

We are Witnesses

John 20:1-18

Acts 10:34-43

He is Risen! (He is risen indeed)

Easter morning is here, the drape on the cross has changed from the red of Christ's blood, to the white of his holiness, and we are gathered together to remember with joy the great gift of Jesus' resurrection and the promise of eternal life with God. I'm tempted to now dismiss you all. After all, what more can be said. We all know the story of the first Easter – empty tomb, risen Christ, let's go home and bite the ears off some chocolate bunnies. That's what I was contemplating as I sought desperately to prepare for this morning.

You see, this *is* a familiar story, perhaps too familiar. We've all heard it over and over again since we were children. What more is there to add to the story than what we have already heard. This is the question I kept asking myself. Then as I read through the lectionary readings for today, I was struck by one word – witnesses.

Although the reading from John doesn't expressly use the word, we read about three witnesses. Mary, Peter, and John were all witnesses to the fact that the body of Jesus was no longer to be found in the tomb he was placed in on Good Friday. Mary was witness to the angels in the empty tomb. Not only that, but Mary became the first witness to see the risen Jesus. And as any good witness does, she gave testimony to that fact when she returned to the disciples and said: "I have seen the Lord!" and relayed the message he had given her to share with them.

A little backstory from our second reading in Acts might be helpful here.

Cornelius, a Gentile, who had been studying the Scriptures and praying to God, had a vision of an angel telling him to send to Joppa and request that Simon Peter come to his house. The next day in Joppa, Peter had a vision of all kinds of clean and unclean animals and heard a command from God to “kill and eat”. Being a devout Jew, he responded that he could not do so. This exchange happened three times with God finally saying that Peter should not despise anything that God had made clean. No sooner had the vision left him then Peter was called to go to Cornelius’ house by the agents he had sent to Joppa.

On his arrival at the house of Cornelius, and finding a large group of people assembled there, he said: “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call *any man* impure or unclean. So, when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection.” Peter was now a witness to the Gentiles giving testimony about God.

The Message, by Eugene Petersen, relates the sermon of Peter this way:

³⁴⁻³⁶ Peter fairly exploded with his good news: “It’s God’s own truth, nothing could be plainer: God plays no favorites! It makes no difference who you are or where you’re from—if you want God and are ready to do as he says, the door is open. The Message he sent to the children of Israel—that through Jesus Christ everything is being put together again—well, he’s doing it everywhere, among everyone.

And by everyone, Peter meant *everyone*! God was doing a new thing through brash disciples like Peter, through formerly demon possessed

women like Mary, and even through Gentiles like Cornelius and his household. There was, and is, *no one* that God can't use to further his kingdom on earth once they open their hearts to Him. This was confirmed hundreds of years before Christ's ministry by Isaiah's prophesy:

Isaiah 56:3-5 New International Version

³Let no foreigner who is bound to the LORD say,
 "The LORD will surely exclude me from his people."
And let no eunuch complain,
 "I am only a dry tree."

⁴For this is what the LORD says:

 "To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,
 who choose what pleases me
 and hold fast to my covenant—

⁵to them I will give within my temple and its walls
 a memorial and a name
 better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
 that will endure forever.

Once hearts are opened, then being a witness becomes part of each one's reality, no matter who they are or how they identify themselves.

Peter continued his sermon:

³⁹ “We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross, ⁴⁰ but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. ⁴¹ He was not seen by all the people, but by *witnesses whom God had already chosen*—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.

Peter and the other disciples had opened their hearts to the invitation given by Jesus to follow him. The number of followers grew from the original 12 to number in the hundreds. The biblical record tells us that Jesus appeared to about 500 people in the 40 days following His resurrection. Jesus came to eat and drink with them - stopping on the Emmaus Road, appearing in the Upper Room, and on the seashore. So many witnesses chosen by God!

Today, each of us who have chosen to profess Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior serve as witnesses of God and what He has accomplished in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Like our early forebearers we hear the echo of Peter's words, again from *The Message*:

He commissioned us to announce this in public, to bear solemn witness that he is in fact the One whom God destined

as Judge of the living and dead. But we're not alone in this. Our witness that he is the means to forgiveness of sins is backed up by the witness of all the prophets."

We are witnesses in a long history and tradition of witnesses to what God has done and what God is doing. We are reminded of this by Paul's admonition to the Hebrews:

Hebrews 12:1-3

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Brothers and sisters, we are not to grow weary in our witness, sharing our testimony in Christ with others. There is much work yet to be done for the kingdom. Each day brings news of the many ways God is calling us to be his people. We are to speak out and reach out to help those who are the victims of homelessness, gun violence, sexual violence, racism, poverty, addiction, homophobia, xenophobia, and so much more. May

we have the strength and courage, through the power of the risen Christ to continue to bring the Good News to the world we live in. With God's blessing, we pray it may be so.

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