was the embodiment of Romans 1:16: "For I am *not ashamed* of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes."

Uncle Gerry was a witness to the gospel, which was the very word Jesus called his disciples, *witnesses*. He did not say that they *might* be witnesses or even that they *would* be witnesses, but that they *were* witnesses. In Luke 24 verse 48, Jesus said, "You are witnesses of these things."

Let's back up a bit. After Jesus rose from the dead, he appeared to his disciples. He knew that his disciples didn't understand that he needed to suffer and rise from the dead. He knew that his disciples would not be able to understand that he now had an immortal body. He knew that they thought he was a ghost, so he invited them to touch and see his wounds. He even invited them to give him something to eat, so that they could see that he was not a ghost, because of course ghosts do not eat. He explained that everything written about him in Scripture must be fulfilled. Yet, after all this, his disciples *still* needed more help to understand.

Jesus was there, in the flesh, and *still* his disciples could not comprehend that it was the risen Jesus. Verse 46 says that Jesus then “opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead.” They did not understand until Jesus *opened their minds* to understand the Scriptures. They could not understand on their own; they needed Jesus to *give* them understanding.

It’s interesting that Luke goes to the effort to write all of the various ways Jesus showed himself to his disciples, and yet they could not understand him. He showed himself to them, spoke to them, invited them to touch and to see his wounds, ate in front of them, and explained how he was the fulfillment of Scripture.

But what would be the purpose of Luke bothering with this long list of evidences that didn’t do anything for the disciples? This list is for *us*. *We* can’t see Jesus with our eyes or touch his flesh. *We* can’t watch him eat with him, or hear him explain Scripture to us. But his disciples *did*. They saw, touched, watched, and heard him. And then Jesus opened their minds to understand, and they were witnesses.

Candidly, I think that the most difficult thing about our faith is that we believe in a God that we cannot see. We cannot touch Him, see Him, watch Him, or hear Him audibly. *We* are *dependent* on those who witnessed God’s Son in the flesh. I mentioned this frustration recently to *my* pastor, and she assured me that I was in a great company of others who desperately wanted to see God, from Moses to Thomas to Julian of Norwich to other forefathers and foremothers in the faith.

If we consider Thomas, we remember that he demanded to see Jesus and to touch his wounds. And what did Jesus do? He *showed* himself to Thomas and invited him to *touch* his wounds.

In Luke 24, Jesus *first* showed himself to his disciples. When they couldn't believe that it was he and couldn't understand what his purpose was, Jesus *then* opened their minds.

Since many of us know and believe the Jesus story, it seems really unbelievable that his disciples followed him closely for *3 years* and *still* didn't believe him when he rose and showed himself to them and *still* didn't understand what his purpose was – even after all that time! But maybe many of us have now had enough life experiences to understand that we too do the same thing. How often have you gone to memorial services and discovered that the person you knew and loved was so much more than you ever knew? How often, after you have lost someone, have you realized that they were there for you more than you ever knew and meant so much more to you than you recognized while they were living? How often have you had revelations about *yourself* years later?

Like many of us, the disciples simply *couldn't see*. They simply *couldn't understand*. Their beloved friend was right in front of them and they couldn't truly see him, so Jesus opened their minds. Then, they saw and they understood. They were witnesses. And they were commissioned to share this good news with the *world*. Jesus then ascended into heaven and the disciples would wait for the power of the Holy Spirit.

Today is Ascension Sunday, the day we celebrate Jesus' ascension into heaven. The good news of the Ascension is integrally tied to Pentecost, which we will celebrate *next* Sunday, so I won't take the fire away from next Sunday. But *today* we celebrate that Jesus is with God the Father, which means that he is no longer *visibly* present to us, but comes to us in the water of baptism and in the bread and wine of Holy Communion. Today, we recognize that his disciples witnessed his resurrected body and because of Jesus' bodily resurrection, all who believe are made right with God and will one day be resurrected in the body.

Though you may not recognize it, you *too* are a witness. You have not witnessed Jesus in the flesh, but you have witnessed God. You have seen God's creation. You marvel that somehow, the universe continues to be created and to expand. You have watched plants grow and mature and have hiked in hills that you did not create. You have sat beside waves that were not under your control. You have loved animals that somehow knew to care for you and love you. You have experienced babies that you knew where the combination of X and Y Chromosomes, but grew and multiplied outside of your intervention. You have experienced friendships and loves that you cannot put into words. You have seen and heard beauty that has moved you to tears. These are all gifts from God. You are witnesses of these gifts.

Perhaps you have witnessed even *more*. You have felt the presence of God in a profound way that feels like your chest is about to burst or that *somehow* God's hand is on you. You have seen a vision of God. You have been moved by God's Spirit in a way that you cannot explain. You have a gift that is from the Spirit. You can

identify spiritual milestones in your life. You have been released from the bondage of addiction or hatred or hard-heartedness. You have seen miracles. You have seen racial reconciliation take place. You have seen a vision of the Spirit's work in the world.

God continues to be at work, and You are a witness. You have seen some of God's work in the world, and perhaps you desire to see more. Perhaps your eyes have been clouded so that you cannot see or your mind has not yet been opened. Revelation is a *gift* from God, and He desires for you to know Him. Pray that He opens your eyes to see Him and your mind to know Him. And I will pray for that too.

Let us pray.